LEAGUE OF LEGENDS: PLAYERS AND ESPORTS

THE WORK OF PROFESSIONAL PLAYERS IN LEAGUE OF LEGENDS ESPORTS

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Lay Abstract

The goal of this work is to explore the lives and labour of *League of Legends* professional players. Created in 2009, *League of Legends* rapidly grew to be one of the most played and watched Esport game in the world. Professional players are often heralded as celebrities and their decisions impact the larger League of Legends and Esports community. This work examines the realities of Esports for professional players. It further analyzes the structure and organization of play and work in the *League of Legends* Esports setting. For the developer, Riot Games, Esports serves a variety of purposes and this thesis explores this and the contributions of Esports professionals to the development of the game.

Abstract

Esports gaming is a new subject within various fields of research. Typically, research explores the relationships between games and its players or the developers. By contrast this thesis examines the highest level of play within gaming, professional players. To do so, it utilizes the example of *League of Legends*. Created in 2009, *League of Legends* has rapidly grown to become one of the largest online multiplayer games with a massive Esports scene that matches or exceeds that of traditional sports such as Basketball or Baseball. But what factors contribute to this sudden rise in *League of Legends* Esports popularity and how have professional players adjusted over the years? This thesis explores these questions and the overall evolution of professional teams and *League of Legends* over the course of its Esports growth. It finds that *League of Legends* is unique in its use of the immaterial labour and digital labour of professional players. Through a concept called the "Meta", *League of Legends* is able to mimic traditional sports and maintain interest in its game. Further for professional players the existence and evolution of the "Meta" sharply influences the need for organizational restructuring over the years. Players and teams become complex organizations in which players' transition from gamers to become workers in Esports. Exploring the *League of Legends* Esports setting uncovers a unique combination of sport and work within a new digital context.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

League of Legends, released in 2009 by Riot Games, is one of the fastest growing and most popular video games in history. Moreover, the largest "Esports" scene in the world has emerged around playing *League of Legends*, boasting a player base of over 67 million monthly users and grossing over $1 billion USD in 2014 for Riot Games (Tassi, 2014). Esports is the general term for the organized play of video games among players in competitive tournament settings. At a quick glance, *League of Legends* Esports offers players an easy opportunity at fame and fortune. The realities of professional gaming, however, are quite different from players' hopes. Scholarly research regarding Esports and the experiences of its players is lacking, particularly because it is a new and rapidly evolving industry. Exploring *League of Legends*, as the largest Esport, is an obvious place to begin to expand our understanding of this industry. The aim of this thesis is to trace how *League of Legends* has developed into a major business, to compare its development with that of traditional sports, especially professional football, and to examine the experience of its players. Most important, this thesis will use Esports as a case study of how the lines of work, play and sport are blurring. It will use the concepts of immaterial labour, digital labour and playbour to understand the profit motive behind Esports and its increasingly professionalized players. *League of Legends* Esports is unique, however, in that it forces us to rethink these theories of work. In particular the "Meta", which is a concept exclusive to *League of Legends*, challenges traditional interpretations of

immaterial labour, digital labour and playbour and suggests that new variations and manifestations of these theories are emerging.

Immaterial labour, a theory first introduced by Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) is best understood as work that occurs outside the traditional factory or material settings of production. Immaterial labour is work which occurs in the digital, online realm. It has a use and exchange value similar to traditional labour but it is not necessarily a material good. Further, the value of immaterial labour is not always recognized by the individual and may be exploited by other groups. The concept of digital labour is similar to immaterial labour. Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) help to explore digital labour and how it is a variation of immaterial labour. Digital labour involves work that is not typically seen as work within the digital world. Within the process of digital labour is a cycle of production and consumption of digital work, similar to immaterial labour. However, the difference within digital labour is that the user is not solely the source of production. Digital labour involves the use of online activities in which the user and its community are the core of the system and its profit generation. Under the cycle of digital labour the user, as a producer of digital or online content, participates and feeds their content into a community for mass consumption. This community then produces additional content, through other members, who renew the cycle of labour, by feeding new content back into the community. The result of this digital labour by users and their communities is the innovation of online content. This cycle of production, consumption and innovation provides those who own the platforms with an opportunity to generate profits. In this regard, digital labour involves the alienation of users from the actual means, or platforms,

by which they produce their online content. Users own the content they create but they do not own the platforms by which they make them.

Within *League of Legends* Esports, the examples of immaterial labour that I explore involve primarily the individual and the profits they generate are not always realized by them or their employers. The cases of digital labour involve individuals and their communities working in conjunction to generate profits quickly realized by capitalists. Moreover, the concept of playbour envisioned by Kücklich (2005) helps to connect these two types of labour to the case study of *League of Legends* Esports players. This thesis considers playbour to be labour that involves aspects of play and work. As professional players perform both immaterial and digital labour they navigate between the dimensions of playing *League of Legends* and working in the Esports setting.

Prior to a discussion, in greater detail, on the aforementioned theories I begin with an outline of the methodology and limitations of this research. Portions of this thesis are descriptive due to the lack of research on the topic in addition to the sudden and rapid evolution of the game and Esports. This work explains core gameplay concepts within *League of Legends*. It discusses the process of monetization and the structure of Esports created by Riot Games. Later it explores professional players and their experiences within *League of Legends* Esports. Following this I discuss the Meta and how it relates to professional players and their teams. I explore how *League of Legends* Esports is increasingly similar to traditional sports. With these foundations established, the thesis returns to the discussion of theories of work and how they apply to specific examples within *League of Legends* Esports. Through this, I find that these theories of work, while

applicable to this case study are also transformed by the uniqueness of the Meta within *League of Legends*. This work concludes with the prospects of future research on *League of Legends* and Esports.

Why study *League of Legends* players?

With the highest player base and largest viewership, *League of Legends* has the most visible and notable scene of professional players. Certain literature even attributes the rise in Esports popularity to *League of Legends* (Bornemark 2013). Often, the work of Esports players is misunderstood as simply playing games for fun by other players and fans. To address this, and given *League of Legends*'s nature as the premiere Esport, the work of players ought to be researched to consider their status and work. Gaming as a whole is becoming a large aspect of many people's lives (Taylor, 2012). As such gaming and of course the games played, move away from being an unrecognized sub-culture of the past, and become a part of society, influencing those who play them on a daily basis. Numerous studies consider these factors and others, but none exclusively consider *League of Legends* Esports players. Through brief interviews and comments *League of Legends* Esports players often hint at the realities behind the professional scene. Players describe managing school work, relationships and other factors all while playing the game and living in the homes of their team employer. In this regard as well, they raise valuable research questions discussed further in this thesis. Ultimately, an examination of *League of Legends* Esports players can help to better understand labour in an increasingly digital world.

Research goals and Contributions

Much of the work presented in this thesis provides a unique insight into the *League of Legends* Esports setting. One of the key strengths of this work is that I show the connections between the dimensions of sport, Esport and digital work in *League of Legends*. While there are authors who discuss Esports in some relation to sports, none address it in the context of *League of Legends*. Due to the rapid expansion of *League of Legends* as an Esport, most of the findings and information within this thesis are recent. For this reason as well portions of the thesis are descriptive as they lay the groundwork for future research. A distinct contribution of this work, as opposed to other research, is to show that professional players and their experiences within their organizations are unique from those of traditional gamers and developers. The work of *League of Legends* professional players and their organizations is particularly unique through the Meta. This work examines the Meta, Riot Games and players in a way that is distinct from typical research that focuses on Esports. The Meta's unique existence within *League of Legends* creates an interaction between the developer and players which serves to highlight the work experiences of professional players.

Chapter 2

Methodology

To understand Esports this research project utilizes YouTube documentaries in conjunction with archived online data. As Berg (2001) describes, archival data is unobtrusive and provides easy access to basic information such as dates (p. 191). Utilizing public commercial media archives, such as Na.lol.Esports.com and Leaguepedia, provides quick access to basic information on players. On these websites information such as contract length and players' period of employment with the same team is readily available. Leagupedia.com is an open source website, and as such there is a chance that it could be edited incorrectly (Leaguepedia.com, 2015). Nevertheless it is the only available website that provides basic information such as country of origin, historical background of players or a list of retired players. Further to support Leaguepedia.com's data, the paper connects its data as much as possible to the official Riot Games Esports website, Na.lol.Esports.com. As the officially sanctioned Riot Games Esports website, it covers some past information on the subject. For example, it provides accurate information on past tournaments as well as some players perspectives on their participation in Esports. Unfortunately Na.lol.Esports.com only maintains some records, for reasons unknown. Part of this research utilizes my experience and knowledge of *League of Legends* and its Esports scene.

This knowledge comes from six years of gameplay experience in addition to tracking the professional scene since its inception. My perspective is particularly unique

as I was one of the closed beta testers for the game. Closed beta testers are a small group of individuals invited by a company to test software before its open release (ISTQB Certification, 2015). I continued to track the evolution of *League of Legends* competitively through its "Ranked" play system, which I describe further on. Evidence of my claims come from my ownership of an exclusive in-game reward called "King Rammus". Riot Games gave this limited item only to players who participated in the closed beta testing of *League of Legends* (Pendragon, 2009). I also have various "season icons" which represent my rankings for each year of competitive *League of Legends* play. Through these methods alone, however, it is not possible to fully understand players' circumstances. As a result this thesis utilizes a variety of videos and documentaries, all of which are available on YouTube, to analyze the lives of professional players and their organizations. The breakdown of these videos can be found in Figure 1 below.

Affiliation	# of Videos
Team Liquid	12
CLG	7
TSM	26
C9	8
Fnatic (FNC)	9
DRIVE "LCS"	5
TS	1
Total	68

Figure 1. Teams or Organizations and number of videos reviewed

CLG is the name of the Counter Logic Gaming team, its videos are produced by "MachinimaVS" a multi-channel network and later IBuyPower a computer parts corporation. C9 is known as Cloud 9 and their videos were also produced by MachinimaVS. TSM represents Team Solo-Mid, their videos are produced by a computer parts corporation, called Logitech, and are uploaded to the YouTube TSM channel called "SolomidDOTnet". Team Liquid's (TL) videos are produced by HTC and are uploaded to the "HTC Esports" YouTube channel. Fnatic (FNC) is the only European (EU) team in

the study as no other EU team has a documentary as of yet. Their documentaries are produced by Steelseries, a computer parts corporation and are uploaded first to Steelseries website and later to FNC's YouTube channel called "FnaticTv". DRIVE "LCS" represents videos made by the developer Riot Games. They are generally short clips in which players describe an aspect of their life as a professional player. TS represents a single promotional video by the only advertised all female *League of Legends* team to exist named "Team Siren". I explore Team Siren in greater depth in later sections of this work. The number of videos an organization or team has does not correlate to the length of the videos. Excluding the DRIVE "LCS" series and the TS video, videos on teams are typically 25-30 minutes long, with the longest at 56 minutes and the shortest at 10 minutes. Given this, the thesis reviewed approximately 35 hours of videos.

Most of the videos I review are called documentaries by their producers. The intent of these videos is to represent the daily lives of professional players on their respective teams. There are slight differences between videos; for example, some include profanity while others do not. Overall the aim of the videos is to show the true nature of being a professional player, as Team Liquid's producer states "The stories are raw and true to tone" (HTC Esports, 2015). The advantages of these videos is that they are readily available and provide the quickest access into teams' houses. Alternative methods to the use of these videos would require visiting teams' houses located in Los Angeles and Berlin.

In this way, this thesis utilizes the availability sampling method (Berg, 2001, p. 32). Under this method, researchers select the most readily available or conveniently accessible information. This approach is necessary for the purposes of this project as it consumes the least amount of time. The initial plan for this work was to employ the use of semi-structured interviews with professional players. Although there was some interest by members of the community, it was unfortunately not possible due to time constraints and the end of the professional season in October. The online documentaries, however, provide an even better research opportunity. It is unlikely that interviews would provide the wealth of knowledge obtainable through these videos. In addition these videos are unique, as they capture the inner workings of the most popular, successful and oldest *League of Legends* teams. The majority of videos are recent as they are less than a year old. Given this, they provide insight into the significant changes in team dynamics within the last year.

Team Liquid (Formerly known as Team Curse), TSM and CLG are the original *League of Legends* teams which formed when the professional scene began. Team FNC is particularly unique as it is one of the oldest and most successful teams. FNC is the Season 1 Championship winner and the team has only lost one regional championship title in Europe. It is also the only team to ever go undefeated in its region during the regular season. Unfortunately FNC is the only European team that has accessible video content to study. Other teams only provide glimpses of their inner workings and most of this content is not updated regularly.

The LCS/ "Drive" videos, while short, are useful as they provide brief insight into relevant moments in a player's life. One player for example discusses how he handled his reaction to the loss of his "Role and job" on his team, unexpectedly, to another player (LoL Esports "BunnyFuFu", 2015). As Esports is still an emerging industry, the videos, whether unintentionally or intentionally, often depict circumstances that would likely be cut from a typical documentary due to public relations, corporate or other organizational concerns. This is particularly useful for this research as the videos reveal the labour disputes and conflicts within professional teams. Unsurprisingly this does not apply in the case of the LCS videos produced by Riot Games. The content of the LCS Drive videos by Riot Games is much more controlled. Professional players acknowledge that in some cases they are required to read scripts or make certain comments in Riot Games' videos (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). This research does not use videos from the Korean or Chinese *League of Legends* Esports scene, as many of these videos lack an English translation.

Limitations

As with any thesis, there are limitations to this research and differing opinions within the literature on Esports. In particular, there are disputes about what constitutes play versus work, and what constitutes a sport and a hobby. Various scholars place different emphasis on the qualities that distinguish traditional sports from competitions such as "chess" or computer gaming (Hemphill, 2005). This is relevant to research on *League of Legends* as this thesis attempts to frame Esports as a variation of traditional sports and not similar to a chess competition. Further, the use of these documentary

videos does not account for the potential of the "Hawthorne Effect". These documentaries may also be staged despite their claims to be "Raw and true" representations of professional players' lives (HTC Esports, 2015). In addition some of the information on Esports is hidden or unclear, due to in part the actions of players, team owners and Riot Games. These three groups choose not to reveal certain information such as player incomes for reasons that remain undisclosed. Much of the undisclosed information within *League of Legends* Esports is attributable to the rapid pace at which the industry is growing. For example, information on the pay structure and working conditions of team analysts are undisclosed as the position is a recent addition to teams' management staff.

A larger limitation to the study of *League of Legend*s professional players is that as a game and an Esport, it is growing at a pace that far exceeds current research on the subject. For example, Taylor's (2012) work, *Raising the Stakes: Esports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, discusses Esports players, but does not consider *League of Legends* to a significant degree. For example, her work does not account for the recent changes in teams or the organization of the *League of Legends* scene. Yet both of these factors have an impact on the lives of professional players. It is only in the past year and a half, for example, that every professional *League of Legends* team has at least one analyst and one coach on staff. Prior to 2014, many North American and European teams did not have coaches, analysts or any of the support staff I mention in later chapters. Teams consisted solely of players and an owner who may or may not appear depending on the team and their success. From an economic standpoint, the additional costs of a coach and an analyst to a team, must impact the lives and

expectations of owners on professional players in some way. Another limitation of games literature is that it does not focus exclusively on professional players or *League of Legends*, instead scholars consider or reference MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) or shooter games such as *Counter Strike GO*. Moreover this literature does not consider "Patches" and the "Meta", which are unique concepts and crucial to *League of Legend* Esports, that I explore further on. It is also possible that *League of Legends* is only a temporary part of popular culture. Even so, if *League of Legends* were to wane in popularity a similarly structured game would likely follow. Considerations such as these are present in many research projects and as such one should not dismiss the importance of understanding new forms of work within the developing realm of Esports.

Chapter 3

Understanding League of Legends Gameplay

Understanding *League of Legends* is no simple task. On the surface it is easy to learn but exceedingly difficult to master at high levels of play. Within the game there are a variety of game modes. This thesis focuses on the ranked play game mode, as this mode is the only one broadcast as an Esport by Riot Games. In ranked play, two teams of five players are pit against each other. The goal of the game is to destroy the opposing team's home-base or "Nexus". To achieve this goal, players take turns selecting an avatar or "Champion" to represent them within the game. Each champion has a unique lore and

personality within the game and has five unique abilities in conjunction with character statistics such as, high health, speed, strength and so on. Players may use "Runes, Masteries and Summoner Spells" to modify the aforementioned character's statistics. At the conclusion of champion selection, players and their champions are loaded onto the game map called "Summoner's Rift".

On Summoner's Rift, players and their teammates must use their champions to navigate the map and combat opposing champions, protective home-base towers, non-player characters called minions and other neutral map monsters. As they perform these tasks players spend "Gold", which they earn through combat and destroying map objectives, on "Items". These items further modify various aspects of a player's current champion. Players utilize the various modifications in game, in conjunction with items on their champions, to defeat the opposing team and destroy their home base. A game ends once one side has destroyed an opposing sides' home base. Typically the duration of a match is anywhere between 20 minutes to over an hour of play. At the game's conclusion each player rises or falls in the rankings ladder integrated into the game, depending on whether they won or lost. There are tiers of ranking from "Bronze" to "Challenger" and as the game evolved so too did the number of ranking tiers. Further, upon victory or loss, players receive "Influence Points" (IP), to spend in the Riot Games' store. Players that lose, receive fewer points than those who win. IP differs from the other currency available in *League of Legends* called "Riot Points" (RP), which requires real world currency to obtain. Consequently, this work proceeds to describe the in-game business structure of *League of Legends*

Business structure of *League of Legends*

Founded in 2006, Riot Games has only developed one game, *League of Legends*, in 2009. According to "Tryndamere" or Marc Merrill, co-founder of Riot Games, the game's initial cost was estimated to be $3 million, but upon conclusion of development, it cost six times that amount (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). In spite of these initial costs, the game continues to and has always utilized a unique variation on the "Free to Play" video game model. Unlike other games or free to play games, *League of Legends* does not require a one-time purchase and does not have a "Gating" mechanism for players.

By gating, I refer to the process by which games require players to pay to play them or pay to unlock additional core gameplay functions. Nearly everything within *League of Legends* is free and unlocked by simply playing and spending IP received from games. This includes the previously discussed, runes, masteries, summoner spells, and also additional champions for use by players. In addition, Riot Games has a "Free Champion Rotation" in place which provides free access to a rotating series of champions. Players may purchase these and other champions with IP, earned for free as described above. Alternatively they may purchase and use RP if they do not wish to play the number of games necessary to earn enough IP to purchase a champion. There are two exceptions to being able to use IP, the first of which are items. Items as previously discussed, are specific to that match and can only be purchased in-game using the virtual in-game currency (gold) accrued through combat and map objectives, all of which is free content. The second and only thing which players must spend real world currencies on are

unlocking in-game aesthetics called "Champion Skins". These skins modify the looks of champions only and in no way enhance abilities or statistics as opposed to items, runes, masteries and summoner spells. Skins are purely for cosmetic purposes and do not influence actual gameplay in any regard. Figure 2 below shows the comparison between a base model champion's appearance (Left) and a champion's appearance with a skin (Right).

Figure 2: Base "Blitzcrank" (Left), Skin for "Blitzcrank" (Right)

As is evident from the photo, the base model has overall less detail while the skin model features different legs and hands from the base model. Players may purchase these skins using RP for various amounts from $2 to $40 USD. It is primarily through these micro transactions that Riot Games reported $1 billion (USD) revenues during 2014 (Tassi, 2014).

Esports Structure and Monetization

Initially Riot Games did not involve itself in the Esports aspect of its game. Esports tournaments were host by third party groups such as "Intel Extreme Masters". Over time, Riot Games took stronger control of the game as an Esport and began to monetize and professionalize both the game and its Esports players. I explore the development of *League of Legends* Esports, professionalization and its parallels to the NFL further on. At present, this thesis discusses the structure of Esports designed by Riot and further the monetization of the scene.

To begin, since 2011 Riot categorizes each year of professional play into "Seasons". During these seasons it hosts the North American and European Esports scene at studio locations in Los Angeles and Berlin. The regular season of play consists of two 10 week "Splits", spring and summer. Each team plays two games per week against one another. At the end of the summer split, the *League of Legends* World Championship series begins. This international series invites the top *League of Legends* teams from seven regions. The championship consists of 16 teams of five players, excluding substitutes. The regions of the World Championships include, China, Korea, North America, Europe, Taiwan and the "Wildcard" region. Wildcard regions constitute any region that is not part of the other six, for example it may include Brazil and Turkey. The venue for the championship series varies each year as Riot Games aims to reach its Esports fans across the world (Riot Games, 2015). In 2014 for example the championship

was host across Asia from Taiwan to South Korea, whereas in 2015, stadium venues are located in France and Germany.

This thesis focuses primarily on the North American and European professional scenes, known as the North American League Championship Series (NA LCS) and the European Championship Series (EU LCS). In these two leagues there are 20 teams with 10 teams per league and at minimum five players per team. However, there are other leagues, two in China and South Korea that I briefly explore in later sections. This thesis does not consider to a significant degree the other regions, such as Turkey, or the Taiwanese league. The game is far too new in these some of these regions and there is limited information available in English.

Riot Games holds total control over all aspects of *League of Legend* gameplay and Esports. This includes issues relating to venue planning, ticket sales, Esports rules and other variables found in the contract or "Rulebook" of that particular season. In some cases, such as China and South Korea, Riot Games allows other Riot approved entities to operate the Esports functions of *League of Legends*. These entities are not owned by Riot Games and the structural relationships between Riot and its partners are unclear, especially regarding issues such as revenues from stadium tickets. However, as Riot has total control over its game, it is likely that these entities are required to follow all Riot Games rulings and Esports related policies. An incident with the "Garena" partner to Riot Games Esports in Taiwan highlights this significant level of control.

During the "Garena" incident, "Garena Esports" a partner of Riot Games, restricted entrance of transgendered women into its all-female tournament (Zacny, 2014). Consequently, Riot Games reprimanded its partner and issued a statement that it would strive to ensure all partners fall under its policies of inclusion and non-discrimination (Zacny, 2014). At the LCS studios in Los Angeles and Berlin, Riot games claims all ticket sales revenues. It is not clear as to the exact size of these studio locations but they likely only support 200 to 400 viewers. Further Riot Games never hosts its finals tournaments at these studios and instead always books new venues in notable stadiums such as the Staples Centre in Los Angeles (home to the Lakers and Clippers in the NBA and the Kings in the NHL) or Madison Square Garden in New York (home to the Knicks in the NBA and the Rangers in the NHL). Under its contract or rulebook with LCS teams it provides players with a salary of $12,500 USD per LCS split (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015). Within these studios, professional players sit on stage at Riot provided computers, with their own personal keyboards and mice (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015). Here, fans are able to watch players on a large screen set behind the players' backs. By contrast, the majority of fans watch matches online, free of charge, using the YouTube, Twitch or Azubu streaming services. A regular season game has anywhere from 80,000 to 500,000 viewers depending on the teams playing and the importance of the match. Regional finals and the world championship games cause viewership to rise dramatically, as discussed earlier, often exceeding that of traditional sports such as MLB or the NBA (McCormick, 2013).

During gameplay, between two and three "Shoutcasters", describe the actions of pro players on screen and analyze the game as it unfolds. These shoutcasters are responsible for knowing player specific data, such as win-rates on a particular champion. Further, they "shout-cast" what they see on the screen to the fans at the studio, in larger stadiums and online. At the conclusion of a match, players pass cheering fans and return to their team specific pre-game room (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Riot Games then turns the broadcast towards a panel of Riot analysts, shoutcasters and sometimes players to analyze and discuss key aspects of the match. This is the basic structure by which Riot Games presents Esports to its viewership. Shoutcasters, analysts and other production variables necessary for casting Esports represent a cost to Riot Games. Unfortunately information regarding the costs of Esports is undisclosed.

The head of Riot Esports, Dustin Beck (Brother to Co-owner Brandon Beck) and Marc Merrill, state that for Riot Games, Esports is a "…significant investment that we're not making money from" (Zacny, 2014). Marc Merrill argues that Riot's approach to business and Esports is drastically different from other corporations (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). He states that unlike game companies such as "Zynga" which focus on "Average revenue per user (ARPU)", Riot Games is focused on players and creating content that players will enjoy and perhaps"…want to spend money (on skins)" (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). In addition, he states that as a gamer himself, he did not want to run ads during Esports and shares in the sentiments of players when Riot Games fails to deliver meaningful content (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). Essentially, Marc Merrill and Dustin Beck argue that Riot Games approach is players first, profits second. Dustin also states

that the future goals of Esports are to model it after traditional sports such as "FIFA" (Zacny, 2014). The reality however, is that *League of Legends* is a vastly profitable game and Riot Games has reaped the rewards. In 2011, the Chinese tech giant Tencent invested $400 million USD to become Riot Games' majority owner ("Persons of the Year", 2012). Despite Tencent's investment, Marc Merrill maintains that he and Co-Founder Brandon Beck continue to guide the goals of the company, with a players first and profits second approach (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). At the same time as Merrill makes these statements, Tencent has no reason to assume control, as *League of Legends* revenues continue to increase from $624 million in 2013, to $1 billion USD in 2014 (Tassi, 2014).

As Riot Games claims to lose money on "Esports" they are likely referring narrowly to their inability to recoup various costs, such as Shoutcasters, analysts, player costs and travel expenses from the Esports community. Ticket sales, which are between $15-65 USD are unlikely to cover the costs of Esports and as Marc Merrill states there are no ads on the free online streaming services (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). Taking this idea of Esports as a "money loser" into consideration, why does Riot Games continue to support Esports? The simple and short answer according to Riot Games is for the enjoyment of the fans (Zacny, 2014). More likely, the goal of Esports is as a tool and part of a broader process of monetizing *League of Legends* both in and out of the game.

While on the surface it may appear that Riot Games loses money on Esports, they instead generate profit from it in other ways. In particular, value from Esports comes from enticing fans to purchase skins as they watch professional players utilize them during

matches. At the same time, professionals are not obligated to use skins during matches; some utilize them while others do not. The Esports aspect of *League of Legends* further supports the game by attracting new players, who are also likely to purchase skins. Riot Games has used Esports to attract large sponsors such as Coca Cola (Gaudiosi, 2015). These sponsors ultimately utilize *League of Legends* as a means to further their own brand and I explore this further on. Moreover, these sponsorships likely help to absorb the costs that Beck and Merrill describe earlier. In spite of his earlier comments, regarding a lack of ads in Esports, Coca Cola had a small ad spot in LCS games during 2014. The key aspect of Esports is that it allows for the further branding and promotion of *League of Legends*. Over time, and much like other high-tech corporations such as Facebook, *League of Legends* slowly monetized its users.

As Bergman (2014) describes, Facebook's Marc Zuckerberg realized that in order to keep his product current and further profit from his users he needed to expand his enterprise from solely the desktop world. In this regard, Zuckerberg moved to the mobile world as Facebook purchased the mobile program WhatsApp and promoted its own Facebook apps (Bergman, 2014). Through this method, Facebook monetized its users and product further by increasing its branding, exposure and the sale of ads. Similarly, Esports allows Riot Games to take its users in-game and move them to other digital and physical avenues by which they can participate in the monetization of *League of Legends*.

Recently Riot has used Esports to provide discounts in game on "bundles" or individual skins used by professionals in high profile matches. The winners of the world

championships, for example, have a set of in-game "World Championship Skins"

designed by Riot employees for players to purchase after the finals. These skins are meant

to forever commemorate the success of the winning teams and their champions. Ironically

for team SKT, the 2013 winners, one of their players "Faker" had a skin made for him,

despite never using a skin in his professional career (Leaguepedia.com, 2015). In

addition, as Esports developed, Riot began to offer "Team Icons" in game to represent the

LCS teams for that season. Players can purchase these icons at any point during the

season to show their in game support for their favourite teams. At the end of the season,

these icons leave the in game store permanently to allow for a new set of icons for the

following season. The 2014 season also saw the introduction of the Riot Games

merchandise store. Similar to Facebook, investors see a massive revenue potential as Riot

Games decides to slowly advertise to the millions of people who play and follow League

of Legends. As I mentioned previously, Riot's parent company, Tencent Holdings (which

owns a number of other media and high-tech companies) saw its market value surpass

$200 billion USD, in April 2015. That is a higher value than that of other tech firms such

as Oracle, IBM or Amazon, and approaching the range of Facebook, which sat at $230

billion in April ("China Tencent", 2015). If Tencent were to require *League of Legends* to

advertise in any capacity, it would significantly benefit both companies while further

monetizing the game and its Esport.

Within its online store Riot Games sells various apparel and fan favourite items

such as "Poros". Poros, among other items, can sometimes appear during Esports

broadcasts. By extension in South Korea, Riot's partnership with Coca Cola allows for

products to have *League of Legends* champions displayed on soda cans (Gaudiosi, 2015).

Through *League of Legends,* brands such as Coca Cola gain access to massive stadium

and online audiences (Gaudiosi, 2015). But who are the people that watch Esports and

why? These are difficult questions to answer as Riot does not reveal "who" *League of*

Legends fans are. Presumably, many of the fans are in actuality part of the player base

that I explore further on. According to Marc Merrill, Esports is for people who "…never

really connected with traditional sports" (Tryndamere Reddit, 2013). Moreover, as

Esports introduces various new ways to monetize *League of Legends*, professional players

and teams are at the forefront. To a certain degree, they benefit from the increased

monetization of the game.

Chapter 4

Who are Professional *League of Legends* Players?

As an Esport, *League of Legends* initially had very few requirements to be a

professional player. Age was not a factor and professional players could be as young as

15 years old. The only "requirement", which existed and continues to exist among

professional teams is that their players be ranked at the highest level of play, currently the

"Challenger" tier. It is not clear if players have agents or if they have any say in trades

that occur between teams within the LCS. Over time, Riot changed its rules to allow for

only those over the age of 17 to become professional players. Further, among most

professional players, the general consensus is that careers last only between 4-5 years (Enhrenreich, 2015). There are of course players who have and continue to play the game since its inception in 2009, but they represent fewer than 15 in the North American and European LCS (Leaguepedia.com, 2015). To date, there are 88 officially retired professional *League of Legends* players, with careers lasting only a few months to years (Leaguepedia.com, 2015).

Players are typically between the ages of 17-25 and are almost exclusively male. Recently a trans-woman entered the LCS but it is unclear if she will continue to play in the 2016 season and information on her is limited (Conditt, 2015). There is a significant amount of diversity between players in the North American and European LCS and issues of race are almost never a part of the Esports scene. A common theme among professional players who have discussed their education in the documentaries is that they lack any post-secondary degrees. Many professional players are similar to players IWD and Quas from TL or Sneaky from C9, in that they either dropped out of post-secondary education in the early years of their career or never went to begin with (LoL Esports "Sneaky", 2015). Most professional players do not appear to have any form of secondary employment outside of playing *League of Legends*. They also do not in any sense perform other work with computers outside of playing *League of Legends,* these players should not be confused as "coders" or game "developers"

Gender in *League of Legends*

For Taylor (2012), the masculinity associated with being an athlete sometimes conflicts with gamers who are uncomfortable with "posing" or maintaining a "tough guise" as they play (p. 115). This is not untrue in the case of *League of Legends*, as players make comments as to their discomfort with sponsorship roles (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Ultimately, however, the issue of masculinity mixing with the athletic aspects of sport within the context of Esports is unclear. Taylor (2012) acknowledges this as she writes "...there is no single type of masculinity within the e-sports scene...they (players) are still quite young and still in the process of figuring out who they are as men" (p. 116). Moreover, much of the conflicts between genders is limited as there are no professional female players. Within the *League of Legends* community, Riot Games reports that over 90% of players are male (Gallegos, 2012). It is unclear as to why there are so few female players and subsequently no professional female players in the LCS. It is worth noting that of the 126 champions available for play, approximately 40% are female (Leaguepedia.com, 2015).The lack of female professional players may be attributable to the hostile internet culture towards women (Taylor, 2012). At the same time, Riot Games attempts to prevent this hostility and other negativity through its tribunal system and its contracts with players.

Developed in 2011, the tribunal is a system within the game that allows players to report each other for negative behavior, sexism among such behavior. If a player accrues enough reports, they are sent to the tribunal for judgment, whereby other players cast their

votes after reading the "chat logs" or comments in game. If the player is found guilty, the tribunal will ban the player from playing *League of Legends*. In this way, Riot Games allows the community to police itself through this system. According to Riot Games, most of its community is not "Toxic", a catchall term used to represent sexism, racism and any negativity within the game. As the tribunal matured, Riot Games replaced it with an automated system based on information gathered by the tribunal. The ways in which this new automated system works are unclear, but Riot Games has stated that it is based on the community's and Riot Games' perceptions of negativity found in the tribunal (Riot Games, 2015). Riot Games is explicitly against sexism and players have been banned and continue to be banned for sexist remarks. As previously discussed, Riot Games even reprimanded its partner Garena in Taiwan for its sexism and discriminatory tournament rules. For professional players, it is built into their LCS contracts with Riot Games to uphold the principles of the tribunal and of Riot Games (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015).

Players are not allowed to make discriminatory remarks at any time during their contract with Riot Games in the LCS (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015). In the case of "Svenskeren", a player for SK gaming, he and his team suffered as a result of racism in game, when he renamed his gamer I.D to "TaipeiChingChong" as he played on Taiwanese servers (Riot Games, 2015). For this rule violation, he was banned for four games and fined $2,500 USD, requiring his team to substitute a player for the world championships. In their report Riot Games cites that he and other members of teams went through "cultural sensitivity briefing" and thus his actions represented deliberate

discrimination (Riot Games, 2015). Riot Games later donated his and other fines

throughout the year, for various other rule violations, to a LGBTQ charity (Osborn,

2015). This decision was perhaps as a result of the Garena incident I discussed, which

occurred earlier in 2014. At the same time Riot Games is not able to police the entirety of

the internet or the professional player base. Other avenues may exist that limit the

participation of female players in the LCS. Team Siren, the only female professional

League of Legends team to exist in North America, provides some insight into female

participation in Esports.

Team Siren was a short lived all-female professional team founded in 2013. The

team disbanded approximately one month after they created a YouTube video describing

their aspirations in Esports. Reactions to Team Siren and their video were generally

negative from the *League of Legends* community (Silver, 2013). In their video, Team

Siren members claimed they could "…compete…as equals as any all-male team" that

"losing (to men) was not an option", they claimed to "represent" something greater than

themselves (Team Siren Gaming, 2013). As expected there were responses along the lines

that women were unable to play video games (Silver, 2013). At the same time, many

players' qualms with Team Siren were that they made arrogant comments and did not

respect the "Challenger" system. This system, which I discuss later on, ranks players in

game with the highest "Challengers" being professional players. The system rates players

based solely on wins and losses in game. Further, none of the female players were the

Challenger ranking, that all other professional players had achieved and were in actuality

many divisions below it (Silver, 2013). For many players it had nothing to do with the

Siren's being women and instead was related to the skill required to be a professional player and the Siren's disregard for this skill (Silver, 2013).

In response to Team Siren's claims, a former professional "HotShotGG" and owner of team CLG, organized a game against Team Siren. During the game, HotshotGG and his team made no comments. Rather it was the Team Siren players who were negative towards the players on the opposite team (HotshotGG, 2013). HotShotGG's actions also reaffirmed the community belief that these players were not skillful, as he defeated their team easily. According to Silver (2013), the main problem with Team Siren was not necessarily related to gender, but rather about their attitude and the messages they delivered to other players and fans. Surprisingly it was not as a result of the negative publicity that Team Siren received that they disbanded. Rather, one of their players stated that the team leader created a hostile work environment that brought down the entire team (Silver, 2013). Although these internal issues and problems with their approach may have led to the demise of Team Siren, the question as to why there are still so few female professionals remains and will require further research.

Pay structure

Due to the secretive nature of the Esports scene, it is difficult to ascertain the exact payment structure of professional players. However, pay for professional players is likely derived from four sources which are Riot's contractual pay, team contracts, tournament earnings and "Streaming". Some players may have additional sources of funding such as personal sponsors or merchandising rights, although it is not clear as to how many players

this would be. For example, former team SK Gaming player "Ocelote" revealed that his income included five parts, contract salary, streaming, merchandising income, tournament winnings and personal sponsors, totaling "almost $1 million USD per year" (Te, 2013). Contracts are kept between players and their teams and Riot Games states only that it pays professional players $12,500 USD per regular season split (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015). Any tournament earnings are divided among players according to the terms of their contracts with teams. Streaming is the process by which professional players display themselves playing the game on Twitch, a popular online service akin to YouTube. Although streaming is not a central focus of this thesis, it is evident that the activity generates a significant amount of income for players (Farrow, 2015).

During a "Stream", professional players receive income through one time, any amount "Donations" or through "Subscribers" who pay a monthly fee to watch the streamer and their content at any time. As a result of streaming and the uncertainties around player contracts it is difficult to assess the average income of professional players. TSM player "Bjergsen" for example is estimated to earn $450,000 USD a year due to his streaming and contract with TSM until 2018 (Farrow, 2015). Through streaming, players often promote their sponsors and have ad space by which viewers can receive special deals or offers as Figure 3 below shows. In Figure 3 below, TL player "Piglet" is streaming his *League of Legends* gameplay. As he performs this action, he advertises his team and sponsors such as "OnGamers". I explore streaming and other aspects of the activity such as "Solo que" in later sections of this thesis. Moreover, the question of who are the sponsors of streaming players and teams remains.

Figure 3. "Piglet" Twitch Solo Que Stream

Who are Team Sponsors and why?

Similar to other aspects of *League of Legends* Esports, the structure between teams, players and sponsors is undisclosed. At the same time, certain information can be deduced from trends among sponsors. For example, nearly all of the *League of Legends* teams' sponsors are high-tech computer parts and accessory companies such as "Kingston", "IBuyPower" and "Logitech". Likely, these companies support teams as professional players represent a means to reach customers who are interested in similar games and require high-tech computer products. Television for example, is not the best avenue to reach the *League of Legends* player base. This player base falls into the category of 18-34 year olds, who have begun to move away from television (Atkinson, 2015). In contrast to four years ago, almost 20% fewer people in the 18-34 demographic

watch television (Atkinson, 2015). By contrast, this same demographic is turning to streaming services such as Twitch, which broadcasts *League of Legends* Esports games.

In recent years, Twitch experienced massive growth, doubling its number of unique viewers to 100 million between 2013 and 2014 (Leslie, 2015). Therefore, the most logical avenue to advertise to *League of Legends* gamers, who require high-tech parts, is through professional teams and players. These teams and players frequently appear on Twitch streams during Esports matches or solo que sessions, which I discuss in later chapters. By advertising in this way, companies receive significant exposure for their brands. Moreover, companies are able to use the image of professional players to sell specific products. For example, "Klevv" a high tech computer parts corporation, uses the image of *League of Legends'* "best player in the world" "Faker" to sell its RAM (Newegg.com, 2015). The logic behind this advertising is that only customers who purchase this RAM will have a computer of comparable specifications to match that of Faker's. Further, only these customers will be able to compete with Faker to be the "best player in the world". Sponsors attempt to connect the success of teams and players in Esports to their brand. This is in the hopes that other players will want to be "just like the pros" and own similar computer products**.** Much of the reason as to how *League of Legends* became so popular and is able to attract sponsors is attributable to its constant evolution through a concept called the "Meta".

Chapter 5

The Meta: The Heart of *League of Legends* Gameplay

Originally *League of Legends* played as an almost lawless game. Players could play any champion, move anywhere on the map and still be successful. Over time, however, this changed and in particular during the Season 1 World Championships teams began to follow a strict set of champion "roles" created by players of Team FNC. Players began to play the roles of "Top", "Middle", "Jungle", "Carry" and "Support". These roles correspond to the position on the map that champions play in, with carry and support sharing the "bottom" lane. Further roles reflect a champion's strengths and weaknesses, such as a middle champions having a lower amount of health but powerful abilities. Ultimately when roles first formed a concept now known as the "Meta" developed.

Within *League of Legends* gameplay is a concept called the "meta". In the simplest terms, the Meta is the prevailing and optimal combination of champions in every role selected to win any given game. An in-depth look at the Meta reveals it to be the most important concept in the game for professional players. The Meta does not simply occur naturally in *League of Legends.* It exists as a result of the competitive balancing of the game by the developer Riot Games. This is done through reoccurring updates to the game known as "Patches". Within these gameplay updates or patches, various items, champions, runes, masteries and summoner spells are "buffed" or "nerfed". A buff is a change in which a champions' abilities or the power of an item, spell and so on is improved. By contrast, a nerf is a change in which the abilities of a champion or the

power of items and so on are reduced. Through each of these patches and new additions to the game, such as new champions, the Meta changes and evolves.

One of the most significant evolutions of the *League of Legends* Meta occurred with the advent of the "Lane Swap" strategy. This strategy, reinforced and solidified roles within *League of Legends* gameplay. Due to the strategic elements of the lane swap, various champions could no longer play in certain roles. Further as this Meta continued to evolve, players could no longer remain, as SaintViscious (2015) describes, "…Just a bunch of crazy kids" playing the game. Teams that could not adapt to the constant patches by Riot Games often disbanded quickly. "Krepo", a former player and now Riot Games analyst states his team CLG Europe "…Got completely dismantled...as we were unable to adapt (to the lane swap Meta)" (Whiski, 2015). To better adjust to and formulate new Meta, players began to adopt a specific team structure that I explore further in this chapter. Riot Games initially consulted with "…some of the pros" to address the issues the lane swap strategy presented at a "summit" in Spain during 2013 (Whiski, 2015). It is important to note that at this point in history, the developer claimed to not "enforce" any Meta and rather let players form their own Meta-teams (Riot Games, 2015). By the fourth season of gameplay, however, the lane-swap strategy continued to persist. This created a stale set of Meta champions and by extension a less interesting Esport to watch. To address this, Riot Games finally interfered and broke its long-standing tradition of not interfering with the Meta and various gameplay strategies (such as the lane swap).

In the patch 4.1 notes Riot Games stated they wanted to "tackle" the issue of the lane swap strategy (Riot Games, 2015). This strategy was not a significant issue for a majority of the player base. This strategy was used almost exclusively by professional players who played the same Meta champions repeatedly during Esports matches. Through its interference with the lane swap strategy and its Meta, Riot Games in essence showed that it would make changes to the game for Esports purposes exclusively. This circumstance highlights a potential connection between the Meta, Esports and revenues. Under the stale lane-swap strategy, professional players utilized the same champions and thus same skins repeatedly. For Riot Games, a new Meta and various new strategies meant the introduction of more champions in professional play and therefore a greater exposure for new skins for the player base to purchase. In the 2015 season for example, nearly every champion has been a part of professional play, with only two not seeing play since 2014 (Leaguepedia.com, 2015).

Benefits of the Meta for Riot Games and its Monetization in Esports

The existence of the Meta is extremely beneficial to Riot Games and its process of patches. Through observing the Meta played out in Esports matches, Riot Games is able to specifically patch to address various Meta champions or strategies. This is as opposed to earlier patching iterations of simply guessing gameplay changes (or not making changes at all) that could revitalize the game. The existence of the Meta allows for Riot Games to quickly narrow down stale elements of gameplay. Once targeted, buffing or nerfing various elements allows Riot Games to renew excitement and interest around

roles and aspects of the map, such as objectives. Furthermore Riot Games is able to translate this into its Esport, renewing interest in matches with each series of new patches and Meta shifts.

To protect itself from acknowledging its involvement and interests in maintaining the Meta, Riot Games adopted a variety of gameplay policies. Riot Games claims the player base can hold them accountable to maintain these goals as opposed to the maintaining the Meta and its roles. They use terms such as "Strategic Diversity", "Champion Diversity", in order to buff and nerf champions and aspects of the game that stifle other champions or strategies (Riot Games, 2015). The reality, however, is that Riot Games uses these terms to maintain the Meta by cycling out champions and strategies through buffs and nerfs. Ultimately, these terms do as they say and promote Champion diversity, but it is to suit the greater purpose of maintaining an ever evolving problem for players, which is the Meta and its roles. Part of the proof of this is that Riot Games now develops and changes champions to meet the requirements of Meta roles and that of the lane swap.

In recent "Champion Spotlight" videos, which Riot Games produces as they release new champions, they highlight the roles players should take champions into ("Sion" Champion Spotlight, 2014). Champion "Sion", one of the original champions, did not initially have a role or place in the Meta (because it did not exist at the time). However after his update in Season 4, his champion spotlight video, highlights that he should be played in the "Top" lane and depicts his ability to survive the lane swap

("Sion" Champion Spotlight, 2014). By creating and modifying champions to suit the perceived roles of the game, Riot Games is able to place professional players into Meta positions, such as "Middle" or "Top", in order to win their matches. For the average player, they are able to relate to professionals through observing Meta champions choices and roles during Esports matches. For Riot Games this translates into players' desire to emulate professionals by "looking just like the pros" and purchasing skins for their favorite Meta champions. Players then further emulate professionals, as they play these champions in the same specific roles. Indeed, anyone following the game can notice how new champions become popular – and their skins become marketable – after there are changes to the Meta.

The Meta and Professional Players

For professional players the Meta and the lane swap as described earlier, translate into the need for constant adaptation. Players have complained at points but are often addressed harshly by Riot Games employees. An example of such a response comes from one Riot employee who stated they were "…tired of pros complaining… adapting has always been a part of pro play" (Leesman, 2014). At the same time, in 2014, Riot guaranteed a consistency to competitive patching at approximately every two weeks (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2014). To some degree, this change came as a result of a common community perception and joke within the community. This joke was that Riot buffed certain champions before the world championship because these champions were popular and interesting. In a more specific sense it came as a result of the aforementioned

complaints by professional players being required to adapt to a new unstable Meta during the period of the World Championship. As Riot Games states in patch notes "5.15", they aim to have a stable patch of 5.18 with players not requiring to make significant adjustments before worlds (Riot Games, 2015). The value of stable Meta cannot be understated for the success of professional players.

In Season 2, 2012 Champions Taipei Assassins, understood the lane swap Meta so well that it enabled them to easily claim the 1 million dollar prize over other teams. A prominent caster and analyst of the team at the time, Clement Chu, describes that the lane swap "...brought a depth to the game...spawning a need for analysis...separating professional play from solo que (Non-Team Matchmaking Games)" (Whiski, 2015). Historically, successful teams are those who are able to predict or read the Meta. C9, one of the most successful North American Teams, came to understand the Meta so well that a common community perception developed over the support player "Lemonnation" and his "notebook" which he brought on stage. Within this notebook, which could have originally been a simple book with nothing in it, players believed Lemonnation had all the prevailing Meta strategies that led to C9's consistent victories (MachinimaVS C9, 2014). To match C9's success at navigating and creating the Meta, teams in North America and Europe began to develop infrastructure to emulate the Meta strategies behind Lemonnation's notebook. Primarily, this meant adjusting and professionalizing team structure to include more than five players and an owner.

Team Structure

As the Meta evolves, *League of Legends* becomes a more complex and demanding game. To meet these evolving conditions, professional teams have changed the structure of their organizations. From 2013 onward, teams moved away from the structure of five players and an owner. Presently, most LCS teams consist of five players, a head coach, team analyst, general manager and team owner. The roles of owners on teams is highly ambiguous. Certain team owners never appear on video and those that do appear infrequently. For many teams these significant staff additions have been relatively recent. As TL's co-owner Steve, "Liquid112" describes it was only in 2014 that they made significant changes to team structure by adding analysts (HTC Esports, 2015). Further, players and their staff live at the "Gaming house", typically with their own rooms. Teams also have "Offices" that they practice in. TSM for example, visits their offices for practice matches called "Scrims" (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). A scrim is a practice match between two teams with the purposes of testing Meta strategies and champion lane match ups. Scrims also help management staff understand the current strengths and weaknesses of their players and strategies.

Head Coach

On almost every team, the role of a head coach differs slightly. For CLG, their recent head coach describes that he sets in-game "drills", manages relationships and works with the team to foster a more "traditional sport" environment (Ehrenreich, 2015). By contrast on Team Liquid, the head coach is mainly seen on-stage, setting up players in

the pre-game pick and ban phase (HTC Esports, 2015). The case of TSM is particularly

surprising, as the head coach is seen to be an "advisor" to players and not directly

responsible for them, as opposed to Deilor, FNC's coach. Furthermore on TSM, the head

coach's role is at one point overtaken by the owner "Reginald" who states that he will

coach the team out of their losing slump (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). In this case, Dyrus, top

lane player for TSM describes mixed feelings of Reginald as a "friend, former co-worker

(Reginald played for and formed TSM initially) and boss" (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). The

head coach for TSM acknowledges the change as a good one as he believes it will help

refocus the team. Furthermore in the cases of FNC and TSM, their head coaches organize

team building exercises such as charades and in-door soccer to raise and maintain team

morale (SolomidDOTnet, 2015; FnaticTv, 2015). These cases serve to represent the

various types of head coaches within *League of Legends* teams. In addition as of 2015,

the key theme among all of them is that they have direct communication with players on

stage in the pre-game pick and ban phase. In this sense it is a much more professionalized

work environment for players as they can no longer select any champion. Head coaches

may refute a certain pick with the Riot Games referees in the case of an error in selection

(Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015).

Analysts

"Parth", analyst for TSM, describes his role as one in which he analyzes "the Meta

and the pick ban phase (the Champion selection phase) for the team" (SolomidDOTnet,

2015). Similarly Team Liquid's analysts describe performing the exact same role of

analysis of the Meta and strategies (HTC Esports, 2015). By contrast, however, on FNC it appears that the head coach is also responsible for the role of analyst, as no analyst appears on video (FnaticTv, 2015). From an outside perspective, the role of an analyst appears simple, to design a team to combat another team. However, it requires much more critical thinking and strategic planning. Analysts must factor in the "champion pools" of players, or rather what champions they are best at playing given the current Meta (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). At the same time, an analyst must dissect videos of other teams' games to understand their potential strengths and weaknesses of their team and their Meta strategies (SolomidDOTnet, 2015).

Analysts work closely with players to focus on strengths and weaknesses as well as game specific player and champion match ups (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Furthermore, analysts must consider "side selection" (Team Red or Team Blue) during the pre-game as a result of the differentiating pick and ban strategies associated with each side. On Team Liquid, the analyst also appears to be responsible for contacting Riot to inform them of side selection, failure to do so led to the displeasure of the Co-Owner (HTC Esports, 2015). On multiple occasions Parth and the head coach of TSM discuss, as their team plays on stage, the "good pick and ban" champion selections they designed for the match (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). The two often state that these good selections "should" win the game on the basis of predictions and expectations of player and Meta champion match ups (SolomidDOTnet, 2015).

Much like real sports, however, these expectations can go awry as in game mistakes, strategies or plays occur all around the use of well-placed abilities. In this sense, as a result of Riot's embracing of the Meta and constant patching, teams require an analyst to stay ahead and focus on the hundreds of champion match ups and item combination possibilities. Team analysts are in essence statisticians. Their calculations, such as the exact moment a player should purchase an item with in-game gold or the exact moment where a champion's abilities exceed another, can quite literally determine a match victory or loss for players. These exact points during games where players should purchase an item, while also calculating and sorting through various elements of gameplay, did not exist when *League of Legends* was first developed. Teams did not always have this analytical aspect as Dyrus and SaintvVicious discuss earlier, in particular when the game was less clear and more lawless in the first season. Other teams that quickly embraced the analyst role, such as C9, saw great success through ideas such as "Lemonnations notebook" (MachinimaVS C9, 2014).

General Manager

For teams a general manager acts almost as a "parent" to players (FnaticTv, 2015; HTC Esports, 2015). General Managers on TL and FNC describe buying food, driving for them or discussing problems or issues with players (FnaticTv, 2015; HTC Esports, 2015). On Team Liquid, "Jokasteve" the general manager describes taking care of players needs and managing their relationships (HTC Esports, 2015). Furthermore he discusses his travels to meet a new player who came from Korea and the struggles with translation and

team synergy that resulted (HTC Esports, 2015). At one point Jokasteve describes that he attempted to help two players on his team build a relationship to work better within the game and to specific Meta strategies (HTC Esports, 2015). Similarities exist in the case of FNC's general manager who went so far as to become the legal guardian of the player "Huni" in order to have him play for the team (FnaticTv, 2015). While they do not go into specifics as to why this was necessary, it is likely as a result of Huni's age as a minor. Ultimately a circumstance such as this, while beneficial to the player as it allows him to play in the LCS, places a significant amount of power, trust and faith in management. Players are therefore subject to the whims of management who is also their guardian and housekeeper.

On Team FNC players do not seem to have issues regarding this power of general managers, while on other teams this presents serious problems. On Team Meet your Makers (MYM), former general manager Sebastian Rotterdam threatened to take player "Kori" Wolski's house in the event that he left the team in breach of his contract (Lewis, 2015). In fear of this, Wolski contacted Riot Games in an attempt to resolve the issue (Lewis, 2015). To an extent, Riot acknowledged the player's concerns. However, rather than directly intervene to protect the player, they instead fined the team $5,600 USD and required it to fire the manager, Rotterdam, who had already been terminated by MYM (Lewis, 2015). In this case, as opposed to creating future policy to prevent this problem from reoccurring, Riot Games simply addressed it as a one-time context specific issue.

Ultimately, the common thread that binds these new staff positions is that they must all help players adjust and manage the Meta. For Riot Games, this new team structure only helps to solidify the existence of the Meta and roles within games. Riot Games waits for team staff and players to find new Meta compositions only to later modify it to keep Esports and the game fresh and new. This philosophy is explored further in later sections but for now this work examines the daily lives of players under a professionalized team structure.

Chapter 6

Skillshots: The "Big Plays" of Esports

For any athlete, the way in which they throw the ball, make a pass or score a point represents skill in their given sport. Quarterbacks are considered skillful when they can consistently and successfully throw the ball on target while under pressure. Skill for a professional Esports player functions in much of the same way. In *League of Legends* champion's abilities are categorized into "skillshots", "point and click abilities" and "on use skills". Originally, most of *League of Legends* champions utilized point and click abilities or on-use skills. These abilities function by simply using the mouse to click a target or by clicking the ability itself. By contrast as *League of Legends* evolved, many point and click and on use abilities were removed in favour of "skillshots". A skillshot is a champion ability that does not automatically acquire a target by simply clicking it (as a

point and click would). Skillshots must be aimed and pointed towards a target in order to successfully hit that target. For example Figure 4 below depicts the champion "Corki" using a line skillshot ability.

Figure 4. "Line Skillshot"

This ability in Figure 4 can travel in any direction as far as the line dictates. In this case skillshots are similar to the pass of a quarterback, whereby the ball travels according to the way in which it is thrown. There are various types of these skillshot abilities in *League of Legends* and they take on different geometrical forms, from straight lines as above to crescents, arches or circles. In the *League of Legends* world of Esports, one's use of skillshots represents a player's skill at gameplay. In game, a champion is therefore a direct extension of a player's body. Moves made outside the game, through mouse clicks and keyboards, impact the in game real time actions and the interactions between champions' skillshots.

Ultimately skillshots serve two functions in game and during Esports. The first is to professionalize players by differentiating between the professionals and typical gamers. For a professional player, successfully utilizing skillshots is a requirement, a miss can be the difference between a match victory and loss. Skillshots represent the single greatest difference between a casual and professional player. Professional players must have exceptional mental and physical reaction times in order to properly use skillshots. These players represent the top .00001% of the *League of Legends* community due to the way in which they utilize skillshots in game to achieve the highest ranking of "Challenger" mentioned earlier. While the casual player can use skillshots in game, they miss much more frequently or simply do not have the reaction times required to connect skillshots of champions together. In this way, skillshots add a sense of sport to *League of Legends*. Much in the same way a soccer goal is the connection of various plays, so too are skillshots that lead to successful plays in *League of Legends*. Likewise, just as soccer fans are excited by these plays and crucial moments so too is the viewership of *League of Legends*. Within the professional scene, regardless of region, all of the shoutcasters continually highlight players' ability to utilize skillshots in game. In LCS play, casters have a term "#LCSBigPlays" (LoL Esports Twitter, 2015). This term provides an opportunity for fans to connect to the game by highlighting moments over twitter in which they believe a skillshot had a significant impact on victory or defeat of a team. Further in 2015, Riot Games began to host a show called 'Prime Time League" (Riot Games, 2015). During this show, analysts break down the prior weeks' worth of "big

plays" from every *League of Legends* region. In this regard this show runs much in the same way as an ESPN football recap for the week.

Assessing Esports as a "Sport"

According to Witkowski (2012), there are "four prominent characteristics in sports definitions": sports are physical, rule- based, competitive, and officially governed (p. 355). Through her research in attending Counter Strike (A shooter game) Esports tournaments and interviews she finds that Esports share these four sports characteristics (Witkowski, 2012). The most important characteristics for this thesis is the physical difference between Esports and Sports. To Witkowski (2012), the physical aspect of Esports is the movement of the mouse, as each movement is crucial to game play. Subsequently, she argues that the intercorporeality of cooperative games adds further "meaning" to the games environment (Witkowski, 2012, p. 359). Players must, as she writes, be highly reflexive and the "sporting movement" is engaged by connecting with one's character and controlling the body to reach objectives and defeat opponents (Witkowski, 2012, p. 359). Furthermore, Heaven (2014) describes that in some cases "pro players carry out 300 keyboard and mouse actions a minute, rising to 10 seconds in a crisis". These circumstances are no different in the case of *League of Legends* gameplay.

Skillshots require fast paced reaction times in conjunction with split second movements. One misstep can mean the end of a match entirely. In support of this Ferrari (2013) writes that skillshots and the "...wide range of abilities and basic motor decisions to be made (by player's characters)" translate into uncertain high pressure player versus

player confrontations. For Ferrari (2013), these confrontations are even more engaging and influential within the context of competitive play as they require innovative moves during professional play. To add to this, Taylor (2012) describes various cases in which players become known by fans for their innovations in game and their "fast play style" (p. 110). For *League of Legends* professionals there are the "Insec" plays, the "Madlife hooks", these are the names of players attached to champion abilities which reflects their widespread notoriety and success. Riot Games not only latches onto these terms, as they broadcast, but attempts to frame and structure their Esport as though it were a traditional sport.

History of the LCS and Traditional Sports.

In this section, the thesis compares the broad similarities between the history of traditional sports, using the NFL, and *League of Legends* Esports. As the Esport evolves, Riot Games continues to attempt to emulate the actions of traditional sports such as the NFL. Connecting traditional sports and Esports helps to further understand the relationship between digital labour and sport. For Riot Games, structuring its Esport as a traditional sport allows it to connect with fans while also maintaining a steady professional scene. From Riot Game's Dustin Beck and Marc Merrill's perspective, *League of Legends* is already a variation of "Sport" (Zacny, 2013).

Much like how football was conceived from the sport of rugby, so too did *League of Legends* develop from another game called "*Defense of the Ancients*" (DoTA). Likewise similar to football, as *League of Legends* developed, players began to see the

potential for monetizing their abilities. Although *League of Legends* does not have a moment where a typical gamer became a professional, as in the case of football's William "Pudge" Hefflefinger, it does share a key similarity in its early history (NFL.com, 2015). Initially, professional football was played among small associations, clubs and teams, it did not exist as a set of specific Leagues (NFL.com, 2015). Likewise, while it launched in 2009, *League of Legends* did not initially exist as a formal Esport. Many online tournaments were host by competing teams such as the "TSM Invitational" which invited other professional teams to compete with its players. It was only until after its popularity soared at two online gaming tournaments, ESL (Electronic Sports League) and IEM (Intel Extreme Masters) in 2009 and 2010, that Riot Games began to see the potential of Esports. In this sense the early solely online era from 2009 to 2010 of *League of Legends* represents much of the sudden growth of football as a result of the television's invention. Much like how the original NFL and smaller leagues crowned champions for a season, Riot Games created the season's system and crowned its Season 1 World Champions after a small tournament.

During Season 2, Riot Games professionalized the scene further and announced its Season 2 World Championships, with specific international rules and circuit points system (Leaguepedia.com, 2015). In this sense, Riot went further than the original NFL and was able to host a definitive tournament to represent the best players of its Esport. At the same time, much like the NFL's early years, Riot Games LCS tournaments did not represent the entirety of *League of Legends* Esports. In South Korea for example, "Ongamenet" (OGN), a television company which streamed Esports exclusively and the

"KeSPa" league existed. These two organizations developed the OGN Korean leagues with their own structure and rules. Similarly in China, the "Tencent LoL Pro League (LPL)" developed and created its own system of tournaments. While not identical to the history of football, these events mirror those of the conflicts and later merger between the NFL, AFL and USFL (NFL.com, 2015). Originally, Riot Games had no interest in controlling these leagues in China and South Korea. Over time however, this position changed and Riot made the choice to "Standardize" all regions under its Esports philosophies (Kulasingham, 2014). According to Riot this change was made to "…minimize constraints, provide more practice time for teams, a transparent and exciting live group draw (for the Worlds tournament)" (Kulasingham, 2014). In spite of Riot Games' full control over Esports, it did have some problems with the KeSPa organization in Korea.

In 2014, the KeSPA organization threatened to boycott the World Championships. This was due to Riot's Games failure to explain that the tournaments would be played globally and that only the finals would be played in South Korea (Kulasingham, 2014). Eventually KeSPa agreed to Riot's structure for the World Championships. However the president of KeSPa states that, in part, the organization agreed with Riot "…to overcome the trauma of the Intellectual Property Rights crisis" relating to which organization had full control over the game and its Esports venues (Hun, 2014). After this situation, Riot Games renamed all leagues to have *League of Legends* title in their names. In a sense the coming together of these leagues is similar to the merger of the NFL, AFL and other smaller leagues over the years (NFL.com, 2015). However, this situation also highlights

the difference between traditional sports and Esports. Unlike the NFL, which does not "own" football around the world, Riot Games as the developer of *League of Legends* has total control over its game and Esport. In terms of rules and regulations this leads to Riot Games as the sole decision maker of all Esports related issues, with no appeals process in the case of disputes.

Differences in history: Accelerated growth of *League of Legends Esports*

While there are similarities between the NFL and *League of Legends*, there are also differences to account for its sudden growth. To begin *League of Legends* as an Esport had an initial infrastructure advantage over the NFL to host its game through organizations such as Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) and the Electronic Sports League (ESL). These two organizations, prior to *League of Legends'* creation, were host to multiple other gaming tournaments such as *Starcraft.* By contrast professional football initially did not have an already built infrastructure by which to host multiple teams at a tournament at once (NFL.com, 2015). To add to this as discussed, Riot Games unlike the NFL, owns its game. The lack of total control over one's game ultimately impeded the ability of professional football to grow as fast as *League of Legends* under the sole guidance of Riot Games. This circumstance is evident by the years of competition and legal disputes between the AFL and NFL, such as those over "...monopoly and conspiracy in the areas of expansion" (NFL.com, 2015). In this sense, *League of Legends* as a spectator sport has the advantage of being in an era in which technology allows for faster access to its game.

Online streaming technology was readily available for the viewership of *League of Legends*. This is as opposed to initial viewers of football who had to travel and pay stadium costs to watch their favourite players. To add to this, Szymanski (2005) describes that for spectator sports growth and demand are generated through six means, price of events, income of spectators, price of alternates, market size, closeness and importance of contest (p.79). In this sense *League of Legends* is at an advantage over professional football in almost every way. As an online spectator sport, viewers do not need to concern themselves with the price of the event, closeness, their own incomes or the price of alternatives as they already own the only required product, a computer and an internet connection. At the same time, this likely limits the opportunities for gate revenue. However, as *League of Legends* is broadcast online, its market size is not limited to fans near a stadium but rather anyone who uses the internet. Football was initially limited in this regard until the invention of the television. In addition, fans of Esports were able to connect with professional scene in ways they could not in football. Initially, professional *League of Legends* teams provided online training sessions using the Twitch streaming service and advertising over Reddit. Through these events players could easily talk with and practice with professional players in ways that traditional sports have never been able to achieve. For Riot Games, these differences proved beneficial as they allowed for Esports to grow at an accelerated pace. Additionally the structure of the game itself allowed for the integration of its own "Amateur" scene.

The Challenger Scene: The development of high skilled players

Prior to the 2013 season, teams and players became a part of the *League of Legends* Esports scene through various third party qualifier tournaments such as ESL and IEM. As there was no LCS at this time, teams often formed quickly and dissolved just as quickly if they failed to make qualifier games (Leaguepedia.com "Team AAA", 2015). During 2013, the first year of the LCS, Riot Games created the Challenger ranking within the game itself. Under the prior ladder system, players and teams reached played games and "ranked up" through various tiers of bronze, silver, gold, platinum and diamond as the highest, all players in a tier were considered relatively comparable in skill. During this year the Challenger ranking became a part of the game and specifically ranked players by a number at this highest level of play. Players at the challenger level must play frequently as only a set of number of players can be ranked as Challenger. Subsequently teams at this highest level of play are selected to play against the bottom three, or "Relegated" teams of every LCS split. Though the format has changed since 2013, the general structure is one in which the top 16-20 teams from the "Challenger Series" compete among each other, online and not in the LCS studios, until only six remain. Teams do not play on stage in studios until the end of Challenger Series due to the costs of travel. This system applies to all regions as the Challenger ranking is built into the game and is automatically rating players and teams worldwide. A relevant change in 2015 is that the 1st place challenger team is automatically placed into the LCS as the 10th LCS team is automatically removed and placed into the challenger scene once more ("Challenger Series" Riot Games, 2015).

In this sense the Challenger Series is an Amateur scene similar to College level football, from which the NFL draws a majority of its talent pool. The Challenger Series features different rules from the LCS and Riot Games pays only the top 6 teams, and not its players, a total salary of $17,500 USD (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2014). This is as opposed to the LCS which pays $12,500 USD per player. At the end of each LCS split, the top three challenger teams compete in relegation matches against the lowest three LCS teams. Recently this changed such that the 10th place LCS team is automatically relegated by the first place Challenger team. In this regard, challenger players echo many of the same concerns as college players, although with the difference of earning some pay. David "Yusui" states that at the highest level of play, the pay is worthwhile but at the amateur level the costs are high and the pay much too low (Hillyer, 2015). Although the Challenger Series does not have a "Draft" for players in the same sense as the NFL, top ranking Challenger players are often recruited by professional teams. For Riot, the Challenger Series provides the ability to have total control over the amateur scene. This is unlike the NFL, which does not control college football and the broadcast rights over college football (NFL.com, 2015). The challenger tier provides the teams of the LCS and Riot Games with a steady pool of players and teams due to its easy to understand rankings ladder system. Ultimately the system is the final means by which Riot Games managed to professionalize *League of Legends* as an Esport and make it nearly identical to traditional sports. Through the challenger system, all gamers whether solo or part of a team, can attempt to become "just like the pros" by simply playing the game. For professional

players, however, the growth and professionalization of Esports has meant a change in their lifestyles

Daily Routines of Professional Players

As previously discussed, players and their staff live at the gaming house typically with their own rooms. Some teams also have offices that they travel to for practice. TSM for example, visit their offices for practice matches called "Scrims" (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). A scrim is a practice match between two teams with the purpose of testing Meta strategies and champion lane match ups. Initially players practiced as five, on their own time and schedules. However, with the addition of management staff, teams now have structures and clearly defined practice periods. On a typical non-LCS day players wake up at their own leisure but typically before 12:00 am (MachinimaVS C9, 2015). Usually the schedule by which players wake up and travel to their office is dictated on the basis of if they have scrims to play for that day (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Subsequently, many players take scrims as an indicator of their performance as a team. Positive and negative scrims can impact the performance of teams on LCS days. As TL's support "Xpecial" notes on "rough week of scrims...I don't have much faith (for the LCS games)" (HTC Esports, 2015). Similarly, when Bjergsen describes that their scrims are going "poorly", TSM is subsequently loses regular season LCS games (SolomidDOTnet, 2015).

At any point during the day, players are provided with food. It is unclear if their pay covers food or if it is management's decision to provide them with meals. Unlike other teams, FNC's management staff specifically prepares team meals for breakfast,

lunch and dinner (FnaticTv, 2015). According to their General Manager, this is his

personal choice and he is not paid for this extra work (FnaticTv, 2015). It is his opinion

that a healthy diet and lifestyle leads to a higher chance of victory (FnaticTv, 2015).

Further, Team FNC has a significant history of success as the Season 1 World

Championship winner, the only undefeated LCS regular split team at 18-0 and playing in

every world championship except Season 2. Similarly, C9, a team with another

significant amount of success in the LCS, supports the healthy lifestyle promoted by

FNC. Both of these LCS championship winning teams have players regularly visit the

gym to maintain their health (FnaticTv, 2015). TSM jungle player "Santorin" also

describes that the gym helps him concentrate and sync with his teammate Dyrus

(SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Ultimately it might prove more than coincidence that teams

which maintain a healthy lifestyle also see significant amount of success in their game

play.

In this sense maintaining a healthy physique also brings *League of Legends*

players closer to traditional athletes. It adds to the idea that sport requires a "Physical

aspect" as Witkowski (2012) discusses earlier. By contrast, on days in which players are

not participating in scrims they may participate in sponsorship events or meet with

sponsors. For TSM players there are multiple occasions in which they participate in

sponsorship events. In one case players are sent, along with TL and C9 to test new game-

gear by HTC (HTC Esports, 2015; SolomidDOTnet, 2015). On another occasion, TSM

players receive a visit from sponsors who provide them with free, state of the art laptops

(SolomidDOTnet, 2015). This case is likely not limited to TSM, but on this occasion it

provides an example in which sponsors utilize professional players to promote their products. During the remainder of the day, players show themselves utilizing these laptops as they play *League of Legends* (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). While it may be the choice of the team during these documentaries, there are no scenes with sponsors providing products or special benefits when teams are losing games. In the TSM Legends series, after receiving their laptops, the team struggled during the regular seasons (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Further, there has not been one episode since then where players receive special benefits or gifts from sponsors.

Player Routines: LCS Game Days

For players, playing at the LCS studios and at Worlds represents their transition from typical gamers to professional players. C9's formerly retired player "Hai" describes his career after retirement as one in which he was a "hermit…lazy…became like a gamer basically" (Gafford, 2015). When he returned to the LCS with C9, however, he once more began his rigorous training with the team in scrim games (Gafford, 2015). During the two LCS splits, both summer and spring, players travel to Riot's studios to play twice a week, Saturday and Sunday for North America and Thursday, Friday for Europe. North American players work at Riot's California studios while European players typically work at the Berlin studios.

The duration of this commute depends on the location of their gaming houses, varying from 30 minutes to 2 hours of travel (HTC Esports, 2015; SolomidDOTnet, 2015). However there are some teams and players who face significant travel. Gambit

Gaming, a European LCS team was unable to attend a week at the LCS studios due to travel visa issues in their home country of Russia (Alex Ich, 2014). To add to this, Gambit's members frequently flew from Russia to the European studios, leaving them with only two days of practice as opposed to other teams (Alex Ich, 2014). One member, Alex Ich, described this travel as, frustrating and exhausting, leaving him with very little time for his family in between splits due to training requirements (Alex Ich, 2014). Travel for Alex proved to be too heavy of a burden and led to his exit from the team (Alex Ich, 2014). In this sense much like any worker, the cost of work for him and his family outweighed the benefits. When players reach their respective studios, they are ushered into team-waiting rooms as they pass cheering fans at entrances (FnaticTv, 2015; HTC Esports, 2015; SolomidDOTnet, 2015).

In waiting rooms, players are given food and drink as they wait for their turn to go onto the stage. During this time any last minute preparations are completed and players may joke or relax before their games (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). Once it is their time, players go onto the stage to play in front of fans who watch the game on a theater screen above the teams. During games players can call for pauses if they encounter problems with equipment or in-game issues. Pauses that are not warranted, as decided by Riot's Rules, can lead to varying degrees of in-game and out of game punishments (Riot Games LCS Rulebook, 2015). For example teams may lose one "ban" for their next game (Leaguepedia.com, 2015). In more severe cases, such as for Team Azubu Frost, penalties can be monetary at $30,000 USD for attempting to turn around and look at the screen, which may influence gameplay through being able to see the opposing team's map

(Leaguepedia.com, 2015). Hence there is an endurance aspect to Esports, and players often push themselves during games. For some players, the working conditions of the LCS stage can prove to be too much.

"Seraph" a player for team CLG is often described as having "nerves" about being on stage (MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). On the LCS stage Seraph typically performs poorly, leading to team losses. However during scrims, which are not at LCS studios, his teammates herald him as an exceptional player in his role (MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). Ultimately the team management attempts to work with him throughout the documentaries to translate his practice work into onto performance on stage matches (MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). Further, on stage players often designate a "Shotcaller", comparable to a team captain or Quarterback in football, who suggests strategies and guides the team in game. I discuss shotcalling and the issues it presents between management and players further on. After a win or loss during LCS days, players exit the stage and discuss results briefly in their meeting rooms before going to see their fans.

As they greet fans, players take pictures, sign jerseys and various other apparel. All while they must manage feelings of loss, or even victory in cases where they believe they "underperformed", in front of their fans (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). At the conclusion of these LCS days, players make the return trip home. On every team, either on the day of or the next day after a match, players review their games as a team to find flaws in play with the management staff (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). On FNC, Coach Deilor requires players' full attention and he does not allow them to use cell phones or other electronics

as they watch and discuss game replays (FnaticTv, 2015). By contrast on TSM, Bjergsen

and other players can be seen using various electronics during game reviews

(SolomidDOTnet, 2015). These differing circumstances serve to represent the different

styles of work ethic between teams. Deilor, in this case prefers a more authoritarian work

approach in which players give their full attention to the game, while Locodoco, coach for

TSM, allows for a more laissez-faire attitude.

Chapter 7

Theories of Work: Labour and Esports

Immaterial Labour: Skillshots and Champions.

One of the first scholars to define work in the world of cyberspace is Maurizio

Lazzarato. Lazzarato (1996) who introduces the concept of immaterial labour, which he

defines as "...a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work" (p. 136). As

he describes immaterial labour, Lazzarato expresses that readers must push themselves

beyond the constraints of defining work through a factory setting. To Lazzarato,

immaterial labour has always existed but it is more visible now as a result of the changing

nature of work. He argues that workers, as opposed to the era of "Taylorization", have

more freedom in decision making at the workplace (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 137). Workers of

both high and low skillsets are therefore required to invest their subjectivity into the

production process. It is at this point that immaterial labour becomes visible. Within the

production process workers must input their perspectives. At this point the structure of the

modern workplace, as one in which there is "cooperation and communication", creates

goods both real and digital desired by capitalist consumers. A relationship develops in

which immaterial labour creates innovation that leads into production and subsequently

the consumption of a product. The entrepreneurial aspect of this relationship is that the

consumed product is initially envisioned by the same group that produced it. Ultimately,

Lazzarato views this as the role of immaterial labour, in that it "promotes continual

innovation" which is then used in the process of work and consumption in the capitalist

system.

For Lazzarato (1996), he witnessed immaterial labour in industries such as

"...advertising, fashion, the production of software" (p. 136). Later Hardt and Negri

(2000) expand on the basic definition of immaterial labour as "...a service, a cultural

product, knowledge" (p. 291). They apply the previously described theories to describe a

type of immaterial labour called "Affective" labour (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). To

Hardt & Negri (2000) affective labour exists as a result of immaterial labour. It is labour

which creates social interactions, relationship and communities that are a crucial part of

the consumption of immaterial labour. Without the social interactions and communities

produced by affective labour, the products of immaterial labour would have no avenue for

consumption. In essence, affective labour represents the relationship between the

production of immaterial labour and the desire to consume this labour.

From these ideas it is possible to understand the work of *League of Legends* of players and team analysts, given the existence of the Meta. The Meta represents the heart of the subjectivity required in immaterial labour which Lazzarato (1996) describes (p. 138). The preparation and practice which goes into developing a new Meta within the game represents a new form of immaterial labour. The immaterial labour of players produces the Meta that is later consumed during Esports and through skin sales. Riot Games then takes the innovations of the Meta and transforms them to reproduce the same cycle of production. In a sense there is affective labour, as the Meta's existence can serve to fuel the desire of players (the community) to be "just like the pros" and thus consume the various aspects of *League of Legends* and Esports. To an extent Lazzarato's work envisioned the immaterial contributions of *League of Legends* players as they create the Meta. He discusses the "young worker" and a "pure virtuality" that is "yet determined" but "shares all the characteristics of….subjectivity" (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 139). Moreover, players that stream themselves over twitch practicing champions and skillshots are performing immaterial labour that benefits Riot Games and their team's brand. This is further exemplified in cases where professional players post online guides regarding aspects of the game and its current Meta. Solo que, a topic I discuss shortly, helps to further understand the immaterial labour of players. In the case of *League of Legends*, the in-game actions of professional players produce an immaterial, valuable, outcome. Through adjustments to the Meta, Riot Games is able to manipulate Esports and create a continued demand for its products and the in game labour of professional players. The

concept of digital labour helps to further explore the immaterial labour of *League of Legends*.

Digital Labour and the Meta

For Dyer-Witheford and De-Peuter (2009), immaterial labour is relevant but the extent of its role at present in the gaming industry, is overstated in their opinion (p. 4). Dyer-Witheford and De-Peuter (2009) present an ambiguous understanding of digital labour, as one that is similar to immaterial labour, but rather a more computer and software development based labour practice. These authors focus initially on the labour of workers to create digital products, such as games. They specifically look at the material relationships which exist that allow people to play video games. In this regard much of their work is focused on connecting capitalism to the process of developing games first and playing games second. Dyer-Witheford and De-Peuter's (2009) research focuses on games outside of Esports, such as "Mario" and the inescapable expression of capitalism within the game. While this research is relevant, it does not specifically focus on professional gamers. It is as a result of this that I instead focus on the work of Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) to further examine and define digital labour.

Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) discuss the differences in digital labour and digital work. This thesis focuses primarily on their concept of digital labour. According to Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) digital labour is best defined as a process in which "…the exploitation of users' unpaid labour…create value that is at the heart of profit generation" (p. 237). Throughout their work the pair discuss Marx and other theorists' relations as to

what constitutes work and labour. Their most important contribution, however, is an analysis of Facebook and its comparison with Marx and Lazzarato's theories on labour. According to Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) the use of personal experiences on Facebook represents Marx's ideas of creating value and subsequently use value (p. 259). As users post their experiences on YouTube, Facebook makes a profit through the sharing of experiences and the sale of advertisements. This represents a case in which Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) write "Human subjectivity and sociality is put to use for capitalist accumulation" (p. 259). This is the heart of digital labour, in which the ideas of consumers are used to produce content that is subsequently sold to similar users. Digital labour is the realization of the theories of immaterial labour which Lazzarato discusses earlier. The difference, however, is that in the case of digital labour, commodities and profits are always produced. To highlight this consider *League of Legends* and the difference between scrims and actual LCS match days. Scrims represent immaterial work, as some of the testing players perform during practice may never make it to the LCS stage. By extension, those Meta and strategies that do reach the stage represent digital labour as they serve to further the profit generation mechanisms within *League of Legends*.

Similar to Fuchs and Sevignani's (2013) example of Facebook, the main instruments of labour within *League of Legends* are its users and the gaming platform. Users are the core of Riot Games' approach with Esports. Through the actions of professional players, Riot Games is able to further develop its brand and the content it produces. While Esports has its costs, shoutcasters, stadiums, analysts and so on it largely

involves the unpaid time and labour of professionals who create Meta and strategies. Payment in Esports is meant to be for playing the game on the LCS stage and not for practice during scrims and other work such as solo que that I discuss in the next chapter. The reality, however is that as they perform digital labour on stage, players must beforehand perform immaterial labour as they practice Meta and strategies. In this regard, *League of Legends* represents a case of digital labour in which Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) find "Play and labour are indistinguishable" (p. 265). In *League of Legends* almost all professionals' careers began as a transition from play for fun to play for work. FNC's "Rekless" highlights this when he describes *League of Legends* is not just "play for fun" anymore but rather play with an element of work (FnaticTv, 2015). In addition, the changing structure of players' careers from five players and a coach to LCS and Non-LCS days signifies this mix of play and work. The connection that Fuchs and Sevignani describe between work and play is best understood through Julian Kücklich's (2005) concept of "playbour".

Playbour: Creating and Playing the Meta, Extending the Game.

The term playbour originates from Kücklich (2005) who describes it as the mixing of work activity with aspects of play. In his work, Kücklich (2005) focuses on a variation of players called "modders", people who play games then choose to voluntarily modify them without any support from the original developers. The modding of games varies widely in size and scope depending on the modder. Small scale examples of this include the modification of games such as "Counter Strike" (a shooter game), in which players

add weapon colours and accessories into the game. Counter Strike, now its own brand, was initially a large scale mod to the "Half Life" game (Kücklich, 2005). It was created by a group of students who later sold the modification (Counter Strike), to the original developers of Half Life and now work with the developer, Valve Corporation (Kücklich, 2005). Typically only online multiplayer games are modded, as these games have an integrated interface, which allows modders to add or change elements of gameplay. Initially the process of modding was done purely for enjoyment or to shape the game in some small regard in one's own image. However, as modding becomes more popular, the complexities of the process and the realities of modding become clearer.

For modders, modding the games they play offers a chance at fame. By contrast for developers it holds a series of benefits such as how it "...extends the shelf life of the product" (Kücklich, 2005). Mods refresh the stale aspects of a game with the introduction of community (modders) creations. In this regard modders become both the producers and consumers of their products, much like the case of digital labour I discuss earlier. Further, Kücklich describes this as part of the "Economy of Modding" and to a certain extent it parallels the economy of Esports and its players. In his analysis, he outlines that modders reduce the costs of R & D and marketing for developers (Kücklich, 2005). Through the gaming community's experience with a mod, a developer is able to efficiently determine factors to integrate into future iterations of the game. As modders are unpaid and unsupported by developers, any failures of a mod rest solely on a modder. In a sense Kücklich (2005) finds that Modders face a certain degree of precarious work, particularly as they balance the line between work and play. As they mod, the developer

is not paying them and it is only successful mods that can hope to be sold to the developer. The case of modders represents both immaterial labour and further digital labour in cases where mods are sold to developers. Modding represents opportunities for individuals and a series of massive gains for developers. *League of Legends* is no different in this regard with respect to its professional players.

Similar to a mod, *League of Legends* provides an opportunity to take play and transform it into an opportunity at fame through a career as an Esports player. Through Esports and the activities of players, Riot Games is able to extend the shelf life of *League of Legends.* As players and their teams create new Meta within the game, Riot Games is able to simultaneously identify stale aspects of the game and patch them. *League of Legends* professionals in particular, similar to modders, create the Meta with their teams as they experiment during scrims and play on stage. Teams that do not do this risk failing to adapt to patches and are likely to be "dismantled" as Krepo discussed earlier (Whiski, 2015). Much like modders, players do this without the direct support of Riot Games. Similar to other developers, Riot Games provides its players with the tools (Champions and Skillshots) to craft new Meta within its game. However unlike the traditional developers which Kücklich (2005) describes, Riot Games does not strive to work alongside professional players who successfully mod their game through new Meta. Instead, Riot in actuality hinders the work of professionals and teams by constantly changing the Meta they create through its frequent patches. Riot Games identifies the Meta and strategies players' are utilizing and then subsequently shifts the game in a way that reduces their effectiveness. In so doing, they create the need for players to form a

new Meta and another set of new strategies to ensure their team's success. All of this results in a combination of immaterial labour, digital labour and playbour for professional players as they create new Meta. At the same time, through this method Riot Games ensures that *League of Legends* remains a fresh, interesting and almost new game that continues to grow with a rapidly expanding market.

Creating the Meta parallels what Kücklich (2005) describes as the impact of modding on the economy of older games. Like modders, players bear the brunt of the costs of adjusting to and finding new Meta and strategies. To add to this, like modders, players do not have total control over their creations (Kücklich, 2005). For example, as previously discussed, players do not always agree with the changes of Riot Games but they are told to adapt by Riot as it is an expected aspect of professional play (Leesman, 2014). Professional players must therefore constantly perform immaterial labour as they learn new champions, skillshots and practice while subsequently performing digital labour as they expose new Meta on stage. Consequently the powerlessness of players to maintain the Meta that they create, highlights the totality of capitalist control over digital labour. This is similar to Fuchs & Sevignani (2013) analysis of digital labour among Facebook users who do not actually own any of the content that they share on the website (p. 260). Facebook users earn no revenues from the advertising that is done on their own content. Similarly, players earn no revenue from the skins and champions they help to promote while they play the LCS stage. In this regard, Joyce Goggin (2011), expands on these blurred lines of work and play in the concept of playbour.

Similar to Kücklich, Goggin (2011) discusses playbour from the perspective of both game developers and players. Goggin (2011) discusses prior research on developers such as Electronic Arts and their "work as play ethos" (p. 362). She then divides players into two groups, those playing and earning an income and those playing for entertainment. Her most compelling arguments build a case that all gamers are in actuality working as they play. Goggin (2011) uses the example of Grand Theft Auto and describes that to be successful at the game it "...compels them (players) to perfect valuable digital skills" (p. 363). Examples of work in gameplay include "...drawing up tables, keeping an eye on the clock, prescribing movements, imposing exercises and organizing tactical missions" (Goggin, 2011, p. 363). These examples of in-game work requirements are no different in the case of *League of Legends*. More specifically, players must keep track of their income (gold) in game, their strengths and abilities, objective timers and other aspects that constantly change depending on the Meta. In this respect, this thesis now moves onto two examples in which playbour, immaterial labour and digital labour occur in the daily lives of Esports players.

Chapter 8

Meta, Money, Work and Esports: Costs and Futures of Players

This section explores in greater depth the Meta and its connection to Esports and the monetization and professionalization of players. It discusses two examples in which the theories of work discussed earlier, occur in the daily lives of players. Through the act of "Shotcalling" in game and a practice known as solo que, players perform additional work to the benefit of their teams and Riot Games. The life of a professional player is not as simple as playing games. There are various personal costs and potential emotional costs associated with work in the *League of Legends* Esports scene. This includes the precarity of being a professional player with a short career. Further, there is the uncertainty as to how long *League of Legends* as a game and an Esport will last.

Within *League of Legends* professional players spend a majority of their time either perfecting current Meta or creating new Meta. This playbour of modding the game serves to benefit Riot Games. It provides the developer with a clear sense of how to patch the game. Through buffs and nerfs to various aspects of gameplay, Riot Games succeeds in keeping *League of Legends* fresh and new to its player base. For professional players, as I discussed, this means that they must constantly adapt, practice and perfect their play. This constant need to practice skillshots and champions reflects in part the immaterial labour they perform. Further, constructing the Meta highlights their digital labour within the game. Both of these when combined with playing on the Esports stage serve to further the *League of Legends* brand and further professionalize players. Players require greater

team infrastructure to be able to adapt and consistently manage the increasing, evolving, aspects of gameplay.

Ultimately, Riot Games is able to hide from scrutiny of manipulating the Meta under the guises of "Champion Diversity" and "Strategic Diversity" (Riot Games, 2015). These concepts dictate that Riot Gams' goals in game are to provide players with the avenue to play any strategy and any champion (Riot Games, 2015). Yet the reality is that through buffs and nerfs to various Meta, Riot Games is in essence controlling the narrative of *League of Legends* gameplay. By maintaining and forcing the roles I discuss earlier of Top, Middle and so forth on players, Riot Games controls the original Season 1 foundations from which all Meta developed. Champions are produced to fit these specific roles and champions that players perceive to be "balanced" (fair to play), are eventually buffed or nerfed to promote a change in the Meta. These changes ultimately further the monetization of the game by uniting players and fans as they watch professionals play these cycled out champions with their skins and desire to "look just like the pros". I now explore the two finals ways in which theories of work mix with sport, monetization and professionalization before I conclude with a discussion on the future of players, Esports and *League of Legends.*

Shotcalling: Practicing and enacting Immaterial labour on LCS Days.

Typically, professional teams have a player designated as a "Shotcaller". This shotcaller makes calls in game during LCS days for strategy and other gameplay purposes. On TSM, their shotcaller "Bjergsen" instructs teammates when and where to

move on the map given various objectives and conditions (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). As a

shotcaller, decisions made in game impact play but can also be significant problems for

teams outside of game. After a loss, a shotcaller may disagree with management's original

choices and argue for alternative picks. In one case Bjergsen spoke to management and

stated "Tell me what you f---ing want and I'll do it" (SolomidDOTnet, 2015). It is unclear

as to whether or not he was reprimanded for this statement but regardless it highlights the

conflict between players and management. Further, conflicts such as these arise as a result

of disagreements over which Meta is prevalent at the time and as to whether the team

played it properly (SolomidDOTnet, 2015; MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). Likewise there

are conflicts which occur between players over shotcalling decisions. On CLG, former

member "Link" described, in his resignation and retirement post, the problems over

shotcalling and team organization in game and outside of the game (Gonzales, 2015). He

describes cases in which players did not respect each other or the calls made in the game,

causing discord in game and eventual losses (Gonzales, 2015).

The reality is that shotcalling is a form of immaterial labour in that the decisions

made within the game have monetary implications outside of it. While the specific

aspects of shotcalling are unclear, as it differs between teams, it generally involves an

additional level analytical work and team commitment on the part of a player. In cases

where a team has an exceptional shotcaller, such as C9's "Hai", the team is successful

and wins additional prize money (MachinimaVS C9, 2014). Moreover in the case of

CLG, failed shotcalling lead to relegations and the possibility of not returning to the LCS

(MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). Losses may also translate into a decrease in sponsors and

sponsorship revenue for players and teams, though this is undisclosed. Shotcallers represent digital team captains and their motivation, charisma and overall attitude impacts the entire team. Shotcaller's can also influence and motivate players to further participate in immaterial labour and digital labour through an activity called solo que.

Solo Que: The bastion of digital labour, surplus labour and playbour.

In between and after scrims or sponsorship events players frequently play *League of Legends* in solo que. Solo Que is a game mode in which players participate in ranked matched 5 versus 5 teams. It mirrors team ranked play with the exception that teams are randomly matched with other players. Solo que fills the periods of time for players in which they do not have team related commitments. During these games players may choose to stream on Twitch, a process I discuss earlier. Further, recall that as players' stream they often promote their sponsors through Ad space as Figure 3 depicted. At the same time this is still representative of a case of digital labour and playbour. For players solo que presents an opportunity to test new champions, new strategies and play the game in the way in which they became professionals to begin with.

For players, solo que is a case of playbour as they both work through new Meta and strategies while also play for enjoyment. Players' immaterial labour, however, benefits Riot Games as it pays them nothing to stream the game while reaping the benefits of free advertisement of champions and skins. At the same time as they participate in solo que they do so under the brand of their team. This in essence represents surplus labour for their employer, who does not pay the player for this solo que time.

Playing solo que has no negative consequences for management, it only benefits them as players work at the game for no additional wages or costs. For team management, solo que also represents an avenue by which they can press players to practice the game more.

On team FNC, head coach Deilor frequently reminds his players to play solo que to improve themselves. Similar cases occur on TSM and TL in which coaches instruct players to improve their play by spending time on solo que (HTC Esports, 2015; SolomidDOTnet, 2015). In this regard coaches and shotcallers may also attempt to motivate players by stating that some team members, as opposed to others, may be playing more solo que games. By raising this concern, players appear to feel compelled to play more. Players do not want to be the source of blame for a match loss as a result of not practicing skillshots or Meta champions in solo que games. On CLG, for example, the team argues, after a loss, that some players need to be playing more solo que with each other and that the loss is a result of the lack of solo que play (MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). Similarly, on TL, "Piglet" is said to be more motivated and a source of motivation for others as he spends hours playing solo que (HTC Esports, 2015). On CLG their most recent head coach Chris Ehrenreich requires players to run various "Drills" in solo que to improve their play and understanding of the Meta (Ehrenreich, 2015). After hiring this new coach, CLG went on to win the North American LCS for 2015. For other teams, videos and experiences such as this may be a source of motivation to change their own team dynamics and structure to promote similar practices. Ultimately, all of this is to the benefit of Riot Games as it increases gameplay among professional players.

Potential Costs to Players and Futures within *League of Legends*

Taylor (2012) writes that **i**n regards to the First Person Shooter (FPS) and Real Time Strategy (RTS) games, Esports players exhibit "exertion-repetition, frustration, work life devotion" (p. 99). This is no different in the case of the *League of Legends* Esports scene. Among the teams studied, "Quas" of TL, "Sneaky" of C9, "IWD" of TL and multiple other players describe playing daily for 10-12 hours as a requirement (LoL Esports, "Quas" 2015). Taylor (2012) describes this mixing of play and work in Esports and the overall increased professionalization among players (p. 100). She argues that it can at times create a sense of "ambivalence" for some players (Taylor, 2012, p. 100). For Taylor (2012), as their game becomes professionalized, players must "...sort through what it means when a hobby transforms into something else...some feel that attempting to professionalize their play comes with a cost they can't bear" (p. 100). From this, there are also potential emotional costs and concerns as a professional player.

Within *League of Legends* social relationships are integral to success. From shotcalling to general team atmosphere, teams that have closer members tend to see more success as in the cases of FNC and C9 (FnaticTv, 2015; MachinimaVS C9, 2015). In *League of Legends* even star players can be sat out of games if they disrupt the team atmosphere. For example, a member of the 2013 *League of Legends* world championship series winning team, "sat on the bench" due to his poor behaviour and strained relationships with his teammates (Erzberger, 2015). Cases such as this raise the possibility of exploring Hochschild's concept of "Emotional Labour" in Esports.

Hochschild's concept of emotional labour applies primarily to workers in the service sector (Hochschild, 2003). While there are varying degrees and opinions on emotional labour, the general consensus is that it exists in cases where workers must manage their feelings while on the job (Hochschild, 2003). As all professional *League of Legends* players live in their gaming houses on a daily basis they must, to an extent, constantly control their emotions towards team members and management. Players may have conflicts or friendships that develop and all of which can influence team unity and potentially success as they work in the LCS. Team Liquid, CLG and FNC represent three cases in which players' emotional well-being and team unity are critical to success.

For Team Liquid, their recruitment of player "Piglet" did not go as planned as he had personal conflicts with other team members (HTC Esports, 2015). Over time these problems were solved by management and the result was the success of Team Liquid as 1st place during the summer 2015 season. As Xpecial describes it was the "First time we felt like a team" (HTC Esports, 2015). Summarily, another player "Fenix" developed a friendship with Piglet that the documentary highlights as crucial to team success (HTC Esports, 2015). On CLG players, at one point, would play more solo que to build relationships (MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). In this regard CLG is an excellent example of a team which struggled for years, until recently, to win an LCS split. Older CLG videos show global-coaching staff, poorly coordinated analysts and general management (MachinimaVS CLG, 2014). As compared to other teams it would be categorized as an "unprofessional" setting with various interpersonal problems as highlighted by former player "Link" (Gonzales, 2015). Recently, however, CLG appears to be a more

professional setting with the addition of a head coach who has a background in college football (Ehrenreich, 2015). Moreover, at their 2015 LCS victory, the team of five players stood alongside six others, all part of the management support staff (Riot Games, LCS Finals 2015). By contrast to both of these teams, FNC player "Rekless" describes his teammates as being his closest "friends" from the beginning of their careers (FnaticTv, 2015).

In FNC videos, players have gym routines together, sit and interact with each other frequently (FnaticTv, 2015). Players on the team also view each other in similar ways, with "Yellowstar" their team captain as the "older" brother and veteran whom they respect (FnaticTv, 2015). Consequently, FNC is heralded as being the most successful team in the LCS with a record of 18-0 in the regular season. In all of the cases, the common thread is that there is some degree of emotional labour and emotional management between players. C9's "Hai" for example, describes that he returned from retirement, in part to help his team reach their goal of playing in the world championships (Gafford, 2015). He describes that he would have felt "selfish" if he had put his retirement ahead of the desires of his other teammates (Gafford, 2015). This type of selfless behavior, among other friendships and conflicts between players must come at a cost. To an extent, Hai hints at this as he states his decision to return to the team and come out of retirement was "Not his decision", though he does not go into specifics (Gafford, 2015). Not every day living together is a pleasant one between players and management. In addition, what role do parents play in the lives of professional players? The answer is often unclear and only small glimpses are available online. CLG's

"Doublelift" for example made a statement that "Today I realized I still love my mom…even if I spent 10 years angry" (Yiliang Peng, 2015). Further what would occur on team "FNC" if its players were to lose the "older brother" of "Yellowstar" (FnaticTv, 2015)? Would such a decision by management cause other players to underperform on LCS days, spend less time on solo que or lose interest in gameplay? To understand these questions, further research into Esports is required as the professional scene develops.

For professional players who cannot mix with their team or simply choose to leave the scene, options are not necessarily limited. Many players are very young and still able to return to school. At the same time others such as Krepo find jobs working with Riot as shoutcasters or analysts. "Calitrlolz" from a lower ranked Team 8, describes that the LCS was a fascinating and rewarding experience for him (Murray, 2015). At the same time, he describes that he plans to attend pharmacy school because he values "stability and consistency in his life" which he believes LCS ultimately does not provide (Murray, 2015). These contrasting outcomes, in addition to those professional players who remain in the scene in other ways, depict the developing realities of work within Esports.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Esports and *League of Legends* are both rapidly developing subjects for research. In this work I explore professional players in *League of Legends* Esports. Through their participation in Esports, players break down the typical definitions of work, play and sport. I consider these changes through the concepts of immaterial labour, digital labour and playbour. Prior to a discussion on these theories I explored the gameplay of *League of Legends,* the organization of Esports and its process of monetization. Further, this work examines the lives of professional players and the structures of their teams, which develop as a result of the Meta.

As a concept that is user-created but owned and controlled by Riot Games, the Meta highlights the changing nature of work as it is understood in the aforementioned theories. As the Meta fits into previously discussed concepts, it adds to the professionalization and monetization of Esports. Players develop increasingly sophisticated strategies and skill-sets for the champions, and Riot Games adjusts the Meta in response – and each innovation and response further develops the game and draws in the interest of its fans. However, the Meta does not necessarily ensure the sustainability of Esports. Through skillshots, Riot Games attempts to connect *League of Legends* to "traditional" sports. The game and its Esport have grown at an exponential pace compared to traditional sports. The reality, however is that there is no guarantee that fans and players of the game will not eventually tire of *League of Legends* and its unsolvable,

ever adapting and manipulated Meta. *League of Legends* is not yet an established professional sport with long standing traditions such as football or boxing. Further, it is unclear if players' and those who work in Esports, have skills that are transferable to other games or other workplaces. The skills of the *League of Legends* players may not be transferrable to other Esports, as the skills of a boxer, for example, could be transferred to mixed martial arts. In this regard there is a degree of precarity in the lives of Esports players.

Implied in these discussions on theory is the possibility that *League of Legends* players, despite their fame and fortune, are in precarious position. While they may earn a sizable income, there is no guarantee of job security as even some Meta shifts may prove too problematic for players. The professionalization and monetization of Esports through the Meta, while beneficial for professionals, does not guarantee a future for them. The extreme dedication and requirements of *League of Legends* Esports, coupled with the aforementioned uncertainties and short career spans of players, may prove destructive for players' futures. While the future of *League of Legends* and its professional players are uncertain, it is important to consider the core of Riot Games' design philosophy, in which "Players and designers are both a part of the *League of Legends* experience and evolution" (Riot Games, 2015).

Given this philosophy, the development and evolution of the game is potentially just as much under the control of players and fans as it is under Riot's. Although players and fans do not own *League of Legends*, they can still aim to influence and shape Esports. Recent hacking in the Esports scene highlights the influence of the community. These

hackers revealed sensitive information regarding team roster changes, which could alter players' careers and the atmosphere of their teams. In this case, further research would do well in exploring the relationships between fans and players. As players develop, both as young men and as professionals, their communities can play a significant role in aspects of play and work. *League of Legends* and Esports may represent a new type of emerging sociality between fans, players and game developers. Future literature and research should not shy away from these issues, as this work represents only a fraction of the emerging culture that is *League of Legends* and Esports.

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