Choosing a Side: How do Players Pick a Game when Entering the MOBA Genre?

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Abstract
Despite their immense popularity in the gaming industry, Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games are notorious for creating a divide among gamers, with their millions of daily players often deciding to play only one game in the genre - a trait which is certainly uncommon in comparison to other genres. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with players from four different MOBAs, this paper explores not only the features present in MOBA games which encourage players to pick them up, but also the often subtle differences in community, mechanics, and psychology between games within the genre, all of which play a significant part in both enticing new players, and forcing them to transition to another game early on in the process.

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Introduction
Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) is a game genre heavily inspired by the real-time strategy (RTS) genre. In a stereotypical MOBA match, two teams consisting of five players will be matched together to compete on a single battleground. Players can either play solo (meaning they will be matched with 4 other teammates of similar skill levels), or in a premade party of up to 5 players.

With the genre being "among the most played digital games in the world," [6] it appeals to both casual and professional players alike. For players in a professional capacity, the gaming eSports industry has become very lucrative – with one event offering over $20,000,000 USD in prizes [5].

Despite the genre's rapid growth over the last few years, MOBA games date back to 1998; when a modder for Blizzard's *StarCraft* created a custom map named *Aeon of Strife* [12]. With further modders following in their footsteps, *Defense of the Ancients* - a mod for Blizzard's *WarCraft III* [4] began to define what it means for a game to be considered a MOBA today. The term for the genre was first coined in 2009, with Riot Games' release of *League of Legends*.

Although the two most popular MOBAs, League of Legends and Dota 2, were released over a decade ago, their popularity (and that of the genre) is still high. In 2016, Dota 2 reported an all-time concurrent player peak of 1,295,114, the game currently averages 750,000 concurrent players daily [10]. League of Legends currently ranks as the number one most-played online game for 26 consecutive months [9]. The communities of these two games are clearly well-established. Whilst the importance of this genre is currently recognised within the academic community (eg [11]), little research has been done to understand how players choose a game within this genre – what are the features that players welcome and which do they avoid? Do the deciding factors come from within the game play itself or do external forces have an impact on which game a player chooses? In this paper, we use a series of interviews with players of four different MOBAs to explore both the conscious and subconscious decisions that lead new players to decide on which MOBA game is ultimately the one for them.

Related Literature

MOBA Games

The MOBA genre contains games with no linear narrative or end game, but rather quick bursts of 50-minute matches. Progression in these games comes from playing multiple matches, levelling up your account and gaining items. Many players therefore dedicate hours to a game just to collect a single new item [7]. For this reason, players may find themselves prioritising only one game from within the genre, as spreading their time across many would result in poor progression. This means that choice of MOBA is an important first step for many gamers, as changing later on means starting from the beginning.

The MOBAs that are currently studied in academic literature tend to be the more popular games of League of Legends (LoL) and Dota 2. Mora-Cantallops and Sicilia principally discuss these games in their research due to the "the huge number of players (and eSports viewers) they attract," [8] and they are not the only researchers to do so [2]. Whilst both games provide excellent avenues for research due to the vast amount of possible data (27 million people play LoL every day [14]) this does not provide insight into how players came to choose those particular games. This approach provides limited opportunity to study the variety of game features which may attract players to other games in the genre.

The draw of MOBAs

The social lure of the MOBA is recognised in research; Tyack et al. identify that the genre's collaborative game

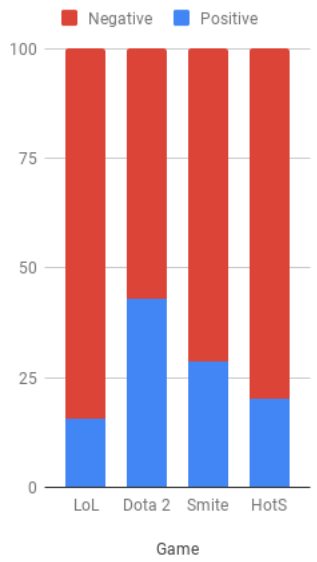

Figure 1: Percentage of comments made by interviewed players of each game that were positive and negative.

play is the reason many players become involved [11]. Iosup et al. emphasise that "MOBA-networked games have fostered the creation of many communities of players" due to the limited tools provided in-game to allow social networking [1]. Whilst Kokkinakis et al. explain how "real-world characteristics influence behaviour and interpersonal interactions within online games," [3] minimal research has been conducted on identifying the behaviours of players prior to joining the game.

The game play itself is also a draw for players, previous research has suggested that there are five key characteristics to a MOBA experience: "positive attitude, skilled play, playing complementary roles or characters, enjoyable conversation, and good communication and coordination." [11] Players are required to achieve a high level of skill within the game to have an enjoyable experience and this can lead to people committing a large amount of time to practice [13].

Existing research has looked into the psychology of MOBA games on players, exploring why they pick up and put down the games, but we find little research conducted into the reasons players will choose one game over another. In this paper, we aim to understand how players choose the MOBA game they will play. We highlight that players usually pick one game and show loyalty. And despite choosing the game, players have mixed feelings towards it. We explore the positive and negative aspects of popular MOBA games as reported by the people who play them. and what diversity of reactions they have the game.

Method

Data was collected through the use of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with players from four MOBA games: *League of Legends* (LoL), *Dota 2* (Dota), *Smite,* and *Heroes of the Storm* (HotS). Prior to the commencement of data collection, an interview template was drafted to assist with conversation flow, and to understand the research question from different perspectives.

During interviews, questions from the template would often be adapted to match the discussion with the player: being added, modified, or removed entirely in order to match the flow of the discussion and to aid the procedure for analysing the data.

Using the technique of opportunity sampling, LoL players were asked within the game via the post-match lobby whether they wished to participate in the study. This procedure allowed for a maximum of 9 participants every 50 minutes due to the duration of each match. To allow for more data to be collected in a shorter amount of time, Discord was instead used for later interviews. A personal account was used, and researchers joined the official communities set up for each corresponding game, each with over 1,000 members. For each community, a friend request would be sent to any member displayed as 'online'. Users who accepted the friend request would then be invited to participate in the study, and the interview would then take place with those who agreed. No reimbursement was provided to participants.

Data was analysed by coding the interviews; finding similarities between interview results and tagging them appropriately. Data was tagged per-game to allow for a

comparison to be drawn between each of the four games. A single interview would only receive the same tag once, even if the point was reiterated by the participant at a later stage.

Results

In total, 324 friend requests were sent to players of the four different MOBA games. From this, 46 players across the games agreed to participate in the study: 12 from LoL, 11 from DotA, 11 from Smite, and 12 from HotS.

Interview data was only used from players who answered the majority of the questions, did not provide basic answers (such as one-word answers or vague details), and players who agreed for the data to be used. As such, 5 interviews were discarded, setting the final sample size as 41, with: 10 from LoL, 11 from DotA, 10 from Smite, and 10 from HotS. The average account age for each participant varied between 3 and 8 years. The average interview duration was 64 minutes.

		LoL	DotA	Smite	HotS
Positive	***Ranked Gameplay*** (players enjoyed playing the more competitive aspect of the game, being rewarded for winning matches and penalised for losing)	70%	45%	9%	41%
	Drive to succeed (players enjoyed how the game would provide the tools and mechanics giving them a reason to play, even (in most cases) after losing)	10%	36%	9%	0%
	Developer Communication (players enjoyed how the developers would communicate patches, ideas, and talk with the community)	10%	27%	40%	8%
Negative	***Toxicity in ranked games*** (players disliked how easily people would throw games, shout abuse in chat, or simply leave the game)	100%	81%	100%	50%
	Unbalanced matchmaking (players believed that they were being matched against players who were not at a similar skill level)	60%	36%	70%	58%
	Teammates giving up (giving up due to stress, boredom, or just a belief that the game is lost already without being abusive)	25%	45%	54%	41%

Figure 2. The three most common positive and negative comments made by players of the four MOBAs. Percentages represent the number of players who reported a comment within that category.

Of all participants, only 7 (2 from DotA, 2 from HotS, 2 from LoL, 1 from Smite) stated that they actively play more than one MOBA game; with 5 stating the reason as being because of their friends, 2 stating that they play one MOBA for the competitive scene and the other for casual play, and 1 stating that they play a mobile MOBA whilst travelling. 31 participants stated that they had tried a different MOBA at one point in time.

For each MOBA, the percentage of positive and negative comments made by participants are shown in Figure 1. LoL players were the most negative about their game whereas Dota 2 players were the most positive. Although every participant had at least one positive thing to state about their game, 24% of the participants had no negative comments to make at all, with one Dota player saying "I want to say [I dislike] the learning curve, but then it just wouldn't be the same game I enjoy watching".

In total there were 12 different types of positive comment and 26 types of negative comments that players across all four games made. Figure 2 highlights the three most common positive and negative comments, and what percentage of participants within each game noted this. For all games, toxicity in games was the first or second most commonly noted negative aspect of the game.

Evaluation

Choice of Game

Players reported on a number of different reasons for choosing the particular MOBA that they played. Here we report on the most common four categories that affected player choice: Friendship, Resources, Narrative and History.

Friendship: One of the most common responses provided when asked how players started their MOBA was due to friendship groups. The implication being that players who are starting the genre for the first time will often make decisions based primarily on recommendations from their friends, not based upon knowledge of the game itself. Despite most players reporting that they only play one MOBA, the lure of friendship groups caused some players to have to diversify the MOBAs they play. One Smite player stated "I think smite is overall better […] The reason I still play league is because some college friends play it."

Resources: The choice for some players was dictated by resources. One DotA player explained how "we had a internet cafe [that had the game installed]. that caused me to play dota i guess." Other players further explained how they were limited by their choice of platform (PC, Console, Mobile).

Narrative: Players who had free choice of which game to start were able to make decisions based on the game itself. The narrative of the game was an important factor. Smite players often mentioned the lore of the game, with one participant stating "the whole mythology thing [was why I started]. I love mythology".

History: Other players based their choices on their experience with the development companies in prior games. One HotS player explained that they heard about the game during beta and it being developed by Blizzard "was a big plus."

Playing multiple games

Many players will stick to one MOBA once they have started playing, with only a fraction of those interviewed stating that they would be willing to change. One LoL player explained how "it would be a whole new grind" saying that "generally it takes a long time to reach level 30."

Of the players who do play more than one MOBA actively, their reasoning varied greatly. One HotS player stated "i have to say [LoL] is my main game," despite them being recruited for this study from the official HotS Discord server. They reasoned that "[competitively] i dont play league anymore, but i do [play competitive on] hots [...] i dont really enjoy league alone," it can be interpreted that both LoL and HotS provide and fulfill two different purposes to the player.

Having more than one game within the genre was also more likely to be mentioned by players who were recruited from the "smaller" games. LoL and Dota players were more commonly loyal to one game.

Future Work

Future work will focus on exploring and validating the current categorisation of game choice within the MOBA genre. This will involve collecting wider participant samples and investigating the effects of account age to ensure that new and experienced players are represented within the samples. Other MOBAs will also be added to the study.

Further research will also investigate exactly when and how a player becomes locked into a game. How quickly does a player feel like it is too late to change?

Conclusion

When a player decides to start playing a MOBA, there are a number of factors that influence their decision, from social pressure to limited resources. Once a player has settled on the game they prefer they will often stay loyal to one game within the genre, with players needing an active reason to split their time between two.

Despite players committing many hours to these games, not all players have positive things to say about the game they've chosen. The negative aspects of the games all vary, but a frequent and commonly shared concern for players is the toxicity and poor matchmaking. As matches can easily last in excess of one hour, particularly ranked matches where the stakes are much higher, players are psychologically put under pressure to not only perform well for themselves, but also their team (who they may have just met for the first time). If a player does not perform to the expectations set by their team, their teammates may begin to demonstrate toxic behaviour towards the player. This is much more easily emphasised by poor matchmaking - players being placed into teams that are stronger or weaker than their own ability will often lead to a poor match. The interdependence of these two phenomena may suggest why they are both things that participants across all games in the study frequently mentioned.

A diversity of features within the MOBA genre ensures that despite the popularity of two major games, players are still attracted to the less well known MOBAs. Choice is welcome, although not always possible, when it comes to players deciding to which game they will become loyal.

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