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Fighting 'Stance': The Role of Conversational Positioning in League of Legends (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) Discourse

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FIGHTING ‘STANCE’: THE ROLE OF CONVERSATIONAL POSITIONING IN
LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (MULTIPLAYER ONLINE BATTLE ARENA) DISCOURSE

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

William Yasha Breslove

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Allison Burkette, Professor of Professor of Linguistics

2022

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William Yasha Breslove, Student

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

PLAYER STANCE AND CONDUCT: AN ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATIONAL POSITIONING IN *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS*

For researchers, the study of video game players - how they behave, interact, and cooperate in a virtual world – presents a challenge: what methodologies are best suited to approaching these interactions? From a sociolinguistic approach, how do gamers converse, and what do these conversations reveal about epistemic, affective, and political relationships? This study uses John DuBois' Stance Theory (2007) and recent modifications of it (Kiesling 2022), to analyze data gathered from the popular multiplayer online battle-arena (MOBA) game *League of Legends*. It focuses on in-game interlocutors' conversation samples to show their positioning, intersubjective alignment, and evaluation of a constantly changing speech environment. DuBois' Stance Triangle permits visualization of the stances taken within such chat-room interactions that focus on player comments concerning the game, game-playing, and other gamers (as well as themselves). In the search for stance identity, DuBois' model specifically seeks to understand the alignment between interlocutors, the evaluation each interlocutor makes of the stance object, and the position each interlocutor takes with regard to that object.

This study builds on the work of researchers in stance-based analysis of gaming discourse (Sierra 2016), multimodality (Collister 2012), and language acquisition (Bakos 2018). This triangulation model will be supplemented with other discourse and pragmatic analyses when necessary, to interpret the stance-taking in a rapidly changing online environment filled with stances often likely to be related to ethical positions and displays of commentary on a range of topics, including the meta-game skills and abilities of the players, and extra-game references, and the intersection of these concepts in the construction of attitudinal positioning, stancetaking, and inter-personal dynamics in a common goal-motivated speech environment.

KEYWORDS: stancetaking, evaluation, positioning, alignment, investment, MOBA

William Yasha Breslove

07/17/2022

Date

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DEDICATION

To my sweet and loving wife and life partner, whose tireless support and enduring friendship has proven a constant source of inspiration, motivation, and love, no matter how many times the many hours of research and gaming blended together. Thanks for everything, Emily Jo.

And to my awesome Grandma, who passed on in my first semester of Grad School. The smartest and kindest person I ever had the privilege to know and love. We miss you dearly.

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GLOSSARY OF GAME TERMINOLOGY AND VERNACULAR

General:	Game-specific (<i>League of Legends</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• DPS – ‘damage-per-second’• FPS – First-Person Shooter• Healer – medicinal character• MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online• MOBA – Multiplayer Online Battle Arena• Noob – ‘newbie’ (novice)• RPG – Role-Playing Game• RTS – Real-Time Strategy• Tank – defensive character	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bot – bottom lane• Gank – ‘ambush’• Jungle – AI populated area of the map• Mid – middle lane• Push – ‘advance’• Top – top lane

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: *GAMING MOTIVATIONS*

1.1 Motivations for Gameplay

Gaming discourse reveals trends and feelings which help shape social norms and industry. Players engaging in social interaction present attributes and opinions which position them via status, accomplishment, and friendliness. These social dynamics shape gaming communication and inspire language change and new linguistic forms.

Additionally, chat data is a key informational source for companies. The relationship between gamers and developers contributes to and builds future experiences and furthers gaming's evolution as a social tool and alternative forum and conversational modality. In sum, interactive virtual discourse impacts social trends at a micro and macro level, helps to steer the gaming industry as it borrows and learns from meta-discourse, and drives larger societal change.

Why do people play video games? Virtual environments have been a unique source of entertainment since their early days, beginning with *Bertie the Brain* at the 1950 Canadian National Exhibition. Though often identified as a children's activity, gaming has historically appealed (and been marketed) to adults as well, offering variety and versatility for people of any age to partake in. Throughout its history, with those humble beginnings as tic-tac-toe and tennis simulators and military simulations, diversions on coffee breaks, high stakes million-dollar tournament arenas, and even virtual teaching and babysitting tools, gaming offers an incredibly inclusive and adaptive medium, spanning enough genres and modes to satisfy anyone wishing to become a "gamer."

A recent study was presented at the Game Developer's Conference in San Francisco by Dr. Nick Yee and his team at Quantic Foundry, examining the reasons behind gamers' proclivities and decision-making. Using a motivation map, they discovered that gamers typically play due to a combination of any of twelve motivations (see Figure 1, below). In a video explanation of their work, as part of the "Psych of Play" series, YouTuber *Daryl Talks Games* explains the motivational model. "You might play to stretch your creative muscles; you may play to get wrapped up in a story or feel like you're someone else; some folks do it for the challenge, some folks do it for the power trip; many of you crave the community and competition, and some of us just like to blow shit up" (*How Your Personality Affects What You Play*).



Figure 1. The Gamer Motivation Model and Twelve Types (Yee 2016)

Using their Gamer Motivation Model, these twelve motivations grouped into six columns: Action, Social, Mastery, Achievement, Immersion, and Creativity. According

to a post on Quantic Foundry's blog (Yee 2016), the motivations within each column tend to correlate, while non-vertically adjacent motivations were less likely to correlate.

However, this is not a perfect mapping. Some of these categories would have to overlap, as they are due to personal preference: for example, some players may like destruction, but also want to discover and explore an environment, despite these qualities finding themselves on opposite ends of the table. In order to better visualize the full spectrum of player desires, while preserving the observed consistencies and trends, Yee and Quantic Foundry utilized Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) to create a 2D map compressing the gaps between the variables while maintaining their relative positioning (see Figure 2). What the team found was a tendency for the motivations to cluster, creating a new three-cluster categorization:

1. Action-Social

The bottom-right orange cluster displays players interested in both rapid gameplay, and interactive play with others

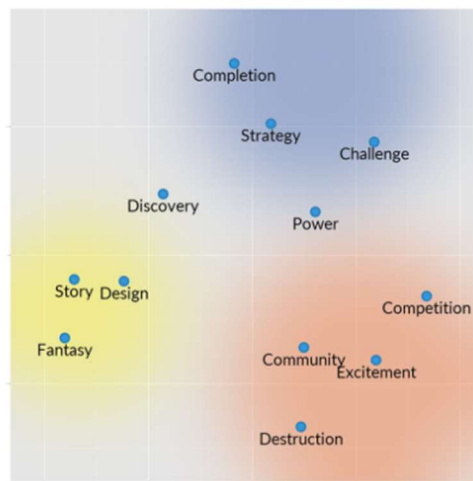
2. Immersion-Creativity

The left yellow cluster shows a combined interest in story and narrative, player expression, and exploration

3. Mastery-Achievement

The topmost blue cluster shows the merging of strategy and tactical play, difficulty and challenge, and completionism and maximizing power level

MAP OF GAMING MOTIVATIONS



The 3 High-Level Clusters

1. Action-Social
2. Mastery-Achievement
3. Immersion-Creativity

Bridges

- Discovery is a bridge between Immersion-Creativity and Mastery-Achievement.
- Power is a bridge between Action-Social and Mastery-Achievement.

Figure 2. Gaming Motivation Clusters (Yee 2016)

This “proximity map” reveals some more explicable trends, which pattern across genre. Games as a visual medium are exciting, allowing players to directly engage with content rather than observing it, and doing it in groups. Co-op action games pattern with the orange, Action-Social cluster, as one of the most popular gaming genres (everything from the *Mario* series to *Rayman’s Raving Rabbids*, *Peggle*, and *Gears of War*). The Immersion-Creativity cluster is evident in “sandbox”-style gaming experiences, as well as map creators, such as *Minecraft*, *Garry’s Mod*, *Halo’s* “Forge” mode, and full creators like *Dream* and *Project Spark*, handing players creative development tools to more precisely tune their own gaming experiences. Lastly, the Mastery-Achievement cluster shows a fascinating combination of drivers: strategy, challenge, power, and completion. Some gaming genres strongly base themselves in these qualities, namely Real-Time Strategy and tactical Role-Playing Games. As players are faced with challenges, they need to adapt and be cunning to overcome these increasingly difficult obstacles, earn stronger abilities and equipment, and take on yet-stronger challenges, until they run out of obstacles and “master” the game.

An important element to note from *Quantic*'s work is that some of these motivations were found to act as bridges between the clusters, namely Discovery and Power. When a player enters a game, they are engaging with a new experience, regardless of genre. Subsequently, they must explore and discover and experiment to determine their limitations, their abilities, their responsibilities, and their potential. Power is the accumulation of increasing ability and reward which advances players through the game, in the hopes of more challenge, more success, and more power. These simulations of human desire are a key part of why games succeed or fail, and why the medium is so accessible and entrancing to a cross-cultural, international audience.

This discovery exemplifies a belief that gaming motivations are not only observably predictable, but consistently found in people from communities all over the world. According to Yee (GDC 2019), "...much like the big five personality traits... the gamer motivations mapping is consistent across several different regions and cultures, which could suggest that gaming motivations and personality are both in some ways universal... and furthermore could be related in some sort of consistent manner" (as cited in Daryl Talks Games 2021). Gaming as a universal medium, and a global art form, is therefore conducive to shared experiences. In single-player games, the identity of a game's level design and characters allows players to bond over their similar experiences, while the differences created through the intricacies and random elements of a game's mechanics can create entirely different feelings and events. However, in a multiplayer game, through short form instanced events and ongoing virtual worlds, players can more fully bond over their experiences, as they share them together in real-time.

In these multiplayer experiences, gamers are asked to cooperate with their fellows to complete shared tasks, compete with other players via a scored or combat system or

occupy a neutral space, assisting their chosen teammates while embattled with their opponents. When engaging in these modes, select means of communication exist to enhance their experience, through both in-game lobbies, and multiple chat channels. However, the contained nature of these virtual experiences leads to the onset of cross-over and conflict with real-world events, creating interesting outcomes via *multiactivity*. According to Reeves, Greiffenhagen, and Laurier (2016), “There are two issues: first, the reflexive relationship between video games and their settings, and second, the multiple activities that accompany the game. All too frequently, players are not *just* playing the game, but engaging in other things like talking about the game, spectating while someone else plays, eating, stretching, or taking phone calls. Game play is interwoven with other activities; that is, it is often inherently ‘multiactivity’ (Haddington et al. 2014).” This multiactivity adds an entirely new dimension to the experience of the game, and creates potential for a reflexive relationship between the game world, and the real one.

The ramifications of this added dimensionality are dependent upon a couple of factors: how these extra-game activities fit within or conflict with gameplay, and how a game’s design anticipates and accounts for this additional modality. As Reeves et al. explain, “These other activities might be tied to the sequentiality of the game – that is, the organization of in-game activities, or they can be interruptive. Finding appropriate moments to interweave activities is a concern for players, although it may be less so for others with minor or no involvement in game play” (314). The understanding of extra-game activities as ‘interruptive’ displays the nature of multiplayer games’ implicit function as a ‘social contract’ between the participants. As players engage in activities, they rely upon the participation of all involved parties, in order to meet the standards for a successful, fun, and rewarding game experience. Every conversation and interaction

taking place within and without this shared environment is potentially impactful, and these conversations can be witnessed as microcosms of a larger discourse.

While some team-based games require only a minimal level of participation and cooperation between team players (such as an aggregate score of their combined points, as in First-Person Shooter and party game modes, other titles and modes dictate a higher level of coordination of effort and synergistic play. Role-Playing Games (RPGs) commonly emphasize certain skills and attributes, using a combination of characters (a ‘party’) to combine these varied elements into a harmonized force. A sub-set of this genre are MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs), where gameplay is typically divided between Player vs. Environment (PvE) and Player vs. Player (PvP) modes. This selection determines whether a player and their allies will be working with others to take on AI (or ‘bot’)-controlled challenges, commonly based in some variation of the fantasy or science-fiction genre; defending a village from an orc army, stopping an occult ritual from summoning a demon, attacking a science lab containing an evil robot army, etc.), or using their honed skills and earned equipment to fight other, similarly-gearred and leveled players for dominance and bragging rights. What these modes have in common is a demand for players’ attention, and a thorough understanding of the ‘mechanics’ of a game’s design.

The role of players in MMOs is chosen from a set of specializations. A prime example of an MMO experience is the popular game series *World of Warcraft*, developed by Blizzard Entertainment. A spin-off of Blizzard’s wildly successful *Warcraft* strategy game series, *WoW* demonstrates the workings of the MMO genre at their most refined. The success of these games owes itself to many factors and qualities of the design, but one of the most crucial elements to *WoW*’s gameplay is their class system. Players can

experience the game through the eyes of a fierce Hunter, using ranged weaponry to pick off foes and survival instincts to endure the harsh environments; become a Druid, getting in touch with the natural world's magic and transforming into powerful creatures; or, they may hone their skills as a Warrior, dominating their enemies through sheer force and becoming more skilled with their choice of arms. Further defining these characters is their available roles; though not all classes have equal access to all three, players can specialize as Healers, Damage-Dealers (DPS, or 'damage-per-second'), and Tanks, embodying the preference for medicine, attack, and defense.

In fact, *World of Warcraft*'s activities place great emphasis on teamwork and the working relationship between these three primary roles, and the inter-game interaction of players, as examined by Collister (2012). To illustrate the importance of these dynamics, and the expectation of their precise fulfillment, Collister details the in-game dynamics between teammates in a 'raid,' a huge end-game activity incorporating dozens of individual players. "[Everyone] relied on each player to be expertly competent and fulfill their duties perfectly. I was a healer character, so it was my job to keep my friends alive... other players had different jobs, such as the tank characters who specialized in distracting the boss so it wouldn't attack the healers, or the damage-dealers... All of this required coordination, because if even one person in the raid group failed at their duty, everyone would die" (Collister 2012). This explanation pertains primarily to *World of Warcraft*, though extends to other entries in the genre, as well as its contemporaries. What *WoW* particularly demonstrates is the normalization of an expectation, where all participants are assumed to know the in's and out's: the specifics of their role, the details of an encounter, and their duty toward the successful completion of a shared activity in virtual space.

World of Warcraft is an online experience, and represents a larger gaming trend, where games have shifted largely toward these interactive, internet-based experiences. Gone are the Local-Area Network (LAN) parties of yesteryear, and even Single-Player games have had a mixed history as staples of the gaming industry, from flops like *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red) to massive hits like *Elden Ring* (From Software). Interaction, and interactivity, have functioned hand-in-hand to bring attention to modern gaming, as titles become faster-paced and adopt quick-play features (thanks to the success of mobile gaming). Game developers have also sought to specifically market game interactivity as its own significant feature, and publishers rely on this quality to attract buyers. This evolving interactivity is a clear selling point, but also creates the kinds of experiences examined by researchers such as Collister (2012) as a step beyond traditional chatrooms. With an interactive environment, communication may transcend simple text-messaging to encompass a wider spectrum of inputs: audio chat, visual cues, ‘body-language,’ and avatar presentation and activity.

This is one of the most critical contributions the gaming medium makes to traditional discourse: the revelation of a game’s activity and social function as a driver for modern socialization. In other shared activities, the action being performed can catalyze conversation: workers may chat over their shared struggle, or lament unpaid overtime, while sports players discuss plays and become outraged over penalties and fouls. What is unique in a gaming dynamic is that games are detached from reality, though simultaneously function as simulacra of ‘real’ action. While in the real world, people may not be able to fly or cast magic, by simply plugging in and hitting a key or button, all things become possible. The imitation of the familiar, and the careful implementation of the unfamiliar creates an ‘enhanced’ experience, and the additional functionality of chat

commands and mutual action in social spaces enables channels of communication completely native to the game world, and players' participation inside it.

Unique gameplay dynamics inform the application of methodologies to dissect not only gameplay conversations, but also the impact of gameplay and mechanics on the development of these interactions. Reeves et al. (2016) say that, “ethnomethodological (Garfinkel 1967, 2002) and conversation analytic (Sacks 1992) informed approaches – or ‘EMCA’ – seek to draw attention to the ‘gameness’ of game playing. This attentiveness is expressed in the overriding focus of EMCA work which delivers a corpus of investigations of play as it actually happens. For EMCA, the challenge is to unpack both the accountability of play as social action and the ways in which it is practically accomplished by players – between players themselves, and between players and ‘the game’ – as a moment-by-moment, sequentially organized activity” (Reeves et al. 2016: 309). This concept of analysis through an ethnomethodological understanding of a game’s world and limiters provides fertile ground for discourse analysis in gaming interactions. Reeves et al. continue, “It is in these senses – the sustained focus *on* play itself, and attention to the *lived detail* of human action – that EMCA work on video game play can provide novel contributions” (Reeves et al. 2016: 309). EMCA methods provide excellent results in a range of application, but in the case of gaming, additional tools may be leveraged to more specifically address the modalities of the medium, as researchers refine their means of speech investigation and discourse analysis techniques.

One of the most promising and applicable analytical methods is *stancetaking*. Though understood as a sociolinguistic and anthropological methodology, stance derives from a psychological basis, and these varied uses have led to a difficulty in properly qualifying stance under a universal, umbrella definition. According to Kiesling (2022),

“[Stance] is a concept that has no theoretical understanding, and it is used with sometimes maddening variety across a number of types of research traditions and publications” (410). Kiesling’s work nevertheless builds upon the foundations laid by other prominent sociolinguists, particularly Jaffe (2009) and DuBois (2007). DuBois’ understanding of stance is a key development in its history, and led to the construction of the “stance triangle.” In his work (2007), he attempts to outline the procedures and create a definition of stancetaking, writing, “Stance can be approached as a linguistically articulated form of social action whose meaning is to be construed within the broader scope of language, interaction, and sociocultural value” (DuBois 2007). Describing stance as “a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and more symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, positions subjects (themselves and others), and align with other subjects with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field” (2007: 163), the implication of “any salient dimension” functioning as a stance object lends itself to a reflexive understanding of stance, where the act of stancetaking itself can be its own object. This creates an interesting connection with gaming, where a game can be a forum for conversation, a medium interlocutors are acting within outside of the conversation, and even a functional driver for these conversations in itself. The work of DuBois (2007), Jaffe (2009), Kärkkäinen (2003), Kiesling (2022), and many other scholars informs this work, as their modeling of stancetaking provides a practical tool to examine the aforementioned game chat content. As a discourse analysis methodology, stance provides an opportunity to observe and analyze not only the procedural generation of in-game messaging, but also the contextual and meta-referential inputs informing this unique style of speech.

Fundamentally, the interaction of human beings necessitates and involves the construction of stance, in the navigation of our respective environments. Conversations can often resemble a minefield, which may appear intimidating to new or socially awkward participants. Once involved, actors have to make micro-decisions about an interaction, their roles in it, and how they relate to or distance themselves from their fellow interactants. In such a setting, the study of stance construction is a valuable tool, using identification of stance and meaning in communication. A person's stance allows them and the people around them to clearly align with an existing position, or disassociate from it. The immediate construction of stance does not ignore the experiential factors bearing on it, but the focus remains on the immediate world of an interaction itself, as it can be hugely influential on how individuals position themselves, playing a pivotal role in these interactions. This paper will use stancetaking as a frame of analysis of rapid multiplayer game chat and determine the nature and impact of the game space on the linguistic etiquette and conduct of players of the wildly popular online game, *League of Legends*.

CHAPTER 2. STANCETAKING AND GAMING: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literature Review

To organize the relevant literature on this topic, the resources will be divided into three sections: stancetaking work, game analysis, and the intersection of stance analysis (supplemented by discourse analysis/EMCA analysis) and gaming communication. This research aims to explore and build upon the existing literature in order to establish the foundation for the application of specific stancetaking methodology to virtual interactive environmental speech. This paper owes itself to the foundational work of many prolific sociolinguists and social scientists, and their contributions to the concepts of enregisterment, indexicality, and of course, stancetaking.

Stance has been an emergent development used to analyze a range of conversational types and modes, including a main influence on this paper, an analysis of online forums and social media (Kiesling et al. 2018). Video games, too, have proven interesting grounds for research for scholars across a variety of disciplines (Sierra 2016, Ruberg 2020), including linguists (Portnow 2011). Existing studies of gaming chat and interaction range from looks at broader player stats and match history (Sapienza et al. 2018) to localized recording designed to capture real-time audio and reaction (Collister 2008, LaFave 2016). However, to date, there are few examples of stancetaking methodology directly applied to text (or voice)-based chat interactions in an online gaming multiplayer environment. This paper seeks to use these tools, and map these interactions, via the evolving stancetaking triangular model (originally posited by DuBois 2007), to display and analyze the effects of anonymous action and the symbolic

representation of virtual avatars (Wu and Hsu 2018) on the perception and language dynamics of online interactants.

To construct this perspective, much like the triangular relationship developed by DuBois, the following catalogue of research is divided into three categories, which work in tandem to establish the connection of relevant ideas and modalities to apply to this newer territory. These three categories are:

1. Stancetaking and Conversational Positioning
2. Game-chat and Interaction
3. Discourse Analysis and Gaming Communication

2.2 Stancetaking and Conversational Positioning

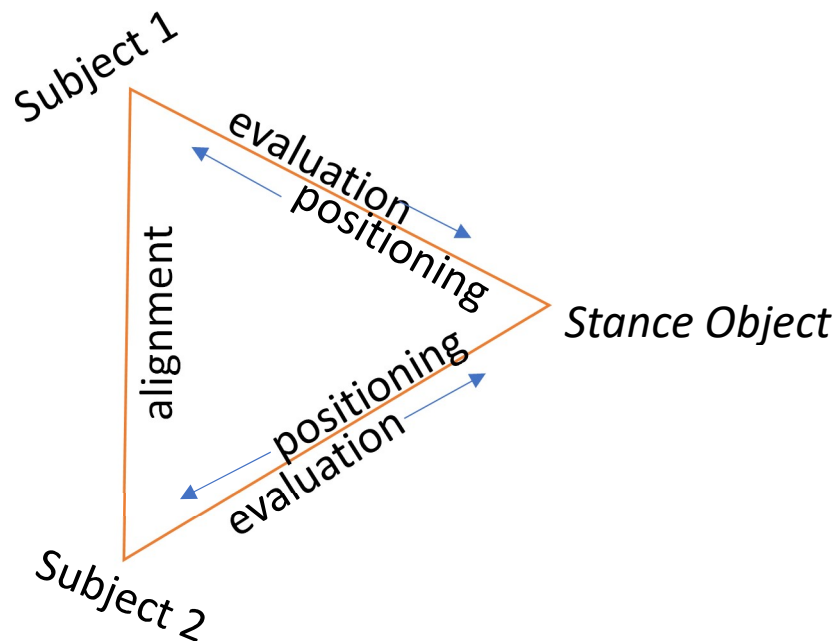
2.2.1 DuBois and the *Stance Triangle*

While not the originator of the concept, DuBois (2007) has done extensive and recognizable work in the area of stance, stance construction, and the way it all works in interaction. According to DuBois, “Stance can be approached as a linguistically articulated form of social action whose meaning is to be construed within the broader scope of language, interaction, and sociocultural value” (DuBois 2007:139). This understanding posits stance, and its construction, as an action within the realm of (and having an effect on) many different cultural and social layers. When looking at a group, and the intra-group relationships, it is important to identify the key features. Firstly, are the social actors within the relevant group. Every interlocutor or “actor” is a viable source of social information, and functions as a point of interest and structure within the conversational environment. Because of this, the social actors (of which there must be at least two), within a conversation are identified as points of maximal interest, in the identification and visualization of stance’s function.

Beyond the actors themselves, the most identifiable point of contact is what the actors are talking about: the “object” of the conversation. From here, the picture can more easily come into view. With the foundation of the actors (who are speaking, forming, and postulating thoughts and opinions in the interaction) and the stance object (the topic of the conversation, which is actually subject to change throughout the conversation – this will be addressed in the next section), a dimensional representation can visualize this relationship. DuBois’ solution is to model these conversations as a triangular relationship (or series of triangles) – the stance triangle (2007:163), as shown in figure 1.

This visualization incorporates other key information from the conversational context in the stance construction. The values along the edges of the triangle and within it are specifically determined by the relationships between each of the three vertices: two between the object and subject 1, two more between the object and subject 2, and a final line connecting both subjects to one another. In this relationship between subject and object, the subject makes a determination of the object’s value and purpose, creating an evaluation of the object. Each of the subjects also position themselves relative to the object, based on their respective evaluations. The final measure of relationship is between the two subjects, and uses their own evaluations and positionings to determine their stance relative to one another – their alignment. Taken altogether – the subjects, the object, their evaluation, their positioning, and their alignment – these relationships form the stance triangle.

Figure 3. DuBois' (2007) 'Stance Triangle'



As an initial demonstration, DuBois (2007) offers the following example to illustrate the relationship displayed in Figure 1.

Sam: I don't like those
(0.2)

Angela: I don't either

The three entities at the nodes of the stance triangle are more or less transparently represented in this example – the first stance subject (Sam's *I*), the second stance subject (Angela's *I*), and the shared stance object (in Sam's utterance, *those*; in Angela's, it is what some would call a zero, or a deletion, representing the understanding that Angela is referring implicitly to the same referent as Sam's *those*). Additionally, Sam's stance predicate (*don't*) *like* serves both to position the entity expressed by its syntactic subject (*I*) and to evaluate the entity expressed by its syntactic object (*those*). As for the three stance actions, in these data, the verb specifies both the evaluation of the object and the positioning of the subject... Angela's use of the word *either* indexes alignment, taking

account of the fact that Angela's stance utterance is a stance follow, which builds dialogically off of Sam's prior stance lead (166).

The assignment of the relationships between participants, the stance object, and one another raises questions of (inter)subjectivity, as in all interactional/discoursal/pragmatic investigations, and I refer here only to DuBois' attempts to deal with such matters. It should be highlighted that intersubjectivity is not the relationship between two subjects, but between their subjectivities. DuBois is sure to stress the importance of this distinction, as it fundamentally alters the formation and interpretation of stancetaking modeling. His identification of subjects is straightforward, and the identification of the stance object is usually linguistically revealed (*that*, etc.) or named, although in interaction he notes that a stance object may be retained in an elliptical response, as in "I don't [like those] either." The alignment identification in the above offered by "either" is also clear, but disagreement alignments or more complex alignment clues are not fully treated. In many cases, however, he suggests that problems of (inter)subjectivity, evaluation/positioning, and stance object identification may be solved by "dialogicity" (DuBois 2007:140) that can be represented as a "diagraph" (160).

In DuBois' view, evaluation is a key component of stancetaking in practice. For a stance to be established, a judgment must first be made. In order to determine how evaluations are conceived, DuBois uses a "reputation model." This allows a user community to rate and scale the comments and opinions shared in the larger group to make more specific determinations. Or, as reiterated by DuBois at the *Hypothes.is* Reputation Workshop, "to collectively regulate and calibrate the contributions of its members" (HypothesisProject 2012: 1:37). This idea of the reputation of group members, and how it is formed and calibrated, is critical to understanding the meaning of

evaluation. “Reputation raises issues as to how evaluation works, with an analogue in the language of face-to-face (naturally occurring) conversation” (HypothesisProject 2012: 2:13).

DuBois demonstrated the importance of evaluation as a key aspect in stancetaking, but so too are the alignment of the participants, and the positioning they take relative to the stance object, important in cooperatively fulfilling the entire model. Evaluation may function as a reflexive tool in stancetaking – “anything that can be thought about or spoken of must include evaluation itself – the target can be anything, including the act of taking a stance” (HypothesisProject 2012: 5:15). The reflexivity of the interactional context in a social setting allows the object of evaluation to be the evaluation, the evaluator, a stance, or the stance taker. The function of evaluation, alignment, and positioning is critical, as they form the cornerstones of the triplex act of stance upon which Du Bois’ triangle is based:

1. “I evaluate something...
2. ...and thereby position myself...
3. ...and thereby align with you.”

2.2.2 Jaffe and the Sociolinguistics of Stance

Jaffe’s *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives* (2009) compiles numerous stance methodologies and applications to varied speech environments, demonstrating its effectiveness and versatility as a conversation analytic tool. Per Jaffe, all of these studies commonly seek to, “explore how the taking up of particular kinds of stances is habitually and conventionally associated with particular subject positions (social roles and identities) and interpersonal social relationships” (2009: 4). Social relationships and stance are constantly co-dependent, as social positioning informs the social hierarchy.

Reversely, the prestige or marked features, qualities, and topics within a community impact the actions of social participants, as they avoid marked behavior and strive for higher status and recognition. These dynamics are true of any community of speech or social group.

When it comes to the function and identification of stance, Jaffe notes the chameleonic nature of identity, its changing role and importance, and how stance works to integrate actors within different spheres of social identity. “A particular linguistic stance (or a set of stances taken over time) may index multiple selves and social identities; conversely, it may index a single social identity, a personal identity that endures over time (referred to in Johnstone [this volume, 2009] as an ethos of self) or a privileged, ‘core’ self (McIntosh [this volume, 2009]). Speaker stances are thus performances through which speakers may align or disalign themselves with and/or ironize stereotypical associations with particular linguistic forms; stances may thus express multiple or ambiguous meanings. This makes stance a crucial point of entry in analysis that focus on the complex ways in which speakers manage multiple identities (or multiple aspects of identity)” (2009: 4). The importance of stancetaking in the construction of identity should not be overlooked, and while it comes in many forms, it often functions as a performative tool and means of self-actualization in the realization of desired qualities and behavior.

Stance is by its nature a social act, and opinionated by nature, and these actions create response and repercussions. “The focus on process also foregrounds multiplicities in the audiences indexed by particular linguistic practices, and on the social dynamics and consequences of audience reception, uptake, and interpretation” (Jaffe 2009: 4).

Consequences of social interaction are dependent upon the extent to which an interactant

is involved, and the severity of a situation. In a hostage negotiation, precise communication and deliberate positioning is critical, as it may save lives. Meanwhile, in a phone call with a telemarketer, or an anonymous online interaction, the consequences are less extreme, as the identity is masked, and subjects are further removed from a situation. Involvement, and *investment* (Kiesling 2022), are therefore important in determining the impact and extent of the consequences social positioning.

Returning to DuBois' (2007) explanation, stancetaking is a 'triplex act,' functioning via evaluation, positioning, and alignment. Jaffe explains, "Evaluation as a broad category of focus is a nexus where the linguistic and social are implicated in a number of ways. First, evaluation of and through language takes place within and invokes moral and social orders, systems of accountability, responsibility, and causality [and] can be 'read' as an index of coherent individual or community value systems; conversely, it can be a site of political struggle and ideological contestation" (2009: 5). This first point shows how a community's values and ethics may dictate the flow of conversation and the positioning of affected actors, especially in their evaluation of known qualities and entities. As a tribal understanding, actors' evaluations position those actors not only in relation to others, but also in relation to others' understanding of their positioning, and this may play into an 'us and them' dynamic, where interactants enter onto a scale between being fully ingrained into a social system or distanced (via speech and action) from a group's widely held beliefs. This shows how evaluation, and subsequently positioning, directly play into alignment, the ultimate function of stance in interaction. "Secondly, all acts of evaluation are simultaneously acts of alignment or disalignment (and thus positioning) with other subjects... evaluation (or 'assessment') of talk, objects, and other features of shared context is one of the key ways in which social

actors take up stances” (2009: 5). The reason stance is dependent upon multiple actors is because individual opinion and positioning is inconsequential unless directly positioned against another’s: alignment is the metric by which interactional dynamics are measured.

One of the difficulties with conversation is that linguistic items (terms and phrases) are variably ‘loaded’ in different social circles. What may be a favored attribute or opinion in one group may be reviled and despised by another. As Jaffe writes, “because individual identities are defined within social formations, by taking up a position, individuals automatically invoke a constellation of associated social identities. In doing so, speakers project, assign, propose, constrain, define, otherwise shape the subject positions of their interlocutors” (2009: 8). This exemplifies the vulnerability of social interaction, because stancetaking is happening, even implicitly, throughout a conversation. Positions and opinions are being formed before a word is even spoken, and each subsequent interaction can completely reshape the conversational dynamic.

Stance also reveals itself through the manner by which a social actor speaks, the timing of their statement, and a host of other delicate factors impacting this relationship. These styles and manners of address vary wildly, but each convey a particular attitude or means of interpretation to a group. “An utterance framed as a performance, for example, positions receivers as an audience; a speaker who takes up an expert stance to give advice positions receivers as novices (or as otherwise needing or receptive to counsel)” (Jaffe 2009: 8). Such a performative display immediately demonstrates not only how a conversation is received, but the bounds and direction in which it is constructed. If a speaker performs, they are cognizant of the existence of an audience for their performance, and thereby create this audience through the manner in which they are addressed. This can be observed in game communications as well, particularly team-

based activities, where players ‘put on a show’ for their fellows, either for entertainment and humor, or to ‘troll’ their teammates through harassment and derogatory speech. Or, as Jaffe explains, “In some cases, these stance attributions (as well as claims to ‘know’ readers’ or patients’ feelings and concerns) are collaborative, and ‘donate’ positive stances to their targets; in other instances, they have controlling, even patronizing functions” (2009: 8). The variable implementation of this performative style as a means of conveying stance demonstrates its neutrality, though in stancetaking, even a neutral stance is itself a stance!

What is most important to understand about stancetaking is its requirements: more than one interactant, and an introduction. “Moreover, as Scollon asserts, both stance and its social entailments are built into linguistic and communicative practice: in his discussion of conversational ‘maxims of stance’ he makes the important point that acts of interpersonal stancetaking are the necessary preconditions for the conduct of conversation; speakers cannot attend to topic until interactional stances have been established” (Scollon 1998: 71-75 via Jaffe 2009: 8). While opinions may be formed (like the ‘first seven seconds’ of a date or interview, or pre-existing biases toward the parties), a stance act is required to begin the complex and intricate dance of social interaction and conversational positioning. Through Jaffe’s work, a cohesive understanding of stance begins to form, though future models and amendments help to shape its incarnational form.

2.2.3 Kiesling’s *Investment*

As mentioned earlier, one of the most difficult aspects of working with stance is a lack of consensus on the definition, meaning, and ramifications it has on the

sociolinguistic world. Kiesling (2022) attempts to address this “no single theoretical understanding” by drawing on several resources: pragmatics, linguistic anthropology, interactional sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and many scholars adept at these disciplines, as well as his own collaborative and independent experience with stancetaking, enregisterment, and indexicality. In Kiesling’s view, stance refers to the intended relationships in an interaction, the interactional objects, and the content of a conversation. Stance’s meaning draws from the literal, physical act of assuming a position (“stance-taking”), as well as the conceptual understanding of having a “stance” on a topic or issue (on anything from an opinion on the latest *Star Wars* movie to hot-button issues and international relations). Kiesling breaks this paper down into six parts: the introduction, the use of stance, the theorization of stance and a proposed model, the function of the model and its application in practice, the operationalization of stance and its quantitative function, and the potential for future research and applicational variety to nearly any instance of discourse.

As research into discourse analysis and attitudinal/emotional meaning has shown, the social workings and impact of language can be just as critical as the structural mechanics behind speech. In fact, indexical motivation plays a large role in driving speech in practice, and the mode in which it is done. Stancetaking is even a factor in linguistic patterning and identity, as shown in Ochs (1992) with regards to iterative gender and gender performance. Kiesling’s own work (Kiesling 2004) observing the indexicality of *dude* shows the importance of identity and the role of stance as meaning. He writes, “the rise of the use of *dude* in non-stereotypical populations, especially feminine-identified speakers, suggests that the stance meaning is waxing at the expense of the identity meaning... [showing] in sharp relief how stance meanings are recruited in

linguistic form and spread based on those meanings as opposed to identity meanings” (Kiesling 2004). This represents a key driver behind the production and reach of elements of speech, as it displays “how a language form can spread even when the identity category is not one that the speaker aligns with” (Kiesling 2022: 411-412). Language forms are not married to specific identities, though certain speech styles may still pattern with them.

Stance is indexed not only by language, but by actors’ identities and qualities which become connected to linguistic styles through *enregistered speech*. Kiesling references the work of Johnstone, specifically her examination of “Pittsburghese” and its enregisterment as a speech which has been both marked (Evans 2014, Fruehwald 2014), and commodified (Johnstone 2009, Johnstone 2013). Johnstone’s work shows that items and products connected with the city of Pittsburgh function not just as “material artifacts” but also “expressive stance” (Kiesling 2022: 412). Over time, language and stance become indexical of an entity. Additionally, “such enregisterments make available the circulation of linguistic features as they can be used to index primarily the stance and not necessarily the identity” (412), further demonstrating a critical understanding: that stance is not the same as identity, though the two are not mutually exclusive. To clarify, “stancetaking is interactive and people of any identity can take virtually any stance” (412). Stance relies more on the action and context, though similar identities may still functionally invoke similar stances.

Stancetaking may also be created through linguistic variation. In discourse, markers may index hierarchy, but they do not have to be categorical. The aforementioned feminine use of *dude* (Kiesling 2004) is evidence of a change in language use and semantics, created through an altered order of indexicality (Silverstein 2003). A

noteworthy example of this type of indexical change may be observed in Mendoza-Denton (2011), where creaky voice, codeswitching, and other discourse markers function as hierarchical devices, "...considered to be part of a style/stance/persona" (Mendoza-Denton 2011, p. 263), showing the importance of stance and its recognition in social interaction. Per Kiesling, "The point here is not to investigate the interactional construction of stance, but to acknowledge that stances are recognized and then circulate in a way that leads to linguistic change" (Kiesling 2022: 413). Oftentimes, this construction involves desirable qualities such as "toughness" or "coolness" in public stancetaking, as speakers wish to be associated with these attributes to blend in, rise through the social hierarchy, or simply belong.

Further evidence of these 'tough' and 'cool' features can be seen in "hegemonic masculinity," as means to index a "hard working" persona. This is particularly true of male interaction, especially fraternities. White males may also invoke African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features to seem "tough" or "dominant" and convey that through their own conduct and that of created 'characters' (via performative appropriation of other cultures and groups). Beyond gender and race, stance's work "...can also explain more than the variable use patterns of single linguistic items such as phonemes, morphemes, syntactic constructions, and lexical items" (Kiesling 2022: 414). Kiesling points to a study of a San Francisco Bay Area arts high school (Pratt 2020), in which "Constriction of the back of the tongue... may be iconized at CAPA [the school] as an index of a bodily solidarity or toughness" (Pratt 2020: 343). Accordingly, Kiesling notes, "... it is possible that 'stance is the main interactional meaning being created, and it is a precursor, or primitive, in sociolinguistic variation: that is, sociolinguistic variants are initially associated with interactional stances, and these stances become in turn

associated with a social group meaning in a community over time and repeated use” (Kiesling 2022: 414). This implies that stance “is not only useful, but in fact fundamental to our explanations of why speakers use language as they do” (414). The importance of stancetaking should not be understated, as it is an essential tool for understanding how people communicate, and the extent to which a social group is affected by the decisions and positions taken within it, as well as the micro-impacts and alterations this makes to the dynamics of a community of speech.

To account for the encoded speech and often subtle changes in positioning by interactants, Kiesling builds upon DuBois (2007) and his “Stance Triangle.” While DuBois’ model functions off of the triangular relationship of evaluation, positioning, and alignment, Kiesling proposes a new dimension to account for additional situations of stancetaking. To introduce this change, he prompts the reader to “conceptualize two stance triangles, in which the original triangle is a kind of stance object, the two subjects are the animator and the principal, and the alignment is the alignment between the animator and the principal” (2022: 420). In order to describe the extent to which the animator “believes” in or “commits” to their utterance, Kiesling creates the concept of “investment.” In his words, “Investment is the extent to which an animator (DuBois’s ‘subject’) commits to the evaluation/positioning – the extent to which they wish to become aligned with being the principal of the evaluation” (420). While an evaluation involves speech simple speech assertions (“*I like*”) as well more complex acts, verbs, and non-adjectival forms, markers of investment range from different levels of intensity of even these simple assertions (*like-love, dislike-hate*), to increasingly complex markers (*I mean..., just sayin’*) which should be accounted for in stance analysis. Thus, Kiesling’s

approach relies on a variation of DuBois's own tripartite system – evaluation, alignment, and investment (rather than “positioning”).

To see this model's effectiveness in practice, Kiesling applied this reasoning to a conversation between two African American sisters (ages 21 and 23) on video chat, occurring while the younger sister (AD) was eating dinner, while her sister joked about drinking a glass of wine in the evening, between writing her class notes. In the excerpt, the older sister (AB) describes a feeling brought on by this imbibement, and her descriptive speech is mocked by AD as “poetic.” She continues this teasing, saying “just say you an alcoholic (and be done)” (Brown, via Kiesling 2022). AB, seemingly taking offense at this accusation, denies it, and repeatedly tells her sister “don't do that,” to increasing intensity. AD defuses the situation by insisting she's “just playing,” laughing at the situation, showing her lowered investment in the labeling of her sister as an alcoholic. AB relaxes, laughs in kind, but explains that “(you) hurt my feelings” and that she “doesn't even drink that [much anymore].” AD repeats the statement of “just playing,” with higher pitch, before calling her sister “sunshine” to show that she did not mean offense, and that her relationship with her sister is more important than the now-offensive topic. This is a situation where investment makes it much easier to annotate and explain the social dynamic, proving the usefulness of this new dimension.

With investment, Kiesling introduces a value system which may enable more quantitative capabilities in stance work. In the past, a quantitative approach to stance has been conducted via methods such as “sentiment analysis,” using computational linguistics to code statements to positive or negative. Freeman (2014) approaches speech via the direction of an evaluation, highlighting that “when a stance is taken, speakers are more likely to hyperarticulate” (423). In a 2017 study, Holmes-Elliott & Levon studied /s/

articulation across class-based reality shows, with the speech item patterning with activity, and level of threat. Gadanidis et al. (2018) sought to use stance as a predictor of the *that*-complementizer in a corpus of Toronto English. For their part, Kiesling et al. (2018) analyzed and annotated Reddit posts for their stance objects and encoded information (via evaluation, investment, and alignment). They found that “dimensions of evaluation tended to stay fairly constant, while indications of investment were likely to take wider swings, such that comments that exhibited a low investment were likely to be followed by comments with a heightened investment. Similarly, there was a tendency to move to a heightened level of alignment from a neutral alignment” (423-24). Whether a consequence of the anonymity of interaction or the epistemic significance of online conduct (the idea that “everyone on the Internet’s an expert”), this study in particular relates well to gaming conversations, as similar online modalities, with chosen anonymity and less threat of direct consequence to extreme opinions.

Kiesling’s research, and that of his contemporaries, reveals an inadequacy of the existing understanding of stance, and that epistemic stance and evidentiality, despite their long history, only fit one of the known dimensions. Accordingly, “alignment and investment may be more important than evaluation” (2022: 424). While this is to be expected, as human relationships are ever-so complex, Kiesling leaves the reader on a hopeful note, proclaiming, “because it is clear that language does more than encode propositions and that in fact the dimensions of alignment and investment may be more important than evaluation, stance is likely to be used in more and wider studies... with creativity and diligence, we will begin to uncover the ways in which stancetaking is done in language and how various forms, including sociolinguistic variables, index different stances in particular communities” (424). These communities of speech, and their

variations, prove fertile ground for stance research, and the road paved by Kiesling et al. (2018) suggests a bright future for stancetaking in interaction, its development, and its continuous, wider application to a plethora of modes of discourse.

2.3 Game Analysis

2.3.1 *Halo* and Local Area Network Dynamics

As a feature of gameplay, the potential for “randomness” in games can be very appealing. Sometimes, this variability is directly programmed in, creating intentional opportunities for controlled chaos. But when handing control of a character to a player, in an interactive environment, with the level of options associated with a game like WoW, chaos can well and truly ensue. In this way, players are bringing their own depth to the game’s existing content. This level of interactivity and “what you can do” is dependent upon the game, and comparing this ability vs. the confines of the game creates an evaluation of how impactful each action is. Some games offer glitches and “exploits” which allow players to “cheat,” which may be leveled in a way that diminishes the experience of other players, or can be channeled in fun, creative ways, like breaking out of the bounds of a map to examine areas the developers would never expect you to access. Others, like *Garry’s Mod*, deliberately utilize and build upon these sorts of exploits, giving players tools to explore, experiment, and have fun with a range of insertable assets and actions. This sort of gameplay style is known as “sandbox” gaming, allowing players to take whatever assets are available, and do whatever they want, combatting the often “linear” design of popular genres to give players as much freedom as possible.

The game examined by Nathan LaFave (2016) in his PhD Dissertation, *Halo*, the flagship title of Microsoft's *Xbox*, was a literal game-changer for the industry. Originally an Apple-owned project (presented at MacWorld 1999), Bungie's *Halo* was instrumental in the rise of modern console gaming, spawning a slew of successful sequels, and driving sales for Microsoft's own console, its native platform. *Halo* was a phenomenon not for its often-linear levels (corridor gameplay had been popularized by PC titles such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*), but its more open-world navigation, vehicular combat, and experimental gameplay. Prior games in the FPS genre were often limited to coming up against an obstacle, back-tracking to the only possible solution, and using that one option/key to open the offending door, and on to the next level, with the play area populated by a designed group of enemies and/or a 'boss' (a more powerful single foe). *Halo* gave players more tools to solve levels, added dimensions to the combat sections, and a pioneering physics engine that allowed for creative gameplay, like "Rocket Jumps" and "Warthog Flips" used to launch players to otherwise-impossible heights, skip entire sections of protracted gunfighting, and even escape the borders of the levels completely.

LaFave (2016) built his dissertation around a local New York hangout, called *Spartan Meet-Up*, where people can organize online and gather in real-life to play *Halo* and other desired games over Local Area Network, where brought consoles are linked together on a local network to allow for up to 16 players in one match. In their hangout, the players (and participants in this study) were privy to a number of games and systems, as well as whatever they brought with them, and the games they played would be determined by the group, and the hosts. LaFave considered conducting his study across multiple game-types for variety, but noted, "While this game variety would potentially present the researcher with the possibility of investigating questions related to, say, differences in

communicative practices across multiple genres, in reality it would make it difficult to acquire enough speech from the same individuals across multiple games. This is the case both because the length of gameplay that each individual gamer has with an individual game is much shorter than Spartan Meetup, and also because the different weekly themes at VGN meant that many gamers did not attend each meetup; they attended ones with themes that appealed the most to them” (28). This seeming limitation, rather than being a weakness, allowed LaFave to focus on the dynamics of play and socialization around *Halo*, instead of trying to decipher the style and manner of speech across a number of other games.

As modern *Halo* titles have started to do-away with split-screen play, LaFave and the other study participants were often limited to older games, particularly the original *Halo: Combat Evolved*. While players were gaming, LaFave (with IRB approval) had audio-recording equipment on the tables in the restaurant where the gamers met, in order to document their conversations in-action as well as their phonetic features, particularly by regional features and ethnicity (as an added dimension of study, as most of the players were African American or Hispanic, from the New York area). LaFave’s focus was on, “...how group members employ reference to virtual spaces that exist in the video game worlds that they inhabit during gameplay. In particular, I will evaluate the utility of the community of practice model in describing the variation in group members’ use of spatial reference. I will also compare this approach to one which explains patterns of players’ linguistic strategies for navigating space as a function of their familiarity with their teammates and their teammates’ behavior in that virtual environment” (LaFave 2016: 1). This involved an acute awareness of the “revolving door” aspect of the meetup, as well as accounting for “regulars.” Accounting for the status of players as newbies (“noobs”) or

veterans of the game, as well as their familiarity with one another, helped to observe the impact of these qualities on their play and conduct.

Generally, players of multiplayer games will often be in constant communication, and localized gaming groups may be particularly susceptible to verbal discussions that may fall outside the purview of traditional voice-chat conversations. This can be seen in the table (Figure 4) (LaFave 2016: 37, Table 2) above, as LaFave points out: “In Table 2 it is possible to see Alistair attempt to initiate a conversation with his teammate, Aurelia – one to which she never fully commits. Aurelia’s comment, ‘there we go,’ is actually an acknowledgement of Marcus’ directive to pick up a shotgun, which she has just done. Thus, after Alistair responds to Aurelia’s request for clarification, she comments on something that has happened in the game rather than contributing to the non-game-directed conversation” (37). This goes to show the “multimodality” that exists in a gaming space, particularly a LAN party-style dynamic, as players are hanging out in the same room, and co-existing in the virtual world. This necessitates the assignment of speech, potentially between chat channels in the game itself and verbalization, but also the discretion to swap between talking about the game diegetically and engaging in extra-game communications as needed. In this case, “diegetic” speech refers to communication within the game world, which is received and understood by the players of the game, but not observers in the outside world. There exists some crossover in this hypothetical Venn diagram, as players may wish to comment on an event which happened in the game, but outside of it (ex. “Dude that was crazy. I don’t know how you made that shot!” or “You only killed me because my controller died. I’ll get you back!”) Local play offers additional permutations, whereby players’ engagement doesn’t necessarily have to end when the match does.

Table 2. Failed attempt at non-game-directed conversation

Speaker	Utterance Focus	Utterance
Marcus	game	Get a shotgun. We gotta be on defense.
Alistair	non-game	Yo, babe.
Aurelia	non-game	What up.
Alistair	non-game	One of these days we should bring our Wii U here.
Aurelia	non-game	What?
Alistair	non-game	Have everybody just play <i>Smash</i> . [i.e., <i>Super Smash Bros. for Wii U</i>]
Aurelia	game	There we go. Um.
Marcus	game	Be on alert. They're about to jump down.

Figure 4. LaFave (2016) 'Table 2' illustrating the clash of intra-game/extra-game discourse modalities

While players occupy this multi-modality, especially in a LAN setting, the onus is on the players to focus on their own game performance. In *Halo*, games involve teamplay and free-for-all arena fighting, where scoring points by kills, zone captures, or securing a flag objective is the path to victory. In a “lone wolf” setting, players are competing with their fellows to be the best of the best, as “There can be only one!” In team play, there is more incentive to work together, as teams are stronger together than apart, but there still exists room for individual teammates to “pop off” and “clutch” a match, by performing so well on their own that they outshine their teammates and almost single-handedly “carry” a team to victory. As a genre, “shooter” games are often more simplified, as they are built around the excitement of the action and competitive gameplay, but there are other popular genres which place more focus on the specialization of roles and the harmonization of these individual purposes into a cohesive unit necessary for success. This is particularly true of some strategy games, as well as Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas, which rely on teamwork and synchrony to achieve mutual victory.

This encouraged synergy of different roles and classes has some parallels with other multiplayer formats, owing to the borrowing of RPG dynamics. In other genres, particularly Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs or MMOs), these dynamics often boil down to simpler roles: Tank, Healer, and Damage (DPS, or “damage per-second”). While the bulk of players simply play damage dealers, and some of them optimize for this role despite its commonality, the Tank and Healer are two of the most critical parts of this body. Simply, the tank aggravates the enemies in whatever groupings they can handle and soaks up the damage, while the rest of the team takes care of the attackers, and the healer has to keep the tank, and everyone else, alive. A damage dealer not bringing their all or perishing in the fight can be mildly irritating, but the death of the tank or healer quickly spells doom for the entire team, often resulting in a “wipe” (as they are wiped out).

2.3.2 *World of Warcraft* and Open World Gaming

MMORPGs are quite possibly the most widely studied type of gaming environments. Beginning with “Kingdom of the Winds” (Wu, Hsu 2018), this genre encompasses games in which players are collaborating and competing in a large virtual world, typically spanning dozens of zones, and with its own functional leveling and specialty system, whereby players may customize and level up their characters by way of experience points and rewards through exploration and combat. Some of the most popular examples of these games are *Ultima Online* (1997), *Everquest* (1999), and *Runescape* (2001), but the most successful and universally recognized of these is *World of Warcraft* by Blizzard Entertainment. *WoW* has been the subject of continuous examination and analysis, and sociologists, linguists, and scientists of all kinds have explored the in-game world of

Azeroth for varied types of data and findings. It has even been served as a meeting venue for scientists across the globe, as in 2008, when panelists from the University of California Irvine to the University of Bergen Norway and the U.S. National Science Foundation hosted and participated in the first scientific conference held in *World of Warcraft*'s virtual world (Bohannon 2008).

For some, *WoW* even has applications in the classroom. In "A teacher's perspective on World of Warcraft in school," Carmichael (2017) interviews Alfonso Gonzalez, a middle school science teacher in Washington, who uses the WoWInSchool program to help engage children with the material and develop their interest in exploration and scientific curiosity. "Kids are talking to each other because they're helping each other out. 'Hey, how do we get to Stormwind?' 'Oh, come on, I'll show you how to get the boat!'"... You talk about in education having kids use technology to communicate and collaborate and connect, and they totally are doing this. If you just play the game by itself, the critical thinking and problem-solving that they're doing... I could make a case for just playing the game, even if we didn't do all these other activities. But it is nice... that we are doing more than just playing a game in school" (Carmichael 2017).

Steinkuehler (2007) makes the argument that, "forms of video game play such as those entailed in MMOGs are not replacing literacy activities but rather *are* literacy activities" (298), and the WoWInSchool program, created by Lucas Gillespie (director of academic and digital learning for Surry County Schools in North Carolina), uses the play space and the supplementary 3D Game Lab to build a course curriculum around the tools available to players in WoW, exploring heroism and adventure, and allowing students to have certain days focused on free-play and accomplishing set tasks, which gets them really excited to learn through play and discovery.

The general appeal of *WoW* and similar MMOs as a canvas for academic thought and inquiry is apparent while observing the game's function: an open-world space that, while filled with quests and guided adventure, offers a treasure trove of options for exploration and creative freedom. Player characters are almost endlessly customizable, through earned rewards and trinkets gathered on their travels, and they can branch out into most any activity they could wish for. Want to fight monsters? There are bounties to fulfill and dungeons to delve. Prefer to knit your own clothes or craft mighty weapons and armor? Explore the professions and practice till you're a master. Want to ignore all of that and soar through the skies on the back of your own personal dragon, gazing at the awesome and beautiful scenery below? The potential for relaxation, conquest, or anything in-between is there. There's even a functional, contained economy, with an auction house working like eBay for magical items and fabulous treasure. This vim and vigor in the world understandably attracts excited children and senior economists and sociologists alike: it is a platform populated by millions looking for a wide range of experiences, adventure, and knowledge.

In their post, "Digital Ethnography of Linguistic Multitasking in World of Warcraft", on the *Society for Linguistic Anthropology's* website, Collister (2012) discusses the interpersonal relationship between players of *World of Warcraft* in shared activities. What this revealed was an emphasis on targeted and clear communication, particularly favoring the ability for players to physically speak to one another over the Internet. "When I started the ethnography... I honestly had no idea what to expect. I had a friend who was already playing, and so I joined up with her for my journey through this virtual world. We communicated with each other and to our new friends in the game world through text chat. I wrote a Master's Thesis on the impact of the game mechanics on

(textual) conversational flow and structure. Even as I wrote that thesis, I knew I was omitting a huge component of gameplay that I had only just discovered after a year of ethnography – voice chat” (2012). Voice chat is such an important addition to gameplay because of the nature of *WoW*, and other computer games – they require a keyboard to play (barring some insane alternative options some players have resorted to for additional challenge and reputation). While voice chat is not mandated nor truly “required,” it does allow players to communicate effectively, without compromising their gameplay performance.

The content of the *SLA* guest post covers the ethnographic work toward their PhD candidacy, in which Collister also investigated the multimodality enabled by “chat channels,” in both their intended purpose and the specificity of their actual use. Again, voice chat was important here, and served not just as an alternative to text chat, but as an additional mode of speech, with differing ranges of application and convenience. Acknowledging the significance of audible communication in gaming, especially *WoW*, they explain, “I hadn’t anticipated voice chat being part of the linguistic picture when I started my research, but as I learned the game and became a competent player, I fell in with a much different crowd of gamers than I had ever encountered before, and these players had much different interaction patterns than those I had studied early in my work. This group is the more ‘hardcore’ gaming types, the ones who go after the rare items and defeat the most difficult enemies... These players form groups of like-minded people, delicately balanced for different character strengths, and collaborate to execute complicated strategies for the ultimate goal of defeating an enemy ‘boss’” (Collister 2012). While a party is working to synergize their actions, via keyboard commands, they also have inter-personal communication as a tool, which may be utilized through any

available channel, with the simple requirement of conveying information to their teammates: this can be done through voice, text, or in-game simulations of “body language,” conveyed through *discourse particles* (relevantly explained in Collister 2015), such as in-game “emotes” and actions.

The complete dissertation realizes the discussed examination of this multimodality in *World of Warcraft*. “player identity is a factor influencing mode choice in broader interactional contexts. The assumed heterosexual masculinity of the *World of Warcraft* culture results in young players, female players, non-heterosexual players, and non-native English-speaking players (Collister 2013) “reporting avoidance of voice chat in situations with uncertain social expectations because they may face harassment about their identities. However, habitual avoidance of voice chat is also practiced by isolated individuals who engage in identity deception, resulting in voice chat avoidance being a marked practice that raises suspicions about player identity” (iv-v). The examination of the inter-play between text, voice, and face-to-face chat reveals concerns of privacy, appropriateness, and communication etiquette. Detailing an instance of this understanding, Collister describes:

One of the most striking cases [was] during a raid in which Matt noticed a healer who had misinterpreted the strategy for a particular boss... Instead of calling Walter out on Ventrilo or in the public raid chat, Matt instead uses a text chat channel that only he, his friend Owen, and myself were present in. He chose this channel because I was acting as the healing leader for that particular raid, and by informing me of the problem I could then tell Walter what to do [see Table 4]. In his mode-switching, Matt combines both of the motivations discussed above: he does not want to call someone out and shame them

publicly because that would be an extreme face-threat and possibly disrupt the raiding environment, but he also directs his talk to a relevant party who can do something about the issue (Collister 2013: 111).

This example showcases the importance and motivation behind multimodality in gaming. Certain genres, particularly games involving tactical gameplay, better lend themselves to various modes of communication, and Collister's participation in these encounters emphasizes the importance of "mode-switching;" knowing when and how to contribute to a group's knowledge to refine their action.

Finally, Collister (2014) examines the overall dynamic between the game players and the surveillance of the game's moderators, whose duty is to screen game communications and conduct for examples of improper behavior, in order to maintain a safe and enjoyable gaming experience. This oversight is often mandated in shared online spaces, due to the vulnerability of players to exploitation and abuse by more aggressive or nefarious online influences, particularly scammers and phishing accounts. Even in an environment designed to promote freedom and choice, there is still a tug of war between this liberty and the enforcement of its security.

With all of the academic work that has been conducted, based on (and in) *World of Warcraft*, one could wonder what other sorts of worlds and styles gaming may offer, and how this will affect the future of studying these modes and interactions. While MMOs have existed since 1985 (with *Island of Kesmai*, supporting up to 100 players at one time), and dominated the 2000s (with giants like *Everquest* (1999), *RuneScape* (2001) and *World of Warcraft* (2004) proving wildly successful), MOBAs are a more recent entity, dating back to 1998's *Age of Strife*, a mod/edit of a map within *Starcraft*, one of

the best-known Real-Time Strategy games and franchises of the last 30 years. In fact, MOBAs largely originated as mods or custom creations in other strategy games. *Dota 2*, one of the largest MOBA titles and a main competitor of *league of Legends*, is the sequel to a game created from a modified version of *Warcraft III*, the strategy game by Blizzard Entertainment and the namesake and genesis of *World of Warcraft*. To bring things full circle, Blizzard has recently created their own MOBA game, *Heroes of the Storm*, in 2015, drawing on their own extensive IP (the aforementioned *WoW* and *Starcraft*, as well as their hit title, *Overwatch*) to create a variety of characters. Even *Overwatch*, in addition to being a First-Person Shooter and action game, draws some mechanics and stylings from the MOBA genre: five-man teams, character selection, and a four-ability rotation are all staples of MOBA games.

2.3.3 *League of Legends* and Matchmade Interaction

The work of Bonny and Castaneda (2022) draws on the intersection of player motivation in gaming and the MOBA genre. In “To Triumph or to Socialize?: The Role of Gaming Motivations in Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Gameplay Preferences,” they identify the principal features of the title genre, and what differentiates it from more traditional gaming formats, in addition to describing these varying motives for play. “MOBAs are team-based online games where players strategize to secure the base of the opposing team and defeat them using virtual heroes. The current top-three MOBAs by number of players, online viewers, and market share are *League of Legends* (Riot Games, Inc.), *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation), and *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.)... [featuring] key MOBA mechanics, such as a three-lane map, cooperative gameplay, and match selection process” (Bonny and Castaneda 2022: 158).

In *League*, there is a greater number of roles, but there exists a similar intersection of these abilities and purposes which must work together to achieve their true potential. Hotshots and “solo” players can get fairly far, but it can’t compare to the harmonious output of a truly united team. When friends group together for activities, especially friendly sports games and leagues, they bring with them a level of camaraderie which helps determine their success (especially if they are having fun). In an online game, with anonymous players bumping into one another and then relying on each other for victory and rewards, they are thrust into a dynamic where they must quickly forge bonds of trust and teamwork if they’re going to succeed, and this is not a guarantee. This reality of anonymous matchmaking and player organization is found even in MMOs, as Ross and Collister (2014) explain, “In most cases, the 25 players in the [raid] group are strangers. They generally have no knowledge of their fellow group members’ playing abilities, and no knowledge about their needs or strategies.” Unlike *WoW*, though, MOBAs and their sister genres do not feature a persistent “game-world” or “permanent” room, with the conclusion of a match placing players in completely separate lobbies. This can often create an antipathy toward these “randoms,” as instead of playing with their friends for fun, they are “forced” to join teams of people they don’t know and hope for the best.

While that aspect is intrinsic to any online games with “matchmaking” these days, which are often seen as more competitive than cooperative, this is particularly impactful in MOBAs such as *League*, where organized teamplay is strongly implied in the name (*League*). Compounding this is the increasing commodification of games, which now appear less like digital play spaces but instead resemble online marketplaces, where one can buy everything from costumes to insignia and emblems, announcer packs, and almost any conceivable cosmetic option. While many of these things can eventually be afforded

with in-game currency (earned simply by playing and accomplishing tasks), still others are bought exclusively with real money, or more likely, a “special” currency which is bought using real money. This thinly-veiled monetization has proven successful for many companies, with Epic Games’ *Fortnite* in particular, being one of the major contributors to relief for Ukraine (Tassi 2022), so this monetization has only become more emphasized by games and the studios who make them.

This monetization of assets in the game world has heavily contributed to a massive shift in tone and atmosphere, two critical reagents for creating a virtual world. When games are seen as heavily monetized cash-cows, the creator is seen as greedy and only in it for the money. While this may be entirely false, with these in-game purchases directly funding future updates and improvements upon the game, they can often be seen as a form of “taxation,” and when updates don’t address public issues or critical bugs or fixes to be addressed, demonstrably “without representation.” The backlash to this implementation also fuels the forums, which were created for feedback as well as player communication outside of the game, but are often vehicles for the seemingly unheard criticism of the state of the game as seen by the larger player body, often demanding patches, asking for certain skins or characters to be added, and other such pleas. The forums also contain other sorts of content, however, including entire excerpts and chat samples from active games, or archived chat.

The purpose of these interactions is dependent upon the original poster (OP), but largely fits into several known categories. They may be seeking retribution against a player who was seen cheating, or verbally (textually) abusing others. They may wish to entertain other players by showing humorous dialogue samples as they occurred in their match. Or, they may just want to preserve interactions for posterity, to document them so

that they and others can look back on all the crazy adventures they had together. This paper, however, will be analyzing these various conversations for their sociolinguistic data, and specifically, the perception of stance and meta-features of the champion avatars, their players, and the broader communication style of MOBA gamers.

Building upon the reasons behind player motivation and their interaction in a collaborative/competitive hybrid environment, Sapienza et al. (2018) studied the effects of familiarity and team experience on individual skill and performance. Playing successive games with different teams does not demonstrably improve individual ability, but it can counteract diminishing performance in cases, providing further incentive to continue playing. The risk-reward/diminishing returns intersection is part of the appeal to the matchmaking process. In an ideal world, each randomized team will prove consistently capable, allowing a string of victories to improve player rating and therefore, via ELO (a ranking system borrowed from chess, derived from creator Arpad Elo), better/more challenging matches in the future. However, the intrinsic disruption of having a different team each time can completely destroy progressive development of in-game tactics and stratagems, as the players do not get to build on their previous *shared* experience, only their *personal* match history and the lessons therein.

In the world of gaming, particularly eSports, team selection and composition is an important element of success (just as in physical sports). This link between composition and performance is of particular note to Sapienza et al. (2018), as well as former studies. “The ‘optimal’ composition of temporary teams also attracted a lot of research: Kim *et al.* [2017: 4-5] studied *League* to determine how team composition affects team performance. Using mixed-methods approaches, the authors studied in-game role proficiency, generality, and congruency to determine the influence of these constructs on

team performance. Proficiency in tacit cooperation and verbal communication highly correlate with team victories, and learning ability and speed of skill acquisition differentiate novice from elite players” (Sapienza et al. 2018: 11). The impetus for cooperation, often necessitating clear communication (textual or verbal, though voice-chat is highly recommended for competitive players) means that players must adapt to the needs of the group, and the game, as they navigate the virtual space.

Their experiment is dependent upon Riot Games’ API (a REST service for third-party developers to access data from *League* players’ profiles and account lifetime), collating data from player’s account history to record their match experience. Sapienza et. Al (2018) specifically examine players’ history of solo-queue matches, due to players’ inability to pre-select any teammates from their friends list or recent players. Additionally, to measure the effects of play over time in a single session, Sapienza et al. deliberately focused on matches time stamped as within short intervals of one another. They then verified the accuracy of their work by conducting an analysis of a randomized set of these sessions, shuffling the match order around to ensure their findings were not due to chance.

As discussed above (in reference to Bonny and Castaneda 2022), when playing online, *League* players are thrust into situations where they are teamed with “random” players with whom they have no working/gaming relationship, and bonds of camaraderie are formed on the spot, out of necessity for team-play. “Previous studies showed that strangers collaborate in online games through communication and coordination, often trying to exert influence over their teammates. Players understand that the way they interact with teammates affects collaboration, and thus they must discipline themselves to facilitate successful social interaction with their team. Players must reach mutual

understanding of the changing situations, work closely, continuously make new strategies together, build and maintain team cohesiveness, and deal with deviant players. In addition, game designers dynamically assemble players to match the skill levels of opposing teams” (Sapienza et al. 2018: 2). Gamers do rely upon the matchmaking system to assuage their greater fear of being matched with much more skilled opponents (or inept teammates), but the potential for lopsided matches is very real, and in a competitive setting dependent upon consecutive wins for advancement and accolades, this anxiety can affect players’ performance and behavior.

What can be gleaned from this is that players of these online games, contending with the multiplayer matchmaking, are faced with a complete toss of the coin every time they search for a game. The makeup of their own team, that of the enemy players, and the assignment of roles and existence of skill level is entirely based on chance, coupled with the agreeability of their teammates to work out a balanced relationship. The “instant friends” mentality assumed of these matchmade players can create lasting bonds, but can also widen the gap between participants who do not mesh well with a team, ostracizing some players for the benefit of the group at their expense. The baseline expectations of these games, particularly in a competitive format, requires a working knowledge of the game, in addition to the shorthand vernacular used by avid players, creating a community of speech to which exceptions to the rule are starkly highlighted. This is the environment which players step into every time they queue for a match, and may help explain the kinds of interactions observed and analyzed in this paper.

2.4 Intersection of stance and gaming

While the groundwork of stancetaking has now existed for decades, previous works show that it has only properly begun finding its feet, as the understanding of stance's implications and aspects continues to develop. Consequently, many realms and modes of discourse have had very little examination with stance methods. While Kiesling et al.'s application of stancetaking to online forums (Kiesling et al. 2018) is one of the closest examples to date, direct accounts of stance and gaming are sparse.

In searching for the application of stancetaking to a gaming modality, the most relevant work found is Lee, Jeong, and Jeon (2019). As a specific exploration of the effects of moral positioning and behavior in the game *League of Legends*, their work, "Disruptive behaviors in online games" practically examines the same kind of material as this paper. However, they use a quantitative methodology, converting results from an evaluative metric capturing behavioral qualities and tendencies of the selected players using structural equation analysis. Upon calculating the participants' data, they determined that player's moral positioning did in fact have a positive effect on disruption, and that, "the propensity to select a character designed to kill or harass others can stimulate antisocial behaviors against the other game participants" (Lee, Jeong, Jeon 2019). Determining the game world and resources as a cue for player behavior is indicative of the modal effect of a virtual environment, particularly an anonymous one, on interactants' social dynamic.

While this study demonstrates an effective use of quantitative analysis to make wider determinations about games and their players, it collates player experience into single representative numbers, and does not display the individual realities of their conversational participation in the gaming space. Steinkuehler (2007) mentions that, "By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home,

such online discussion forums – much like the virtual worlds with which they are associated (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) – function as one novel form of a new ‘third place’ (Oldenburg 1999) for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old” (313). Using this understanding of an online social network and the similarities of the gaming medium, then much like social media platforms like *Instagram* or *Twitter*, it becomes reasonable to think of players as human interactants, navigating regulated speech channels to better communicate and direct the flow of play.

With this perspective, game-chat can be seen as any other kind of conversational discourse, with the added connotations of the impact of the game-world, the nested networks of association (players, teams, matches, servers, etc.), and the experiential driver of ‘play.’ Looking at gaming communication in this way allows the application of conversational analysis methodologies. The ‘newness’ of gaming invites the application of ‘new’ techniques, with the barely tapped potential of gaming as a conversational medium (specific to each game’s modes of discourse) as a useful source of information and inspiration using CA and stancetaking techniques. With stancetaking as a largely unsolidified means of analysis, without a strict definition, its pliability lends itself to a wider range of application, and its attitudinal and epistemic perspective of human conduct appears to fit the modern forum of gaming interaction like a glove, interpreting statements’ communicative power while focusing on the implicature and metalanguage of players to understand their motivations and impact.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Source Selection

When choosing a new, demanding environment to apply stance analysis to, there were many potential options, and online modality seemed a good course of action, opening up an entire world of chat rooms and social media platforms. However, there has already been stance work done on these platforms (see Chapter 2's literature review), but another opportunity presented itself – one ensuring a narrower scope, and more directed conversational flow – multiplayer video game-chat communications. While linguistic analysis of video gaming is not new (see Collister 2008, Sierra 2016, Bakos 2018), there are scarce stance-based approaches to these particular environments.

In the initial focusing approach, many game genres and platforms did not represent adequate speech environments for ideal analysis. The games that best fit this approach appear to be cooperative/competitive multiplayer experiences, as their speech environment extends to both team-play, and “all chat,” featuring all players in the match, regardless of their affiliation. With this in mind, the game format most conducive to this display was the genre of Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs). This gametype involves two teams of players – which are most often comprised of real people (though A.I. “bots” may occasionally take their place) – engaged in a linear game environment, with the objective of destroying the opposing team's base to end the match. The most well-known and popular of these games is RIOT Games' *League of Legends* (LOL), known for its accessibility and friendliness to players new to the genre, though conducive to high-level competitive play in million-dollar tournaments streamed globally.

3.2 Game Factors

Within games like *League*, there are many possible characters and cosmetic variations, but there are some limiting factors too. In addition to the fact that only one of each character may exist per team in a match, there is also a sort of “peer pressure” functioning not only to ensure that certain characters are often used while others are left in the dust, but also determining what type of player gets to have “dibs” on each of these champions. The game encourages, if not outright necessitating, the application of certain “roles,” and an ideal combination of these aspects to create a balanced team, capable of taking on a wide range of threats to the success of their objective. In terms of position, based on their relative alignment on the map, these are *top laner*, *bottom laner*, *mid laner*, *jungler*, and *support*.

There is a politics around these roles which is steeped in stereotyping as well as jostling for the best position, which creates an inner conflict with teams. Not only are they worried about the threats of the map and those without (from the enemy team), but they must also contend with internal bickering and disagreement over who gets to do what, and where they get to go. An ADC, or “attack-damage carry,” is the most powerful character on the team, but this is not an automatic boost. ADCs are functionally a “glass-cannon” type, doing tremendous damage and holding potential for some of the most influence and power in the game, but they are fairly fragile as well, and on their own, can be expected to die very quickly. The support, on the other hand, functions as a “team player” in the truest sense, whether as a medic or a walking enhancement or “buff” to their teammates, particularly the ADC, but this is often out of the fact that, on their own, they are not geared for damage, and typically do not hit very hard. However, by augmenting a competent ADC or other player, their contribution becomes more than the

sum of its parts, and they may achieve harmony to function at their highest possible level, making the other stronger and creating a formidable threat to the other team.

One of the most striking details of *League* pertinent to stance determination is appearance. Consciously or no, determinations are made about a person by the way they dress, what they look like, the color of their skin, their apparent gender (even if it may conflict with their actual identity), etc. These assumptions, though not grounded in hard fact, still have a weighty contribution in the judgment of others. This can inform perception; expectations of how someone may speak, what they sound like, how knowledgeable they may be, etc. In a virtual environment, there is the reality of “avatars”; stand-ins for player controllers (or sometimes AI) which are the character’s sum total in the virtual space. When players are controlling these avatars, they are creating a level of abstraction between themselves and their playable characters. In *The Proteus Paradox* (Yee 2014), Yee details an experiment he helped conduct while a graduate student at Stanford University. In their Virtual Human Interaction Lab, using a virtual room, “...we gave participants either an attractive or an unattractive avatar... Within sixty seconds of being given a new digital body, participants in attractive avatars became friendlier and shared more personal information with the stranger than participants in unattractive avatars. Changing avatar height had a similar effect: people given taller avatars became more confident than people given shorter ones” (2). Interestingly, these biases were not contained to the virtual space. “Crucially, these behavioral changes followed users even when they had left the virtual world. Those recently given attractive avatars selected more attractive partners in a separate online task. As we create and endlessly customize our avatars, they in turn influence how we think and how we behave” (2). This suggests that not only do creators’ preferences help

determine their avatar selection and appearance, but that the avatars they choose to embody reflect their behavioral conduct and interaction.

Of course, avatar selection and presentation are pertinent not only to how one sees oneself, but how one is seen by others. In DuBois' notes and teaching, reputation is an important aspect of a conversational interaction. In fact, reputation may play a large part in the evaluation of interlocutors, and this can be pre-determined, or known in advance, or subject to immediate interaction in the rapidly changing speech environment.

According to the *Reputation Workshop* website, via DuBois, "A reputation model is a way for a user community to collectively regulate and calibrate the contributions of its members" (HypothesisProject 2012). The role of reputation in evaluation, one of the key aspects of stancetaking, can be significant, as speakers are making their own beliefs and characteristics known. However, this process begins before a word is even uttered. In a more anonymous arena, these determinations are formed as soon as the players are in the starting lobby, just as similar qualities are quickly assessed by people in real-world interactions (Palomares and Young 2017).

In total, these judgments may be factored by the players' characters (if nothing is known about the controller), the players themselves (if they are known to one another), and even a combination of these things. For example, if two friends attempt to play a game together, and there are choices for their avatars, they may make judgments in advance of their selection, not only for their own characters, but determinations of what kind of player the other may be. In a shooter game, someone may be associated with large, explosive ordnance, which may be connected to any number of traits: they may like to do area of effect damage for the largest possible radius, they may see an edge in the more stereotypically powerful weapons and seek to capitalize on this - or they might just

really like blowing things up with a big gun. In an existing relationship, if someone is known to always seek the exploitation of flimsy rules or getting around otherwise stable constants, it may be assumed they will apply this strategy to their gaming exploits as well, playing characters or using weapons which may be seen as “cheap,” “overpowered,” or “meta.”

There also exists a strange push-and-pull between the virtual and material world, and the merit of each. A player may be seen by some as highly skilled and high-ranking in a game, to the awe of those around them, but they may also be accused of being a “no-lifer” or “neckbeard” who is able to dedicate the time required to unlock those accolades due to a lack of investment in the real world. On the flip side, players may be understood as “casual” because they don’t invest a lot of time in a particular game, or a “noob” because they are so under-leveled and do not reach a metric associated with the expected level of performance in a teammate. The prioritization of “virtual” success over real accomplishments is succinctly described by economist Edward Castronova in *Synthetic Worlds* (2008): “Indeed, viewing synthetic worlds as a locus of migration... accord[ing] with the predictions of cyber-theorists such as William Gibson (*Neuromancer*, 1984) and Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash* 1992), who saw no long-run limit on the amount of time people would want to spend in virtual reality environments, were they to become practical. Now indeed they seem to have become practical enough... to serve as way stations between the late twentieth century and the future as these authors envisioned it” (8-9). Consequently, there is a push-and pull between reality and the game world, and players find themselves having to balance their activity based on demands and their own preferences and allotted free time.

With such a diverse playerbase, and accordingly, a rich language environment, *LOL* provides an objective-driven landscape that still allows for open communications. The game is also entirely equipped for online functionality (its core mode) and can host two teams of five players each. Additionally, *LOL* features a host of player characters, known as Champions, who may be divided further into specialized roles and capacities in a character class format, providing additional limiters and influences to help ensure a smoother, more focused conversational flow. The caveat to any open format like this, however, is that no matter the in-game constraints and restrictions present, there is always potential for chaos, and a chaotic speech environment. This is factored into the final results of this investigation and will be explored at greater depth in the subsequent analyses, found in Chapter 4.

3.3 Collection Obstacles

Bearing in mind these specific aspects of the chosen speech environment, there remained a critical question: what was the best way to examine the speech modality in gaming, and what would yield results of complex interaction and illustrate some of the trends and phenomena associated with gaming communication? This seemed to point toward a natural data collection, with participation in the game space yielding useful data, to then analyze using the stancetaking method.

However, with this approach, the Observer's Paradox posed a difficult challenge to surmount. The researcher, as an entrant into matchmade-based gaming, would have to contend with being one of ten players in the lobby, and one fifth of a team's composition, positioning them as a critical component toward the game's outcome. With that understanding, rather than seeking IRB approval for direct, personal data collection in

live games, the data was instead sourced from the *League of Legends* forums, which contained archived game-chat and examples of multiplayer speech.

Initially, this proved useful, and yielded several data points and conversations which could be analyzed using stancetaking methods. Unfortunately, in 2021, RIOT Games began to remove their online forums from public access. This proved a significant obstacle, as these forums appeared to be the typical domain of this interactional data, but the pages no longer appeared to exist. With that challenge, it seemed that live in-game collection again became the best possible option, which would require restarting the investigation, and increase the difficulty of obtaining good data.

Fortunately, some intrepid and resourceful souls worked to archive as much of the forums as they were able, preserving much of the data. Personally trying to retrieve this archived data, however, proved to be a fruitless endeavor, as the data was specially encrypted for computer-reading, and required special services to download the compressed (though huge) files. Other sources, such as CHARON (2021), contained game data, which could be translated from Hungarian using a built-in translation tool, but this translated English would not be viable for stancetaking analysis, creating more hassle in the data collection when efficiency and depth of field were required.

Gratefully, *Summoners Code*, an online archive of *League* interactions, hosted on Tumblr, proved to be an effective means by which to gather chat excerpts and communications. Luckily, it even had some of the original interactions collected and featured in an earlier draft of this work before the forums had shut down. Better still, all of the interactions featured timestamps for each message. Though the matches the data came from would be extremely difficult to track down, the time-stamps still provide an additional tool of analysis, showing the timing between each message and response,

which can be loosely mapped onto the flow of a typical *League* game (earlier timestamps would occur when teams are freshly out of their bases, while later ones, via the natural ‘clock’ *League* involves, would come toward the end of the game, when tensions may become high, and victory can feel less certain. Coupled with the original data preserved before the forum’s destruction, this provided a stronger catalogue of possible examples. As a final supplementary source, the search for additional compilations of game-chat data revealed *YouTube* and *Twitch* videos as popular formats, containing additional examples of in-game interactions.

With these sources identified, the data was collected from these three places: the original forums, the archived data, and further interactions from video-based sources on *YouTube* and *Twitch*. In the selection of this data, though, the ten examples which were chosen as the best exemplars of game-chat/stancetaking phenomena either derived from the *Summoner’s Code* archive or were sourced from the now-defunct forums but also feature in the archived data. Utilizing these examples of gaming phenomena, it became possible to identify a taxonomy of multiple types of interaction in a gaming setting, highlighting these identified taxonyms (shown in Chapter 4).

3.4 Stancetaking Application

With the data collected and prepared, organized along the identified phenomenological taxonomy expressed above, it became important to determine the most effective method of analysis. Considering the data, and the game-native factors affecting speech, discourse analysis became a starting point. Schiffrrin et al. (2003) define three main categories of discourse analysis: 1. Anything beyond the sentence; 2. Language in use, and; 3. A broader range of social practice including nonlinguistic and nonspecific

instances of language. While the language is certainly important, much of the information is carried in implicature, and subtle referencing. As a result, the metalanguage is an important factor of game chat literacy. Beyond this implicature, the conversational excerpts are removed from their native context, negating the effectiveness of an in-game, ethnomethodological approach.

However, stancetaking has the potential to be applied even without direct participant understanding, as context can be determined through environment, timing, and mode and intensity of discourse. Kiesling et al. (2018) applied these methods to *Reddit* posts, and DuBois himself posited that “It seems clear that [online interaction] would respond quite well” (HypothesisProject 2012: 23:39). He noted the potential of the medium, explaining, “What’s of interest to me... the dynamic here [is open] to take these comments and bring them into the kind of diagraph analysis I do with my conversational material” (23:24).

It is important to note that while stancetaking methods and applications have since been expanded (Jaffe 2009) and refined (Kiesling 2022), this work utilizes DuBois’ foundational methods (2007) in order to provide a more concrete application of the original conceptual understanding, and realize its application in a proposed virtual discourse, adding the twist of a game-focused setting to display the interactions of these game player-interactants. As a result, it will not incorporate Jaffe’s (2009) theories of hierarchy and identity, nor directly apply Kiesling’s (2022) investment, with the primary aim of highlighting the occurrences and common themes in game-chat interaction.

The following work analyzes just these kinds of discourse, in a goal-oriented, team-driven environment, to procure meaning from the kinds of conversation happening in any given match of *League*, and gaming communication at large.

CHAPTER 4. GAMECHAT SAMPLES: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

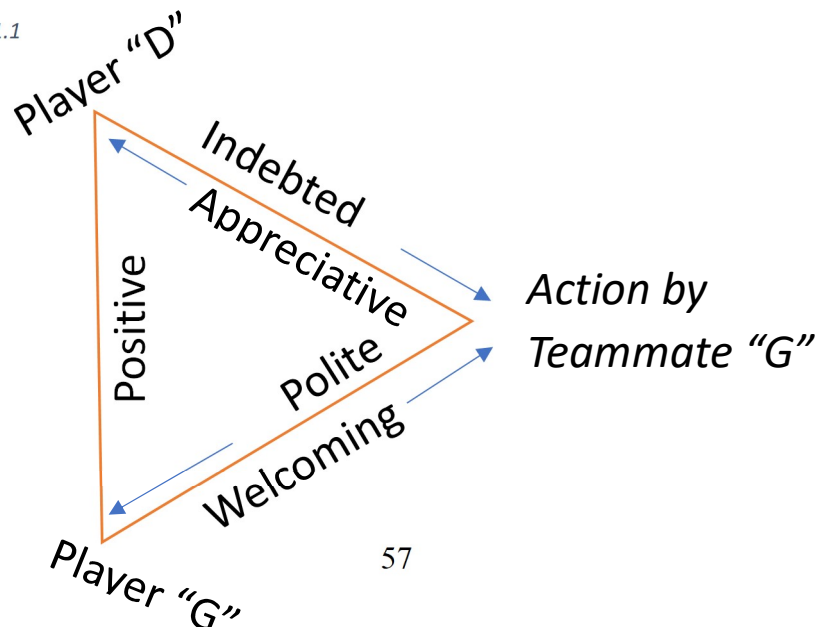
4.1 Gamer Stereotypes and Epistemic Performance

4.1.1 “Neckbeard”

- 1 D: ty
- 2 G: your welcome
- 3 D: You’re*
- 4 G: and here we see the wild neckbeard in his natural habitat
- 5 G: correcting grammar on league of legends

In this first dataset, the interaction occurs between two teammates, working together in pursuit of their common goal. The first line is implicitly prompted by an in-game occurrence, involving G’s assistance, which prompts D’s “ty” (“thank you”). With the etiquette established, G provides an appropriate response, “your welcome.” However, D points to G’s grammatical error by correcting “your” to “You’re.” In response to this correction, G notes, ‘and here we see the wild neckbeard in his natural habitat.’ G continues by specifying D’s offense: ‘correcting grammar on league of legends.’ This interaction is visualized by the stance triangles below:

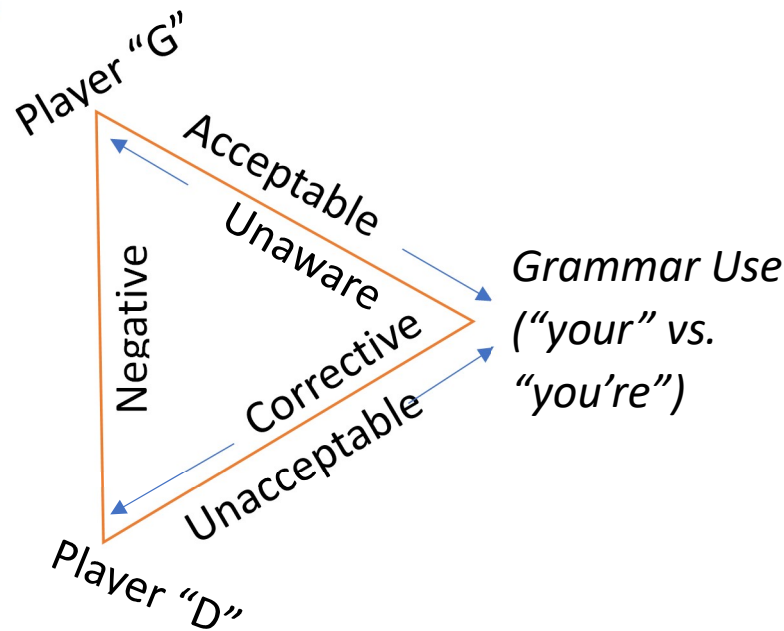
Figure 5. Triangle 1.1



The first two lines of this interaction demonstrate a simple thank you-response pairing, but Line 3 introduces the stance object – the correction G makes of D’s “your” to “you’re.” In this gaming environment, D’s correcting of G may be seen as an act of teasing or a joke at G’s expense, perhaps akin to that of a “gotcha,” where one is caught out doing something that may be the basis for (usually mocking) criticism. Accordingly, a labeling of D’s evaluation of the stance object reflects this “gotcha” mentality, thereby positioning D as a clever, teasing interactant. Note that game culture information has already been exploited here in the identification of D’s evaluation and positioning, for there is no such handy evaluative tool as the example “don’t like” to guide this interpretation. In this case, however, the “gotcha” evaluation is based on a speech act that carries a typical social meaning, i.e. mocking or teasing, and further identifies D’s relationship to the stance object. The labels are based further on a cultural practice of verbal competition which appears to govern much of game-based chat-room behavior, particularly verbal dueling, which is well-known in the sociolinguistic literature (in many cultures, especially between close male interactants e.g., Labov 1972, Kiesling 2004).

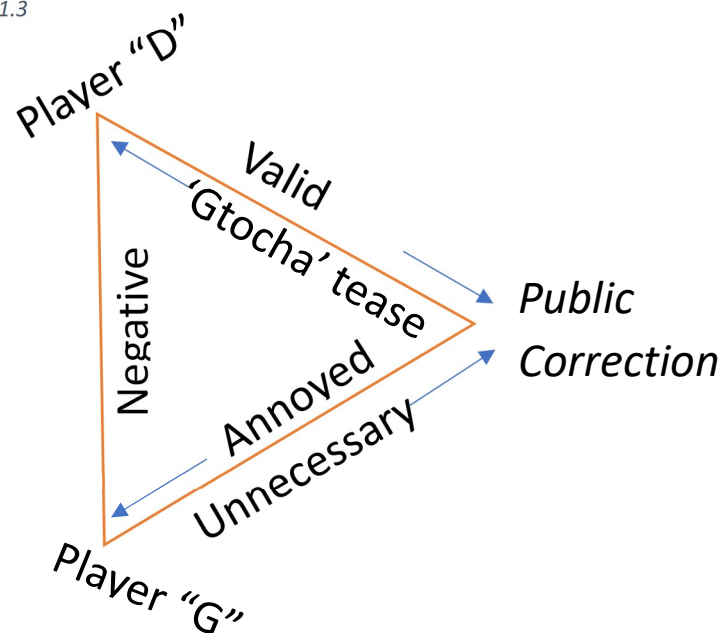
However, it may also be noted that there is a darker side to this “gotcha” evaluation, via the understanding of a “standard language ideology” as well-documented in Lippi-Green (2012), which especially grips the United States, allowing for the public criticism of perceived language “errors,” even by those whose usual politeness to others would never allow them to comment on race, physical appearance, or other sensitive attributes; language, however, appears to be fair game, and D obviously makes just such a move in this third line.

Figure 6. Triangle 1.2



G, therefore, appears to take a negative evaluation of this “gotcha” correction of their own perceived mistake as “criticism,” and G’s positioning, based on their response, indicates an annoyance at D’s correction. This response is deceptively complex. First, G returns D’s indirect insult directly by labeling them as a “neckbeard” in Line 4. Though Wikipedia is infamously suspect for its oft-erroneous information, in this case, it provides a suitable definition for these purposes. Under “Neckbeard (Slang),” it offers the following description: “The term is associated with the currently (2010 – present) unfashionable facial hair style known as a neck beard, and by extension, to a stereotype of overweight, unkempt internet users, and overlaps with the nerd, gamer, and geek subcultures.” The Urban Dictionary, as a resource of “folk” language, also mentions gaming: “Copious amounts of Mountain Dew, Doritos, video games, and a sedentary lifestyle are all additional hallmarks of the neckbeard ethos.” The consensus on this term’s implications appears to align with the “parent’s basement” stereotype.

Figure 7. Triangle 1.3



All this is made less harsh by its playful, David Attenborough-style nature documentary narration in Line 4 (“wild,” “natural habitat”), indicating that G, although perhaps recognizably annoyed with the grammar correction, is nevertheless willing to play ‘the you-get-me-I’ll-get-you-back’ game suggested above, as a natural response to even-out the social implications of a “gotcha.” This interpretation introduces the label “mock” into both G’s evaluation and positioning and illustrates the complexity of stance analysis when there are no clear lexical markers of the sort DuBois outlines above. It is important to note, however, that G qualifies his attack in Line 5, and implies that he too is subject to standard language ideology (as well-described in Lippi-Green 2012), for his “Neckbeard” attack on D specifies that the grammar correction was only unwarranted “on league of legends.” One could suppose, then, that it’s (the correction in question) quite alright in other settings, and sociolinguists who thought G might have embraced some form of linguistic relativity by attacking his grammar corrector must reevaluate that assessment.

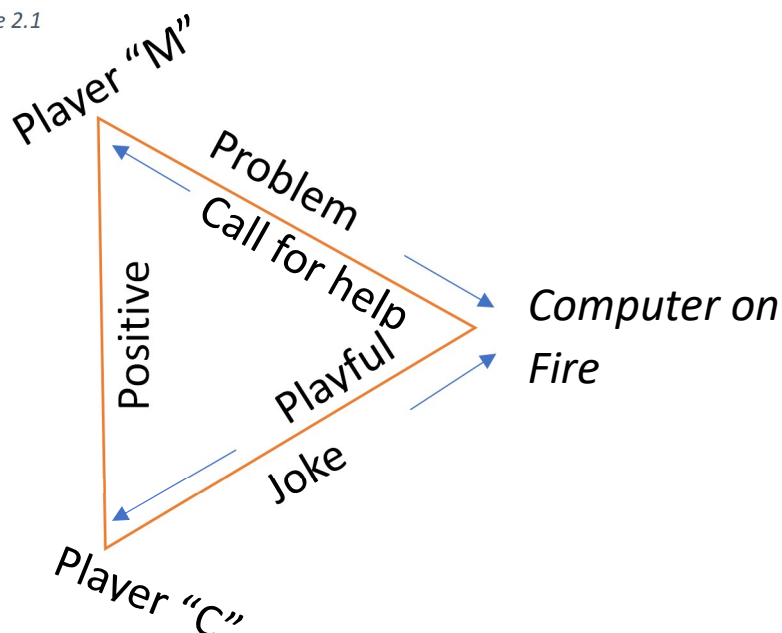
Alternatively, the implicit reference made here might be “[of all places, you’re correcting people on *League of Legends*.]” This could even be extrapolated to “[even on *League of Legends*, people aren’t safe from this type of antagonistic correction.]” Finally, however playful these insults may be intended, the alignment value between D and G is clearly “negative,” an appropriate label for an insult-contest, even in a game setting.

4.1.2 “The Scientist”

- 1 M [1:09]: my comp is on fire
- 2 C [1:17]: throw water on it
- 3 H [1:22]: foam*
- 4 H [1:29]: water+ electric= bad
- 5 M [1:37]: who we got a scientist here folks

This next example sees a team negotiating a player’s “technical difficulties.” In this case, the “difficulties” are that M’s computer is apparently on fire. This begs the question of how they are managing to type, and their apparent calm, but nevertheless, the issue is made clear with the animator’s statement: “my comp is on fire.” C seemingly tries to help M’s plight, suggesting that they “throw water on it.” This could be seen as the electrical equivalent of the classic solution to physical wounds offered by generations of helpful parents: “rub some dirt on it.” This playful evaluation of the situation is displayed in the first triangle:

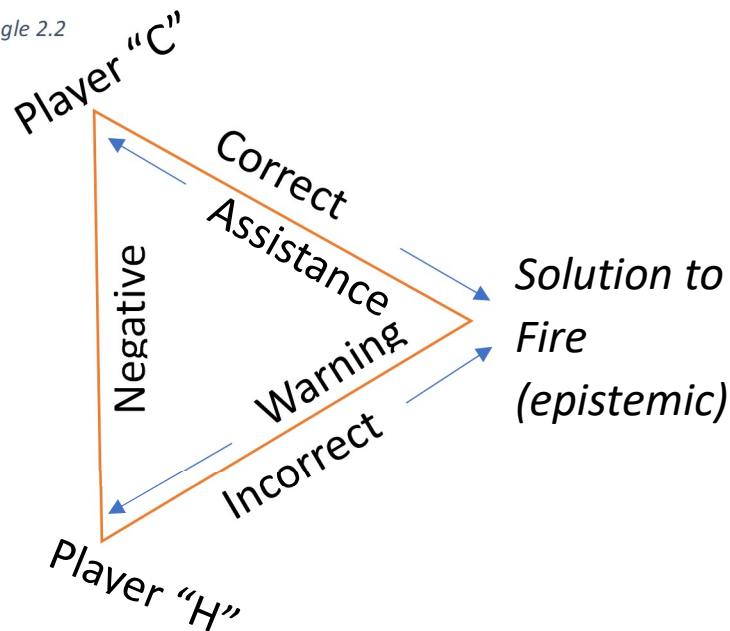
Figure 8. Triangle 2.1



As the “straight man” of the conversation, player H responds to M’s dilemma, taking the situation very seriously. Amending C’s suggestion of using “water,” H instead suggests “foam*” in line 3, explaining this change in line 4: “water+ electric= bad.” The use of an asterisk in “foam*” is a common marker of correction or amendment to an internet-based dialogue, particularly for typos, or more humorously as entire word-replacements to change meaning, often followed by the phrase, “there, fixed it for you.” This is particularly true if the “fix” is made to another’s post, rather than one’s own. The second statement, “water+ electric= bad” is explaining the scientific basis that water and electricity don’t often work well together, as naturally occurring water contaminates pure water’s function as an insulator. Conductivity creates an issue when working with electrical systems, and H is explaining that it would be unwise to use water to extinguish the burning computer. Instead, they propose that M uses foam, as it will address the problem without water.

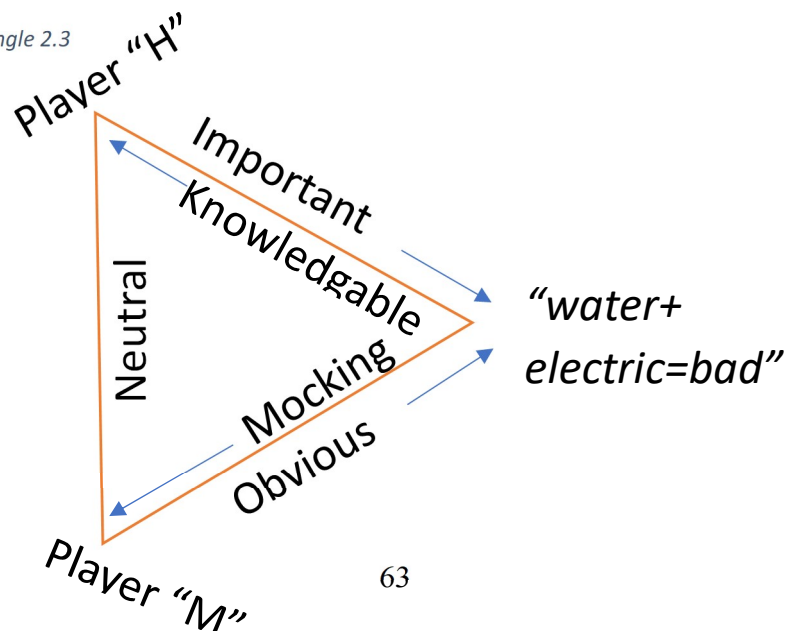
H is evaluating C’s solution to the fire as incorrect, disaligning them, and warning M of this detail.

Figure 9. Triangle 2.2



However, while water is obviously a terrible solution to electrical fires, real or otherwise, foam is a water-based solution. It is technically not as bad, but still not an actual recommended method of extinguishing them! The mere attempt of H, knowingly or not, to clarify C's suggestion is itself funny to M, the original animator. They state: "who[a] we got a scientist here folks." This essentially confirms the fictitious nature of the fire, as well as sarcastically mocking H as a nerd to the rest of the team ("folks" shows this). While this is mocking H for self-seriously analyzing a fraudulent situation, it does not address the actual solution, and maintains a neutral alignment.

Figure 10. Triangle 2.3



4.2. Affective Humor and Dramatic Speech

4.2.1 “Mine Opponent”

- 1 U: Mine opponent, the knave, hath departed my lane hastily! Clutch tight to the warm embrace of the tower, lest you be caught by that most pernicious evil: the gank
- 2 L: wtf mid no ss?

This example is very brief, even briefer than the previous two examples, but nevertheless concisely encapsulates a host of factors critical to stance construction. U’s lengthy initial utterance is a mock historical English attempt to signal to the other players that there is a threat on the map and to be careful. Recall from the last dataset that players are often assigned to one of the three lanes located on the map. Consequently, the opposing team similarly divides their forces (as part of a strategy that has been accepted as the most viable and consistent approach in *LOL*). This means that each of the players in a match are often “guarding” at least one of their opponents, akin to that same function in sports like basketball, soccer, and hockey.

U’s initial statement (“mine opponent, the knave, hath departed my lane hastily”) expresses that an enemy player, ostensibly the champion U is assigned to be “guarding,” has “[hastily] departed” their own lane. The second part of this initial communication warns U’s teammates to “clutch tight” to “the tower.” This is in reference to another game-specific mechanic, whereby each lane in *LOL*, as

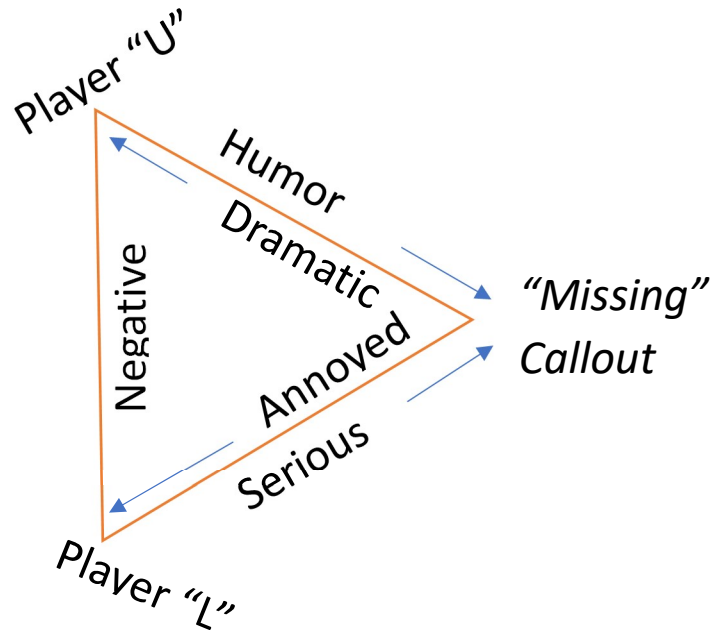
in other MOBAs and games within the “tower defense” genre, is protected by multiple defensive towers, which automatically target and fire at enemy players within their detected range. These towers must fall if the enemy base is to be attacked in earnest. By “clutching tight” [to the tower], players protect themselves with the additional supporting fire being provided by their towers.

The last element of U’s message is the threat presented by failing to heed their advice: the “gank.” “Ganking” occurs when an overwhelming force ambushes a smaller unit, typically a single player. This has been understood as a backronym, becoming “Grant Absolutely No Kindness” (“G.A.N.K.”). But while website discussions and gaming slang dictionaries may disagree at points, the general consensus is that the word comes from a portmanteau of “gang” and “kill,” and was borrowed into gaming from street slang. So in total, U is saying, “watch out, there’s a missing enemy player. You may want to stay near the tower so that they do not catch you unawares.”

L responds to U’s message with “wtf mid no ss?” This translates as “what the fu** middle lane, no switching sides?” L is criticizing the “mid” player (or more specifically, U) for failing to notify them that the player U was responsible for, inside of the middle lane they were guarding, was “missing” or unaccounted for, and therefore a potential threat to other lanes. Technically, U did in fact relay this information, but used a sort of mock historical Early Modern English (invoking “poetic” or “classic” English speech, often drawing from the time and works of Shakespeare), and by doing so, failing to clearly communicate the important warning in a manner easily understood by their teammates. One may say that U was guilty of violating both Grice’s maxim of quantity (by saying more

than was necessary), and of manner (by being prolix and opaque). In sum, U failed to properly warn their teammates, even though their words technically fulfilled their role.

Figure 11. Triangle 3.1



This exchange is shown in Figure 10 (above). U’s use of mock historical English/EME introduces the stance object (in this case, the source of L’s misunderstanding), but from U’s perspective, this is only playful game-talk, similar to the animal documentary-style narration invoked in the “Neckbeard” example from dataset 1, or the mock Spanish attempted in Example 4.3.1. Many modern games feature customization, purchasable costumes or “skins,” and seasonal events featuring a host of styles and appearances, and U’s choice of dialogue may very well be influenced in part by that game feature. L finds this warning unintelligible, and is also annoyed by U’s apparent failure to warn (indicating a lack of seriousness in gameplay conduct), firmly establishing a negative alignment between the two.

4.2.2 “Tainted Love”

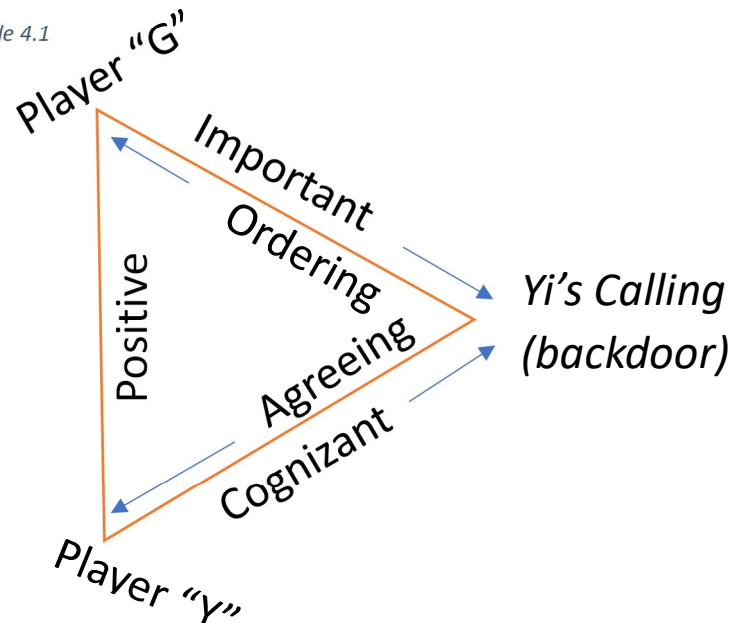
- 1 G: [56:53]: were down like thirty kills. Only once chance, yi go bd while we defend
- 2 Y: [57:10]: Understood, my friend. Time to Yi. If I do not return, tell Rengar... I love him
- 3 R: [57:24]: fuk u
- 4 Y: [57:29]: As ever, love is cruel. I am off!

In this next example, player “G” requests that teammate “Y,” their ace in the hole, do what they can to stave off a loss, while they defend. G is hoping that the team’s defense will stall the enemy and buy Yi time to reach a sufficient power level to single-handedly clean up, and pull victory from the jaws of defeat. G explains: “were down like thirty kills. Only one chance, yi go bd while we defend.” Being “down like thirty kills” is virtually a death-sentence in *League*, as the other team will be so strong that the gap is almost impossible to close. G, knowing this, asks Yi to “go bd,” or “back-door” the enemy team. While the rest of the team holds them off, Yi will sneak behind them, enter their basically undefended base, and try to take it from them. Since the enemy team will be occupied on offense, G is betting on the fact that they won’t be able to reorganize their forces and rush home to stop Yi before the task is accomplished and the game is won.

Yi responds, “Understood, my friend. Time to Yi.” in line 2, acknowledging the gravity of the situation and what must be done. “Time to Yi” is a play on the champion’s name, “Master Yi,” verbalizing the title as a reference to Yi’s reputation as a champion who becomes so powerful by game’s end, they can basically carry their entire team

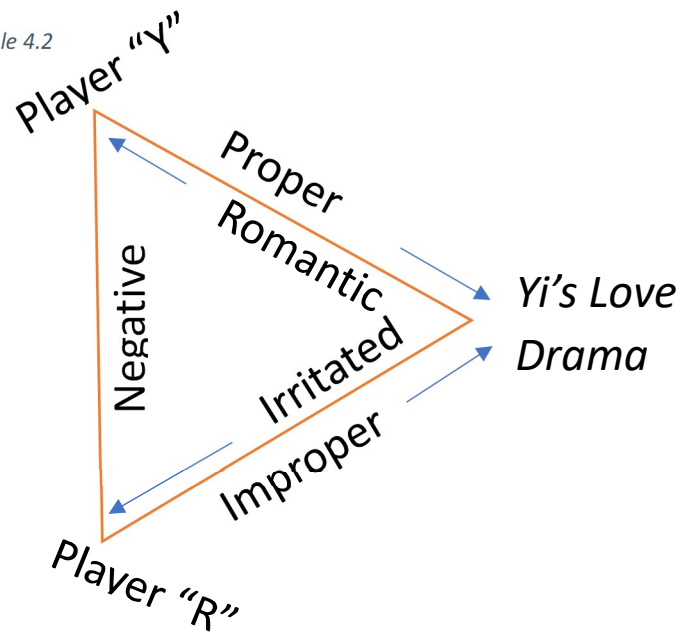
(hence, “Time to Yi.”) With the stakes known, Y adds the caveat, “If I do not return, tell Rengar... I love him.” This is invoking dramatic tradition where desperate action, seen as a “suicide mission,” is dramatized by confessions of love, adding dimension to the spectacle. Dramas and soap operas regularly make use of this kind of confession, and twist-taking, in order to heighten the stakes and the audience’s investment. This first exchange shows the animator, G, as stressing the importance of Y’s action, and positions themselves as “ordering” Y to fulfill their duty. Y understands, agreeing with the stakes, and accepting the mission G gave them, positively aligning the two players:

Figure 12. Triangle 4.1



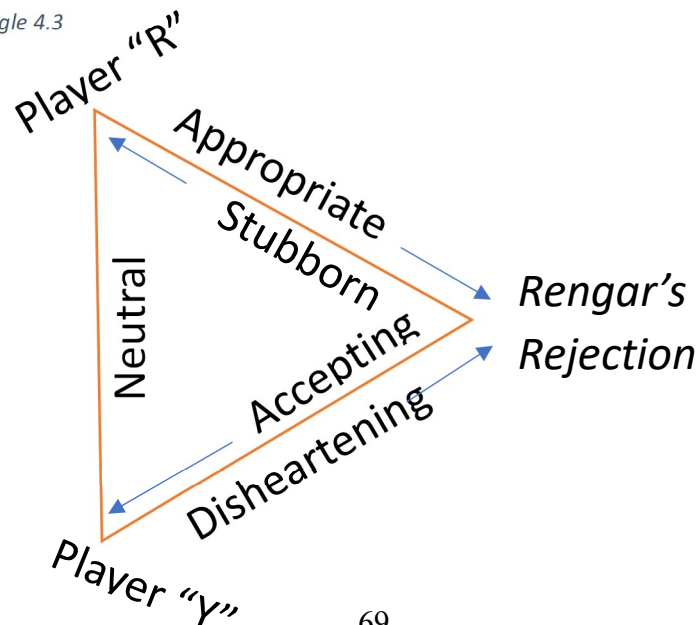
Rengar, meanwhile, is not having any of it, and flatly addresses Yi’s advances, responding, “fuk u” in line 3. While M (jokingly) thought it prudent to include their pining for R’s love, positioning them as “romantic,” R clearly does not agree, and is unwilling to play along with the joke. Their flat rejection of M’s proposal shows their view of the declaration as improper, in manner and timing, and demonstrates annoyance and disalignment at the prospect of Yi’s love.

Figure 13. Triangle 4.2



Y's response "As ever, love is cruel" in line 5 continues to play with their dramatization of events, invoking the inevitability of Rengar's rejection (the hand of fate, "love is dead," etc.). However, in the final phrase of their statement, Y tells the team, "I am off!", showing that despite R's refusal, Y is still willing to accept their solemn duty and go on a solo mission. While they are clearly disheartened by the way events unfolded, they are accepting of their responsibility. Though they disagree with R's decision, they move past it, showing a neutral alignment with R.

Figure 14. Triangle 4.3



4.2.3 “Lots of Feelings”

- 1 G: [13:23]: STFU NOOB NO HOMOS ON RIFT
- 2 A: [13:31]: If there are no homos on rift, why can I charm Riven?
- 3 R: [13:34]: i just
- 4 R: [13:38]: i just have a lot of feelings, okay

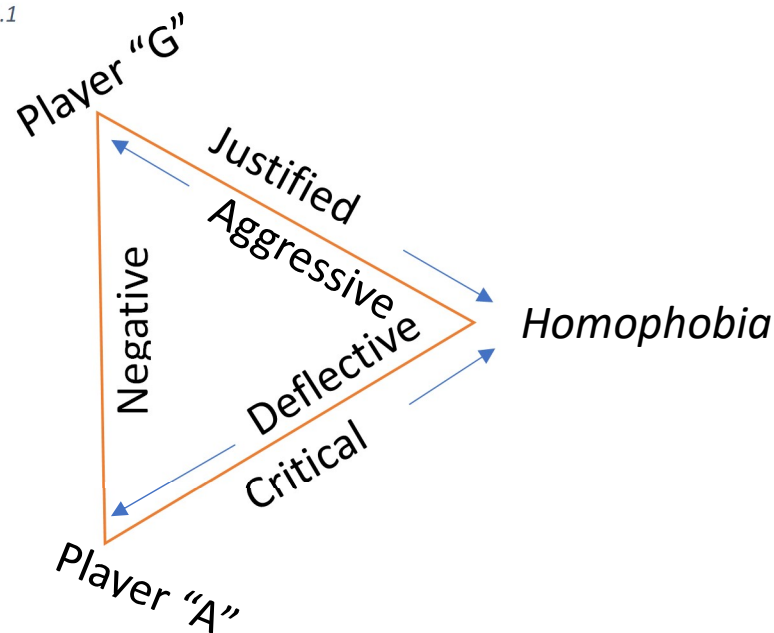
As a final example of “Affective Humor and Dramatic Speech,” this set illustrates humor’s potential to deescalate and defuse contentious situations. In line 1, player “G” aggressively animates the conversation through the statement “STFU NOOB NO HOMOS ON RIFT.” In addition to telling the target player to “STFU” (“shut the f*** up”) and calling them a “noob” (short for “newbie” or novice), their statement is in all-caps, which in Internet speak is equivalent to shouting or yelling (Mallon and Oppenheim 2002) increasing the investment G has in the statement (exclamation). The second part of their sentence is, “NO HOMOS ON RIFT,” which also features dual implicature. “Rift” is a shortened form of “Summoner’s Rift,” the setting of *League of Legends*. Whereas other MOBAs may feature multiple maps, with similar mechanics and features, *League* games always inhabit this one area, meaning experienced players should be intimately familiar with this map, as it is the only one.

The statement “NO HOMOS ON RIFT” is representative of a social phenomenon known as *gatekeeping*. In essence, gatekeeping refers to a member of a community excluding others by merit of their own knowledge, opinions, or personal qualities. As with “isms,” there are many different kinds of exclusion. There is epistemic gatekeeping, where people cannot participate in a discussion or community (according to the animator) unless they possess a minimum level of knowledge. Things can quickly escalate into

other forms, of course, with racist, sexist, etc. gatekeeping commonly occurring in particularly online communities, where “keyboard warriors” may feel emboldened by the lack of repercussions and face-to-face contact to vent hatred and superiority. In this particular case, the manner of gatekeeping is homophobic, as the slur “homos” demonstrates.

Player “A” witnesses G’s aggressive action, and recognizes the stance object as homophobia. Rather than getting upset, calling them names, and responding in kind, A instead questions the rhetoric of G’s statement. In line 2, they say, “If there are no homos on rift, why can I charm Riven?” While A’s true thoughts are unknown, their question suggests a criticism of G’s statement, as well as the need for clarification. They therefore deflect G’s aggression, creating a negative alignment, and position themselves as such, below:

Figure 15. Triangle 5.1



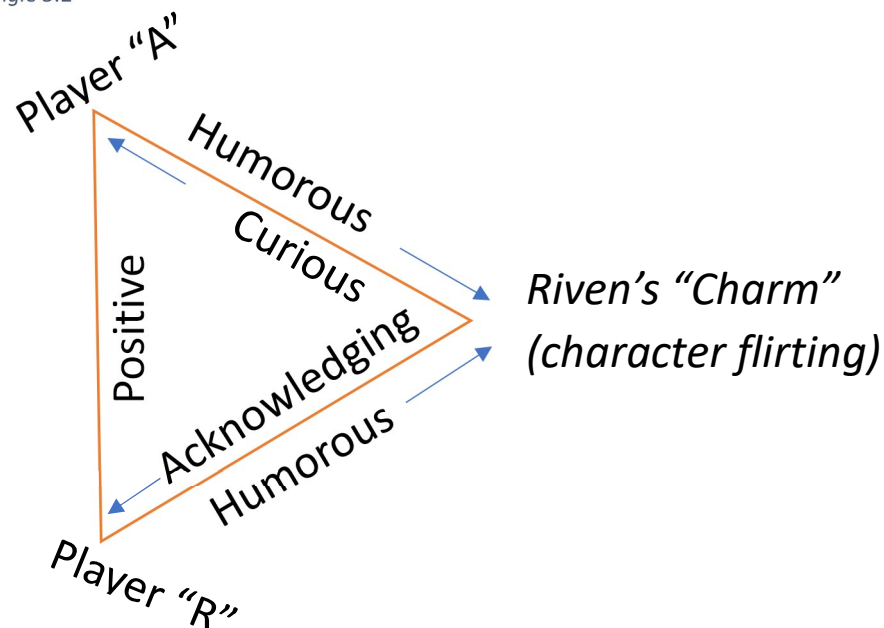
Player “R,” the “Riven” in this situation, responds to A’s questioning of G’s blanket statement. R says, “i just... i just have a lot of feelings, okay?” This is acknowledging a fact that A posited in their own statement: both A and R’s characters are

female. A's mention of "charm" is a reference to the character, Ahri's, ability, *Charm*.

The description of this ability reads: "Ahri blows a kiss that charms the first enemy hit for x seconds and deals x (+60% of ability power) damage." This ability, and its image, is iconizing the physical action of blowing a kiss, and the name, *Charm*, is implying the ability of the blown kiss to emotionally affect the target. Therefore, A is implying that, as a female champion, using the *Charm* ability on another female champion is symbolic of gay love. This quite literally flies in the face of G's gatekeeping, as it shows that "homos" can in fact be on Rift.

R is directly playing along with A's introduction of a humorous rebuttal to G's statement, admitting that they "have a lot of feelings." They go along with the humor through their evaluation, and position themselves as acknowledging what A is doing, creating a positive alignment:

Figure 16. Triangle 5.2



This exchange shows how initially aggressive displays can be subverted through humor and wordplay, defusing tension and protecting a play-space from hurtful behavior.

4.3 Player Prestige and Character Dynamics

4.3.1 “Habla Espanol”

- 1 L: wth we have teemo going top
- 2 M: I have faith in you teemo
- 3 M: maybe he’s a secret pro, give him a chance
- 4 T: alguna abla espanol
- 5 M: NOOOOOOOOOO

In this second example, the interaction occurs between three teammates. The first line contains some game-specific commentary in addition to an accusation L is making against T. While T is not yet a participating interlocutor, they are still an actor, as their in-game movement is what triggered L’s concern. This line reads, “wth we have teemo going top.” This specifies the in-game action in question. When playing *LOL*, the map (the environment/battleground the players’ avatars exist and act within) is divided so that each team spawns in an opposing corner of the map – typically, as in this case, southwest and northeast. Three “lanes” or highways connect these bases, with two paths running along the bounds of the exterior area, and a third running straight through (diagonally) as the most direct, but also most dangerous route. This map design forces players to develop strategies to locate a percentage of their team effort in all of the lanes. Normally, failing to do so leaves a path vulnerable to attack, one which will lead straight back to their headquarters and potentially a losing match.

Here, L is remarking that “teemo” (one of the character/champions the players may select as their avatar) is “going top.” This implies that teemo (T) is not meant to be going to the top lane, as they are needed elsewhere. However, they are clearly doing so

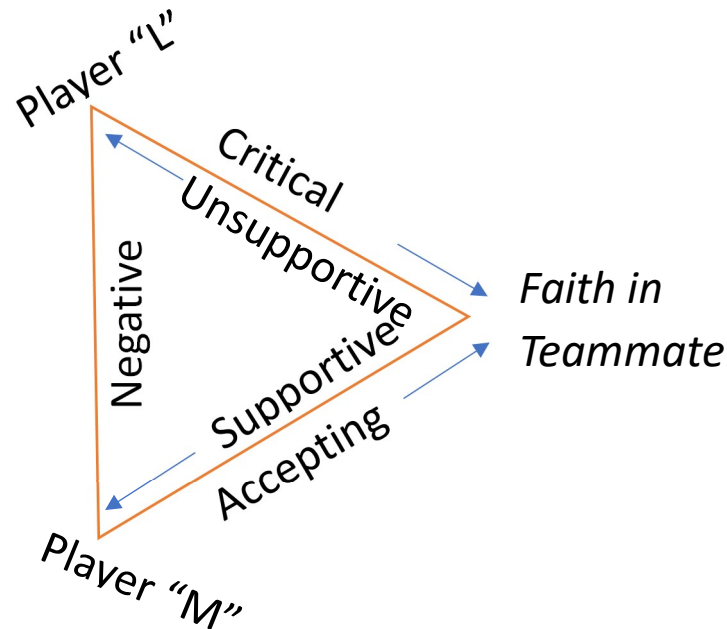
anyway, against at least L's wishes, clearly frustrating them, as highlighted by "wth" (what the heck). This criticism is intended for the team directly, while indirectly communicating to T as well: while T is not being addressed head-on (as one could do with a private message to avoid embarrassment), their actions are, presenting a situation where L is essentially "hanging them out to dry." This conscious choice to publicly shame Teemo's action by calling attention to it, rather than message them directly to give them a chance to explain themselves/correct their mistake, sets the tone for the interaction.

In Line 2, M, another teammate, chooses to defend T's action: "I have faith in you teemo" (addressing the offending player directly). Against L's addressing of the perceived mistake, rather than the player, M makes the choice to speak to T, but given that this is already public, uses the all-chat function, placing their message as a response to L's criticism. M then reinforces this belief by implicitly addressing the other teammates, L included: "maybe he's a secret pro, give him a chance." Rather than simply believing in T, M is referring to the possibility that T's actions are not a mere mistake, but rather a deliberate choice as part of a smarter strategy that L and the rest of the team are not yet privy too, posturing T as a "secret pro," and not to underestimate their move.

This means that the first three lines already have the necessary elements to construct a stance triangle for this interaction. The stance object may be identified as the "faith in teammate" (specifically, T). L is clearly critical of T's action, making their evaluation an absence of faith in their teammate. M, on the other hand, is defensive of T's actions, outright stating their faith in T, meaning M's evaluation demonstrates the presence of faith in their teammate, putting them at odds with L's evaluation. As a result,

L and M have a negative alignment, as the opportunity for solidarity of opinion that L presented, which came at T's expense, was rejected by M, choosing instead to side with and vouch for T, consciously creating a negative alignment with L's statement.

Figure 17. Triangle 6.1



However, in Line 4, T apparently disrupts this existing relationship by writing what at surface level appears to be Spanish. However, this Spanish statement, “alguna abla espanol,” is not only misspelled, but ungrammatical. While this may be attributed to a typo or accidental speech, the scenario surrounding this expression makes it more likely that T is intentionally using Spanish, even broken Spanish, as a response to their teammates conversation surrounding T's actions. What this would mean, is that it is an attempt at a non-English language, in what has thus far been an English language interaction. The intent here, appears to be a “distancing” of themselves from the standard established by the existing conversation, but not for the purposes of independence or disagreement. Instead, this usage reflects a deliberate act of “playing dumb.” In this circumstance, there are two forces acting on T – each of the interlocutors so far, L and M.

L is critical of T's actions, in a public format, while M is putting their own reputation (as a teammate and player) on the line by speaking in defense of T, finding some reasoning for their actions. T appears to be aware of this, but instead of defending themselves, going after L, or thanking M for the support, T chooses to say, "alguna habla espanol." In Spanish, this would be ungrammatical, and would most closely resemble "some speak Spanish." Is T failing to accurately recall actual Spanish phrases, such as "Aqui se habla español," (Spanish spoken here) from a store sign or other familiar format? If so, they may be attempting to reconstruct the language or direct phrase, but missing the mark.

What this still leaves out, though, is why T would be failing to construct a Spanish phrase, loosely translating to "speaking Spanish" or perhaps "speaking some Spanish," in a conversation which had to this point used exclusively English speech? The most logical explanation, given the data, the circumstance, and the format this interaction occurred in, is that T is implying that they cannot understand the conversation, as they "speak Spanish," and accordingly, not English. However, their construction suggests that they do not in fact speak Spanish, so the move to pretend to suggests that they DO understand the English speech, but are playing along as if they do not. This is may be an equivalent to sticking a finger in each ear, closing your eyes, and saying a long series of "la-la-la-la-las" to indicate you do not want to listen to something being said.

Although this analysis tries to make sense of T's Line 4 "mock" Spanish in the context of the "faith in teammate" stance object, it also triggers a stance object change to "language switching." When this occurs, it brings with it a new set of evaluations, positionings, and relationships among the actors. M has previously approved of T's action in Lines 2 and 3, but now responds to this new performance of language fraud, with a text-loud "NOOOOOOOOO," which must be taken as a rebuke of T's language

switch, and is the most overt clue that a new stance object has arisen. This use of Spanish, like the “gotcha” of “neckbeard,” is playful, and that is indicative of the labeling given here, to both T’s evaluation and positioning in Figure 18. M, however, clearly positions himself as dismissive of this language change, and even appears shocked by T’s use of Spanish in the conversation. This shapes a newfound negative alignment between the two, opposing the earlier faith M had in T.

Figure 18. Triangle 6.2

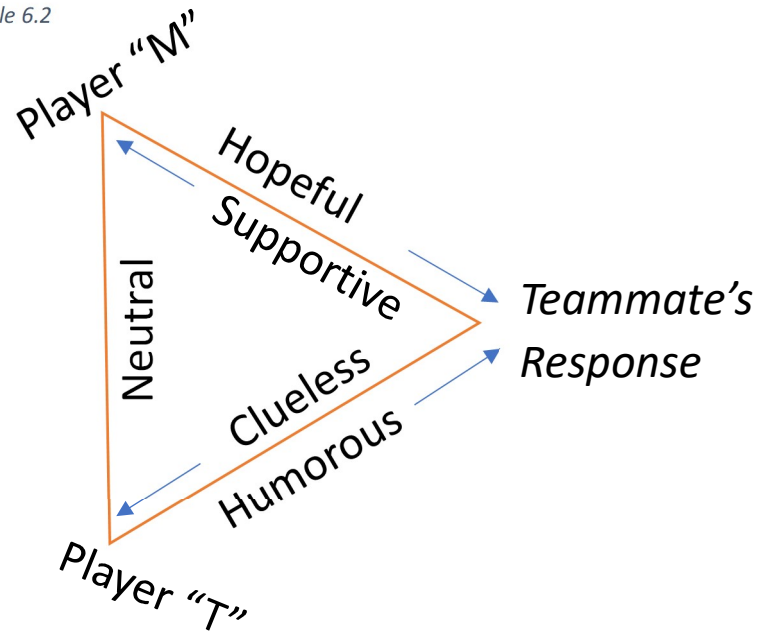
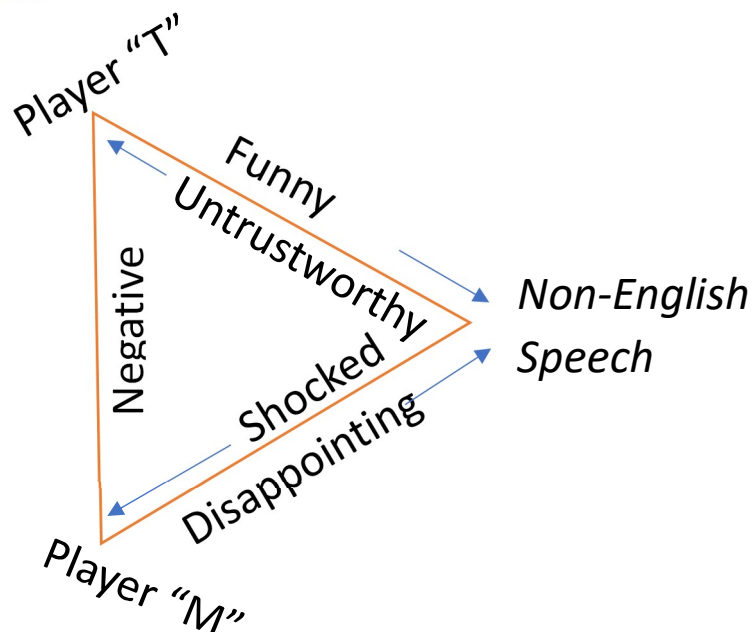


Figure 19. Triangle 6.3



The above diagrams (particularly Figure 19) show the use of and reaction to the Spanish language invocation. Although T's use is recognizably "playful," this usage feeds into an existing history of mock forms of Spanish in the United States among non- or non-fluent speakers, and this may factor into T's stereotypical perception of the language (and perhaps by extension, the culture and people as well). In a study of such use, Hill (1999) suggests the following:

Mock Spanish, exhibits a complex semiotics. By direct indexicality, Mock Spanish presents speakers as possessing desirable personal qualities. By indirect indexicality, it reproduces highly negative racializing stereotypes of Chicanos and Latinos. In addition, it indirectly indexes "whiteness" as an unmarked normative order (680).

T's mockery of non-English speech (in a game population more often associated with South Korea and other non-English speaking countries) could be indicative of a larger linguistic bias present within the game's community, though this is impossible to tell from just one account. What this mockery does show, however, is the role of players' culture and language in how they are perceived by other players, even teammates, and their function within the game. Drawing the assumption of direct correlation between a player's language and their skill at the game demonstrates this underlying bias.

4.3.2 "eBay"

- 1 N: [All][16:32]: Haha the ebay is strong with this "diamond" Fizz

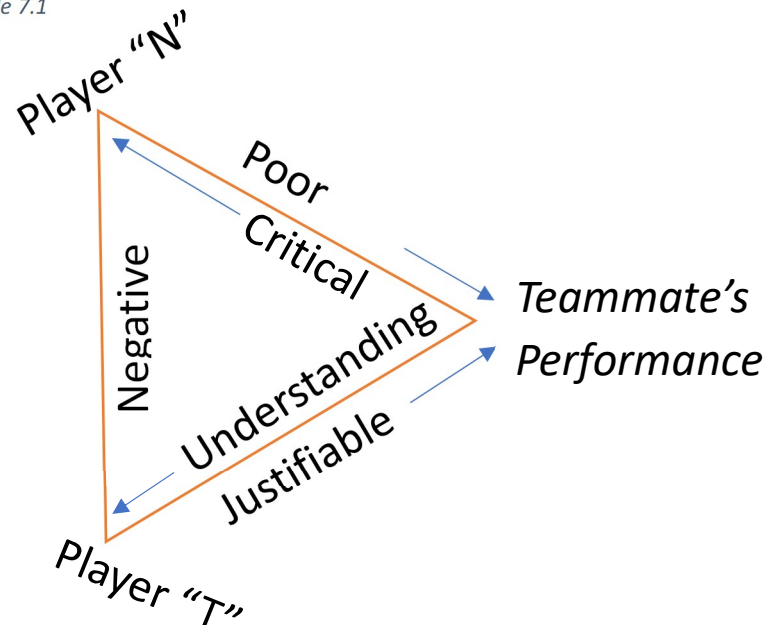
- 2 T: [All][16:44]: anyone can have a bad game stop blaming him
- 3 F: [All][17:05]: well, actually I bought this account

This second example features another argument between teammates. In this interaction, much like the preceding example, the object of conversation is a player's ability, and their teammates' faith in them. This case, however, features "N" accusing their comrade, Fizz ("F") of buying their account. N points out that player F has a diamond ranking, a tier only reached by players with a near-spotless record, consistently winning match after match and performing well in the large majority of their games. N also says, "the ebay is strong," a likely reference to a phrasal template originating in a major phrase from pop culture – "The Force is strong with [this one]/[you]" from the *Star Wars* franchise. This is implying that player F actually purchased the account of a more skilled player, and is displaying this fact through their own poor performance, as a "diamond" player would be much more skilled and help carry the team. This demonstrates N's evaluation of F's performance as poor, and shows their criticism.

Player "T," in a similar manner to player "M" in the "Habla Espanol" example, defends their teammate, and their statement can be broken into two parts. In the first half, T explains that "anyone can have a bad game," suggesting a universal potential for players of any skill level to have a bad match here and there. This implies that F may still be a good player, who skillfully earned their ranking, but is just having a rough time, for whatever reason. This also ties into multimodality and the real world, as non-diegetic factors might be impacting their performance (bad news, a headache, computer lag, etc.). This means that T is evaluating their teammate's performance as something which can be explained, or justified, and not to jump to conclusions just yet. With this evaluation, and

their words, they are positioning themselves as understanding of F's performance, and directly telling N to "stop blaming him" (the pronoun here likely refers to the character's gender) creates an obvious disalignment between T and N.

Figure 20. Triangle 7.1

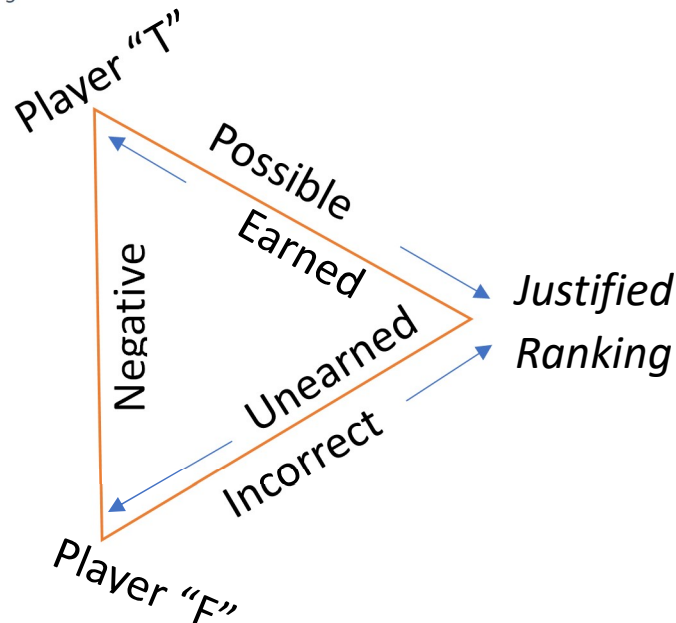


With their skill and legitimacy questioned, player "F" is positioned to respond, and does so. Unfortunately for T, F confirms N's suspicions, explaining, "well, actually I bought this account." Whereas the first stance object focused on F's performance, as a justification for N's criticism of their ability and accusation of buying their account, the justification of their ranking becomes the focus in this latter third of conversation. F's confirmation that they did indeed purchase the account basically rejects T's defense. While T could have easily gone with the flow and sided with N's accusation, they consciously chose to give F the benefit of the doubt, but were proven wrong when F admitted to their guilt.

Through F's confirmation, T's defense of their teammate is rejected. While T believed in F, F knows their evaluation is incorrect, and explains this to the group. They

know that they did not “earn” their ranking in the traditional sense, and instead bought their way to the top. While this is recognized as a marked quality, as player skill and effort are valuable commodities in the gaming world, the game does not recognize the difference – as long as someone signs into an account, they are that person. This represents a gap in the game’s own matchmaking, as anyone, even hackers, can easily take on the appearance of whichever account they control. Nonetheless, this revelation refutes T’s statement, and creates a disalignment between the two parties, validating N’s initial statement, as can be seen in the following triangle:

Figure 21. Triangle 7.2



This interaction shows how while players may feel compelled to offer support, and earnestly help their fellow teammates, their faith is not always founded in reality, as many players would rather offer money over hard work for prestige, ranking, and some stars on their profile.

4.3.3 “New Character”

- 1 K: [10:00]: stop feeding zac
- 2 E: [10:41]: zac feeding noob
- 3 Z: [10:58]: sorry guys I’m new at playing him
- 4 S: [11:10]: zac just pull yourself together man

In this last example of the “Player Prestige” section, a team is once again decrying the poor play of one of their fellows. However, this case shows a near-total agreement on the team. In line 1, K accuses Zac (“Z”) of ‘feeding’, a vernacular term referring to players constantly dying and ‘feeding’ the other team. In *League*, the macro-level play is all about a team’s ability to push the enemy base and demolish their headquarters structures, but supporting this, at the micro-level, there are *lane dynamics*. Given the way players are divided amongst the three lanes, there are usually equivalent match-ups, with mid-lane defenders/roamers and top-lane carries dueling for supremacy, while the bottom-lane usually comprises two players per team: a ‘marksman’ champion, and a ‘support’ whose job is to keep the marksman alive. This is because this style of champion has a distinct power curve, beginning weak and having to play carefully, but snow-balling and becoming exponentially more powerful toward the end-game, akin to a Pawn in Chess reaching the end of the board to become a Queen.

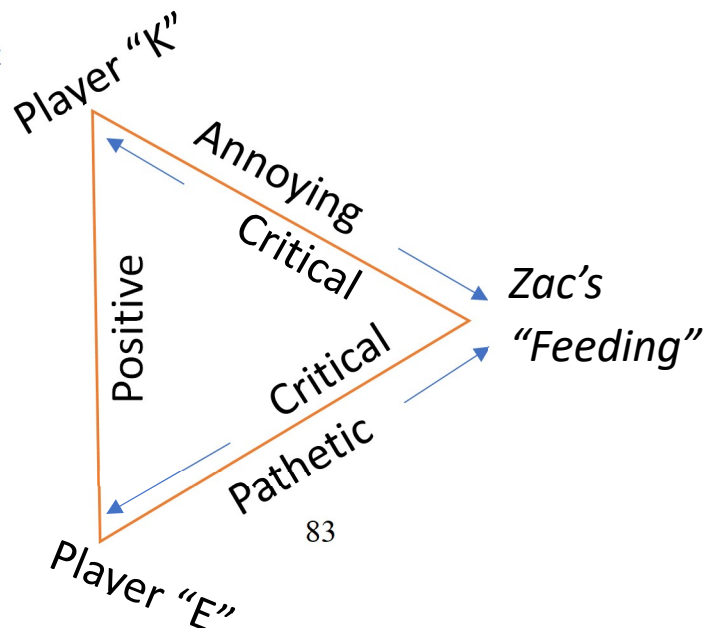
Because the threat of these champions is so high in the long run, it creates a dynamic where players are constantly ‘trading’ damage. As minions advance toward each tower, players are weaving in and out, trying to pick off their opponent, or at least wound them sufficiently to drive them back. They are constantly trading, gaining and giving up ground, with the ideal scenario being a ‘kill,’ forcing the opponent to spend

time respawning and getting back to their lane, and freeing up time to do some damage on the tower, roam to help gank a different lane, etc. Trading is critical, and death carries a steep penalty, so players are often micro-positioning to edge out the enemy, dealing just a bit more damage than what they receive, so that they may win the lane.

When a player dies, however, they aren't just affording their opponent time to control the game – they also 'feed' them experience points. In the long run, this 'XP' (experience) adds up, and repeated death results in a greater discrepancy between their power levels, showing why 'feeding' is such a problem, and a serious accusation, as it essentially labels a teammate as a liability. Being marked as a 'feeder' doubly carries the stigma of being a 'noob,' and a useless part of the team, essentially excluding a player from their own group, and becoming an easy target for blame in the match.

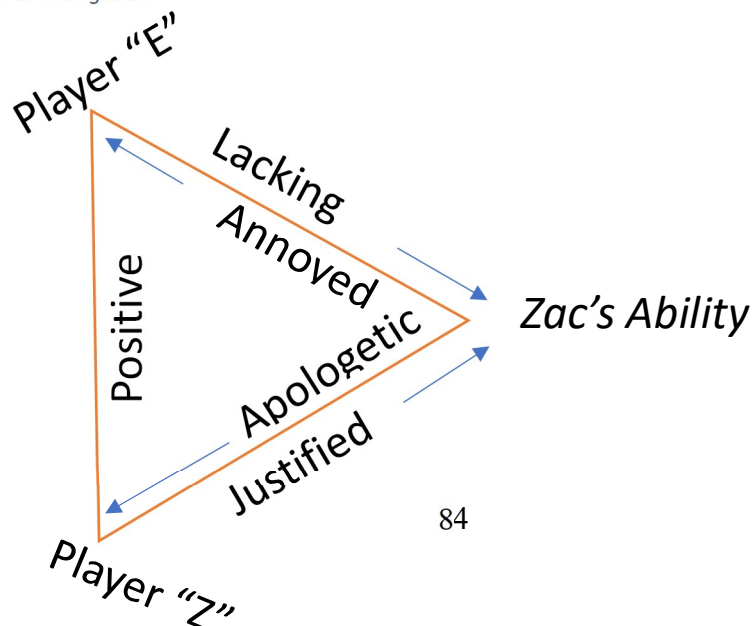
Unfortunately for Z, K is not alone in this opinion of them, as forty-one seconds later, E makes the same accusation, demanding that "zac stop feeding noob." Here, feeding and noob are both used as derogatory labels, doubling-down on the insult and increasing the investment against Z. K makes the initial accusation, but E agrees, albeit with greater severity. While their evaluation is different in the level of investment each player has, they ultimately have identical positioning, and thus, perfectly align, as displayed in the following triangle:

Figure 22. Triangle 8.1



In response to their teammates ganging up, Z makes the decision to admit their fault, and ask for forgiveness. Following their apology, Z justifies their conduct with the statement, “I’m new at playing him.” While ‘noobs’ are usually frowned on by the player-base, especially in ranked, competitive matches where players have to be at the top of their game, this statement adds a new wrinkle to the relationship. Since players have the opportunity to play as over 100 champions, there are often many blind-spots each one has for the other champions. For example, a player proficient at the game and with considerable experience playing twenty different champions is still only tapping less than 20% of the potential character powers. Just as a fluent bilingual speaker, though impressive in their command of two different languages, would still not be considered a polyglot, let alone a master of *every language*, players would need considerable time and experience to dedicate themselves to the mastery and understanding of every champion in *League*. This is why Z’s admittance that they are new to the character is a relatable reasoning, because while player skill is a huge commodity, players cannot be expected to excel with every champion, and a poor showing one game may be due to trying out a new champion, one with whom they are less familiar.

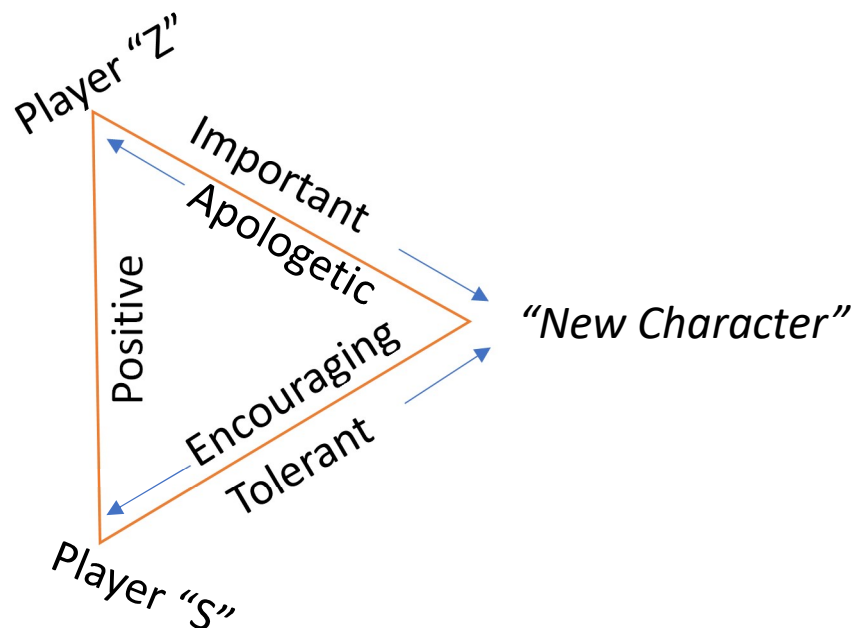
Figure 23. Triangle 8.2



As shown above, Z's admittance and plea for understanding shows that while they do not disagree with the criticism, they believe themselves more justified in their actions. However, they position themselves as apologetic, succumbing to the wisdom of the group, and aligning with them.

This gambit seems to pay off, as player "S," rather than pile on, encourages Z to "pull yourself together" in line 4. This exhibits S' divergent (from the others) tolerance of Z's performance and excuse, instead encouraging Z to refit, rearm, and try to improve. As players are thrown into *League*, regardless of their ability with a few champions, they are motivated to try out additional champions: at the best, they gain a new character "main," and at worst, they become more intimately familiar with their abilities, so that they may better "know your enemy" to defeat them. When S decided to reinforce this, and acknowledge Z's willingness to admit to their faults, it created a positive alignment between the two, and potentially could motivate a change in the team's opinion as well, especially if Z's performance improves.

Figure 24. Triangle 8.3



4.4 Vernacular Punning and Meta-referencing

4.4.1 “It’s a Boy!”

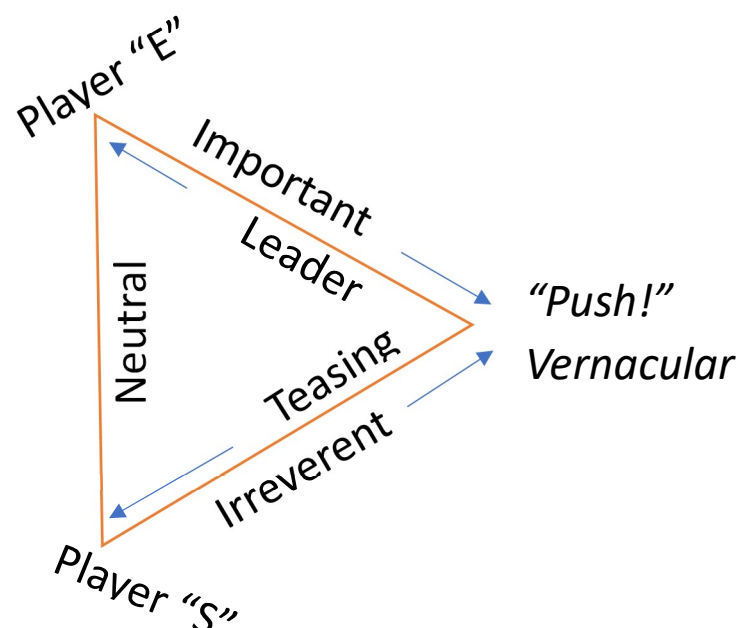
- 1 E: Now push!
- 2 E: Push!
- 3 E: PUUUUUUUUSH
- 4 S: IT’S A BOY

In this example, the dataset only features two interlocutors, but serves to illustrate the humorous reflexive use of in-game knowledge and faux-ignorance of the vernacular to enact wordplay in conversation. In *LOL* terminology, “pushing” is the act of moving up a lane of the map toward the opposing base. As in addition to the aforementioned “towers,” there is also a constant tide of AI soldiers flowing from the bases on the corners of the map, a team must “push” in order to beat back the tide and make it to the enemy headquarters to win the match.

In this example, E is assuming a leadership role, signaling to the team that it is time to advance, by saying, “Now push!” At this point in the conversation they are creating, they are speaking generally to the entire team. And instead of acting passively or consulting with their teammates to determine the ideal time to advance, they take it upon themselves to rally the team, in order to attack as one. E continues to double and triple-down on this command, adding, “Push!,” in line 2, and then again in line 3, “PUUUUUUUUSH.”

S decides to respond to E's assumed command, having otherwise gone unanswered by the rest of the team. Instead of taking the request at face value, however, S resorts to observational comedy in their response, by exclaiming, "IT'S A BOY." This choice demonstrates a reflexive knowledge of the gaming vernacular, but still twists it by comparing S' repetition of the urging to "push" to that of a doctor or doula making the same request of a mother giving birth, in order to deliver one or more children into the world. This feels like a similar mockery as that made by T in Example 4.3.1, but while that exchange featured a form of code-switching in a standardized language environment, S is extrapolating the nature of the game's vernacular to the wider reality, in order to highlight the silliness of saying "PUSH" over and over, and turn a self-serious game mechanic into a comical situation. However, both of these situations are comparable in their respondents' deployment of speech to confound, annoy, or entertain.

Figure 25. Triangle 9.1



In order to construct this triangle, E's positioning must first be observed. What E has done is position themselves in a leadership role of the team, being the shot-caller determining the proper time to gather the entire squad for an offensive push into the enemy's base. In this sense, the object of interaction is the "push" command. This is reinforced by the continuous use of this phrase to hammer home the point. When S eventually responds, they are assuming the responsibility of replying on behalf of the rest of the team, at least in the absence of any other commentary from the potential interlocutors. But rather than signal in the affirmative or negative to E's request, they humorously mock E's language (the usage of in-game vernacular to command their teammates) to comedic effect, as a form of wordplay.

This shows S's positioning as a teasing, irreverent observer, though they also demonstrate the likelihood of an intuitive understanding of the stance object (the "push" command made by E). This also displays a mocking (though neutral) alignment with E. This is because the response contains enough information to imply S's reception and understanding of E's initial statement and repetition of the point - which enabled their response - but does not confirm a decision relevant to that point for the purposes of in-game understanding. This vague non-answer serves as a comedic device to the entertainment of the teammates, though E is less likely to share that sentiment, as it does not contain valuable information as far as the game and strategy is concerned. This shows that the stance object is still viable, as S's response does not refute the recognition of its existence - they simply ignore its in-game implications, using E's speech against them.

4.4.2 “Knock-Knock”

- 1 M [09:11]: noc plz
- 2 M [09:13]: gank bot
- 3 K [09:19]: noc?
- 4 L [09:22]: Noc...?
- 5 N [09:25]: WHO’S THERE

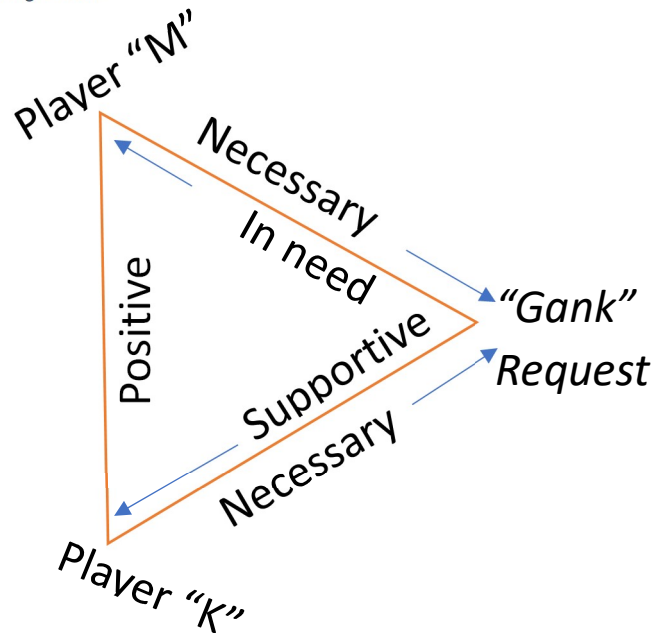
In this last example, a team is questioning the absence of their teammate. The live nature of a *League* multiplayer match creates the expectation that players are at their keyboards, paying attention to the monitors, and playing the game. While real-life ‘intrusion’ can be occasionally expected, the majority of the time, players should be engaged while they are in the match. This means that being “AFK” (Away From Keyboard) is both a problem teams face, and a marker for those accused as inattentive, lazy, uncaring, etc.

In lines 1 and 2, the animator, M, asks their teammate, “Noc” (N), to help them by ganking the bottom lane. In all likelihood, M is playing in bottom-lane, and asking Nocturne to leave their own lane, journey to the bottom of the map, and help M ambush an opponent. Six seconds later, their teammate K chimes in, asking, “noc?” In the space between the two players’ contributions, N did not respond, prompting further questioning as to N’s whereabouts. Not only did they not engage in the planned gank, but they are currently not responding at all, which is a problem for the team.

The stance object here, M’s request of N’s gank, is evaluated as an important action, by both M and K. M is expressing their need for N’s help, and positions themselves as such. K is supportive of this decisions, and the need for timely action, so

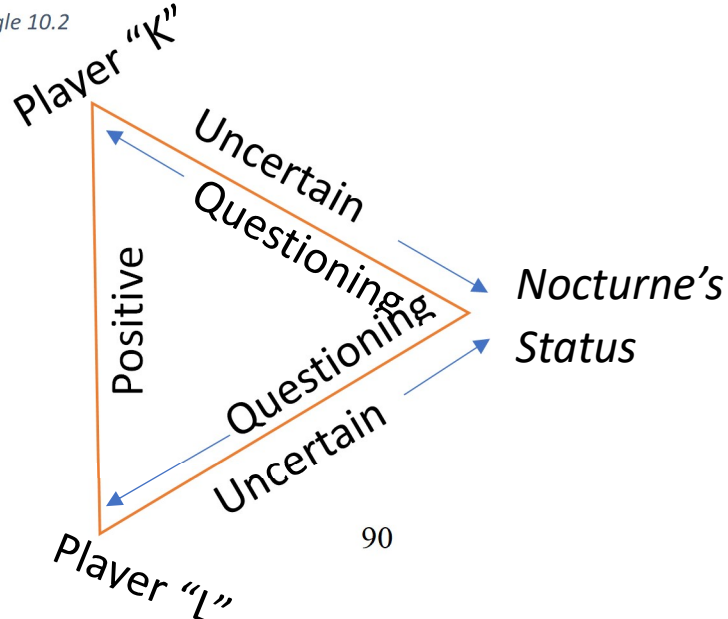
supportively positions themselves with M, by asking of N's whereabouts, creating a positive alignment with M, as displayed below.

Figure 26. Triangle 10.1



Just three seconds later, in line 4, L similarly asks, "Noc...?" While the ellipses, representing the passage of time, show a greater level of investment, L's entry is almost identical to their teammate K's from three seconds prior, and so the two show congruent evaluations and positionings. Both are uncertain of N's status, and they express this by questioning Nocturne's apparent absence. This leads to a positive alignment between the two, as shown in this triangle.

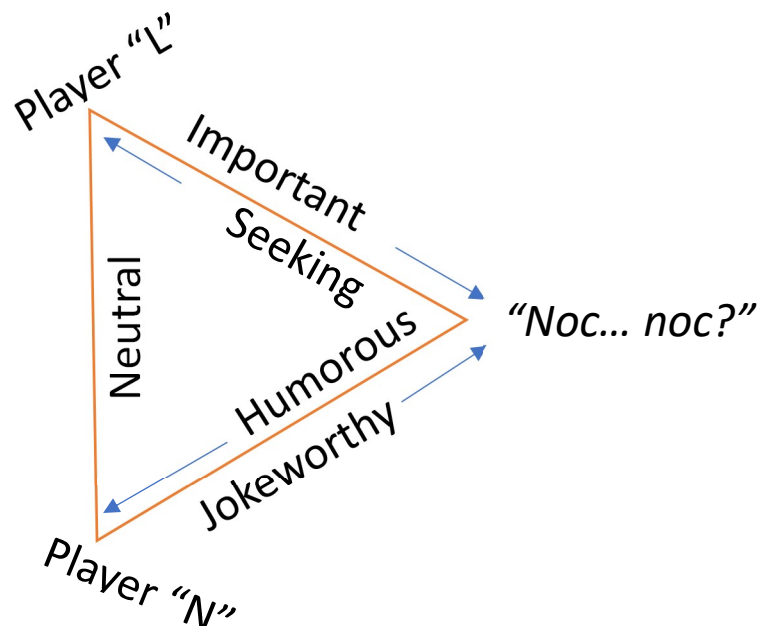
Figure 27. Triangle 10.2



In the final exchange, line 5, N enters the conversation, responding to their teammates concern another three seconds after the last remark. However, rather than address their lack of action, they see the potential for a joke. “noc? Noc...?” The stars must have truly aligned. N can’t resist this opportunity for a “knock knock” joke, and accordingly asks, in all-caps, “WHO’S THERE.” This works on a couple of levels, not only as the expected response to a classic “knock knock” joke, but also because N was themselves “missing” throughout the inciting exchange. The missing player being the one to ask who is there adds another level to an otherwise simple joke.

By taking this action, N is evaluating their absence, an important factor to their teammates, as the prime set-up for a humorous entrance, and positions themselves as finding the whole situation funny. While this does fly in the face of their teammate’s concern, the otherwise innocuous humor is not directly addressing the validity of their absence. If they had apologized, that would have created a positive alignment, while arguing or denying the claim would position them negatively. However, their joke functions as a middle statement, neutralizing their alignment with the team.

Figure 28. Triangle 10.3



This examination ends the data analysis on a humorous note, but reveals the subjective perception of characters, environments, and the game itself. While N's team sought to determine their location, N subverted an admittance of not paying attention not through an excuse (as in Example 4.3.3), but through a humorous de-escalation of the situation. While the ultimate impact of this punning is not included in the sample, the action itself suggests the intersubjectivity of the teammates, and players of shared-experience multiplayer. Games can be seen as competition, with players fiercely embattled to achieve dominance and reign superior, or as silly, fun experiences, meant to entertain and be enjoyed for their quirky, chaotic nature. It all depends on what an experience generates, and what its players bring to the party: games are subjective experiences.

CHAPTER 5. SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND PATTERNING: CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusions

All of the above data, as well as their triangular representations, reflect the reality of the examined speech environment: the game's reflexive function as a stance object, and the frequent identification of and response to such objects, evaluations, and positions. As a general theme, the identification of conversation as "playful" or "teasing" occurs frequently both as a response to the environment, and in the ways in which it forms solidarity (or divisiveness) among the gamers. In all the selected categories, humor functions as a tool through which interactants may create a range of social meaning. As a *defuser*, comedy can be used to de-escalate tension and help prevent a situation becoming worse. This usually manifests as a statement of lowered investment, making light of a potentially serious or contentious topic (see Example 4.2.3: "Lots of Feelings"). On the other hand, humor can be wielded as an *instigator*, opening a conversation at a player's expense (as in Example 4.3.2: "eBay"). This connotes both a social responsibility of the players in a game, and a needs-based relationship of teams to cooperate to maintain unit cohesion, inspiring a dynamic of balancing jibes and "locker-room talk" with positive dialogue.

Additionally, details and mechanics of the game itself observably affect the communication style. Firstly, the different champions accrue enregistered features which often determine their perception by other players. For example, a player using a champion like Pantheon - a Spartan/Greek hoplite character - may invoke the movie *300* with dramatic quotes and boast of their prowess in battle.

Alternatively, a Maokai player - whose character avatar resembles a tree (or more pointedly, a ‘treant’) - may sit still the entire game: because, well, they’re a tree. This effect can determine the sort of “role-play” that occurs within a match of the game, with even the champion’s name playing a role, often featuring in some form of punning or mockery (see Example 4.4.2: “Knock-Knock”).

While these general conclusions show the regular impacts and effects of the game space medium, the identification of the various stance components is much more disputable. Given the potential variability of the hidden, implicit decision-making behind the utterances, via the anonymous format, it can prove almost impossible to know exactly what thought process lies behind the game-chat statements, and their actual intended effect, which can confuse not only the analyst but, as shown above, the other player-interactants. Although the stance triangle can accommodate much of this interactional behavior, at times it can seem like an oversimplification. It would be difficult, for example, to display up to the game-size maximum of ten interlocutors’ simultaneous speech in a clean, concise manner. The ambiguity of player statements and intentions can also complicate the definitiveness of identifying their evaluations and positionings, creating some degree of guesswork.

Even with focused goals designed to attract the players’ attention, *LOL* chat is very often an incredibly chaotic speech environment. The openness of the chat functionality predicts variability and even apparently irrelevant statements and responses. The potential for such variety of communication and lack of serious restrictions leads to some interesting interactions, such as those studied here. For example, the rapid change in stance object can be difficult to adjust to,

both in any formal analysis, and even more so live for the other players, and the fast pace of the game can make interpretation of rapid comments – and the competing evaluations and positionings of other players – much more challenging. Some conversations require a series of additional triangles for just one interaction, complicating the process, but this triangular visualization still functions to display the data and relationships more clearly than other approaches.

The wide array of indirect language used in these interactions can make parsing a player's actions (and especially their motivation) even harder, and thorough game analysis is reliant upon an adequately extensive knowledge of not only game-specific features, but also extra-game events and objects. There is a running theme of sarcastic commentary at play in *LOL* conversations (the acronym alone can be quickly read as a joke in itself), while the enregisterment of character qualities and speech can be just as impactful on how they act as how they are perceived. Metalinguistically, there is inevitably a variable awareness of game speech by the players assigned to a match, and this may result in conversational baiting tactics (or “trolling,” as it is more commonly known: particularly in online interactions, including video games). Attached to this is extra-modal commentary on a player's true appearance or behavior (such as Example 1: “Neckbeard”), which relates to enregistered qualities of the gaming community and the persistent stereotyping of these attributes.

Ultimately, the anonymity of online play - when mixed with the modality of in-game chat and the functional role of players and their responsibilities in a mutual environment, a shared goal motivating the play and its eventual outcome, and the virtual participatory setting's phasal structure (dependent upon successive

matches) - contributes to a unique speech environment, and looking at the stance construction of these interlocutors in this mutual social space can give insight into the factors and behavior of players in conversation, and how these processes and behaviors contribute to the collective group experience.

CHAPTER 6. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE: – A NEW “META?”

6.1 Industry Impact

The repercussions of gaming commentary extend far beyond an individual match instance. Gaming as an industry has grown much, much larger than its humble beginnings, having since evolved into an economic titan. According to the *American Gaming Association* (2018), the gaming industry generates over \$260 billion, and supports almost 2 million jobs. As a global force, video games are a pop-cultural juggernaut. Player characters like *Pac-Man*, the Master Chief from *Halo*, and Nintendo’s pantheon of characters are universally recognizable even outside of the gaming community, and are embedded in the hearts and minds of generations of players who grew up with these favorite heroes and play experiences.

This nostalgia, as with any media or social culture, is heavily inspirational for developers and publishers. The goodwill earned over the last few decades of gaming leaves players wistful for the recreation of their fabled experiences, and by extension, the resurrection of their childhoods. In practice, this has resulted in the “porting” (altering a game to work on a number of different systems than its original release), re-mastering (updated graphics) and re-making of a long list of popular titles. For example, the popular *Age of Empires* RTS trilogy (*I*, *II*, and *III* were released in 1997, 1999, and 2005 respectively) have received re-masters, with the three-year span of 2018 - 2020 seeing the release of their *Definitive Editions*, polishing and re-branding the experience for new gamers, as well as their original players. This can also be said of the *Halo* series, as Microsoft’s flagship title was bundled for generations new and old in *The Master Chief Collection* (2014) on their Xbox One console, preserving the popular titles in the move

away from their native platforms, the Xbox and Xbox 360. The *Assassin's Creed* (2019), *Batman: Arkham* (2016), *Command and Conquer* (2020), *Metroid* (2017) and *Uncharted* (2015) series are just a handful of the games to have received similar re-packaging and updating in the last decade.

When compared to the films industry, gaming gives Hollywood a run for its money. In some places, annual gaming revenue even eclipses that of films. According to the *California News Times* (Martin 2022), the current gaming industry is “bigger than the movie and music industries combined” (Martin). Cross-cooperation between the two based on the success and appeal of game characters and stories has inspired a host of adaptations. The *Resident Evil* movies, *Tomb Raider*, *Uncharted*, *DOOM*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*: all of these are adapted from their roots as popular video game series. While these works have been largely hit-or-miss, the cinematic storytelling inherent to gaming lends itself to other visual mediums crafted around narrative and gorgeous displays. Modern streaming services have also sought to capitalize on these popular titles, with TV show adaptations of *Halo*, *The Witcher* (Andrzej Sapkowski's book series was popularized outside of Europe through CD Projekt Red's phenomenal *Witcher* series), and even the mobile-gaming giant *Angry Birds*.

Crucially, the creators of these games and franchise properties are heavily reliant upon their userbase, or more specifically, their playerbase. While hardcore fans are unlikely to shake their allegiances, and buy titles from specific series as soon as they hit the shelves (and online shops), casual players can be harder to entice. In the early days of console gaming, LAN parties were all the rage – a group of friends would bring their consoles to a chosen spot, link them together, and blast foes for hours of soda and pizza-fueled fun. As platforms have shifted to online connectivity (especially since the rise of

Xbox Live), these experiences have largely disappeared, as there's little need to be at the same location when play is enabled from the comfort of home with an internet connection. Similarly, "couch co-op" gaming, where multiple players in the same real-world physical space can share a screen together, and a feature entire games have built their play experience around, is largely dead. As noted by LaFave (2016), the *Halo* series, once seen as the definitive shared-play experience, dropped local cooperative play with the release of 2015's *Halo 5: Guardians*. This, coupled with the inclusion of then-popular "loot-box rewards" (using a "slot machine" style Random Number Generated [RNG] output of possible items) alienated a large amount of the playerbase, striking a large blow to the developer's reputation and the prestige of the erstwhile mega-hit franchise. This year saw the release of *Halo: Infinite*, which took the fans' complaints to heart, and shaped its experience around the large volume of feedback they received from their last game. While co-op is currently not featured, 343 Industries has promised the implementation of an update before the end of the year, adding back this much-missed feature.

The link between fans and developers varies from game to game, but the acknowledgement of the player community has often proven a critical influence on a game's success. RIOT Games, the developer of *League of Legends*, uses sources such as *Reddit* and player pages to address issues, fix bugs, create skins for overlooked champions, and maintain gameplay balance. However, the size and success of their game creates such a demand for a level of quality that is increasingly hard to sustain. At over 160 player characters, each with their own abilities and interplay, the successful integration of new skill-sets and champion dynamics can be difficult, with repercussions for outliers ranging from slight tweaks to gameplay to completely breaking the balance,

which is critical to a fair, objective arena. As such, developers have to be very careful when making changes to the game, not just as their product, but as a tangible social contract between the player and themselves, and nurturing a positive player-maker relationship can ease these concerns and free up resources for more creative freedom and enriching the gameplay experience.

6.2 Stancetaking in Rapid-Change Conversation and the Future of Communication

The integration of these rapid stancetaking techniques in the ‘profiling’ of player-interactants may become more important for researchers, language analysts, game teams, and the interactants themselves as social media and wider interaction evolves in a virtual format. Recent titles such as *VR Chat* and Meta’s *Horizon Worlds* demonstrate the potential for virtual reality’s impact on mediated communication. According to Meta’s founder, Mark Zuckerberg, the *Metaverse* will evolve the traditional “profile picture,” as, “instead of a static image, there will be 3D representations of you” (Meta), pointing to a dimensional shift in user interfacing and profiles.

Moreover, where is communication trending? As face-to-face speech has given way to telecommunication, and phone calls have largely been replaced by digital speech in other platforms (particularly video games), it can be difficult to predict just where people will be having their conversations next. Popular *YouTube* creator Eddy Burback (2022) points out the potential flaws of wholly committing to VR technology for the future of interaction, satirically explaining:

“Imagine in the reverse – imagine the only way that you could experience the Internet – the only way you could watch *YouTube* videos or go on Twitter or Tik-

Tok – the only way that you could do it is to use a VR headset. What would the next invention for that internet be? I would think, it would be to put it *pulls out smartphone* on a portable device, so you could experience the real world but also use the Internet if you need to; where you don't have to shut-in and be at home... that would be the next step, you'd think" (Burbach 2022: 11:58 – 12:32).

While performative comedy underlies this explanation, as with similar styles of informative video on *YouTube*, Burbach (himself having over 1 million subscribers) highlights an important element of virtual experiences – a detachment, even to the point of vulnerability, of an interactant from events happening in the real world. Though this has always been a large criticism of video games in general, the increased investment in a virtual world, despite warnings from science-fiction, poses a very real potential for the interactive experience to subsume and replace real-world interaction. For language-based communication, this could have huge ramifications, as interactional methods and modes of speech continue to orient toward these virtual and visual formats.

Detachment and loss of sensation as a danger posed by substance-abuse is not a new idea, and media has drawn this comparison before. Comics (Giddens 2017), movies (Gentile 2019, Reinberg 2019), and of course, games (Bachmann 2019) have drawn their fair share of attention as catalysts for unnatural and violent behavior (Huesmann 2009). However, even as play experiences expand and diversify, forecasted realities of dangerous habits and behavior become more recognizable, with technology seemingly trending in the direction of continued immersion, placing people more fully in a virtual environment, at the potential diminishment of their real-world interaction. While this danger is certainly one to watch for, game creators are extremely passionate about their

projects. Indie games, in particular, represent a sphere of experimental design and unfettered creativity that more tangibly blends incredible artistic talent with the kinds of experiences players crave. In the contrast between these independent projects, and large-scale, triple-A game development, an observable truth shows itself just as with any other industry: as a product outgrows its initial base, they risk alienating the people to whom they owe their success.

The player community in *League of Legends* belong to a symbiotic relationship: as they offer their feedback to the developer, RIOT takes note of these suggestions to retool the assets under their control, and together, they shape the overall play experience and success of the game. This commentary does not purely rely on “letters to Santa” through direct contact, but also the observation of gameplay commentary to determine the current dynamics players navigate as they interact with the game. These oft-difficult to interpret interactions, due to the use of coded language, meta-refencing, and game-based vernacular provide an environment where stancetaking methodology can prove extremely useful, profiling player behavior and conduct in-context to understand motivations, opinions, and ultimately, their desired direction and the reasons they want to play the game. Further studies using this methodology could look at contextual samples of game interaction, or take a more ethnographic approach, ala Collister (2008), but using the stancetaking toolkit, and the added dimension of investment (Kiesling 2022) as a refined method of player opinion and inter-personal relationships. For gamers, communication is intrinsic to their understanding of the environment, and multiplayer interaction informs player direction and action.

For linguists, MOBA interaction and gaming communication at large represent an increasingly relevant environment for study as lobby sizes increase and games become

more populated. Gamers' tendencies and responses to their environment are indicative of the directions these experiences are catered to and driving, and these places are hotbeds for language variation and social change. The use of stancetaking and similar methods in these modern arenas, both implicitly and in focused, research-motivated studies, can help to make sense of otherwise intimidating multimodal speech environments. This research, and the further application of stancetaking and specific sociolinguistic approaches to gaming environments, may prove useful for linguists, industry analysts, and gamers themselves - people of all kinds - and at the end of the day, that's exactly who these games are for: everyone.

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