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Navigating Toxic Identities Within League of Legends

Jeremy Thomas Miner
University of Montana, Missoula

NAVIGATING TOXIC IDENTITIES WITHIN LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

By

JEREMY THOMAS MINER

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Dr. Gregory Larson, Chair
Department of Communication Studies

D. Joel Iverson
Department of Communication Studies

Michael Cassens
Department of Media Arts

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Toxicity and Online Gaming Identity

Chairperson or Co-Chairperson: Dr. Gregory Larson

   Toxicity is an inevitable part of online gaming for many individuals that participate in the activity. How individuals navigate this behavior affects not only the community but the players themselves. In essence, online world environments affect the identity of the individual within them. The magic circle separates the gaming world and the real world into two separate and distinct places, however crystalized selves posits that the identity of an individual in one sphere is part of the individual in another. Understanding the connection between these two ideas gives rise to the question of whether or not toxic behaviors in a game carry outside of the game. This study aimed at defining toxicity from the point of view of gamers in League of Legends and then determined whether or not the behaviors from in the game carried outside of the game. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty individuals currently a part of the game League of Legends. Results indicated that participants view toxicity in unique ways but at the same time all share communal definitions of what is toxic. Further, behaviors and identities in game were not as separate as the magic circle describes, with participants indicating that their online identities and behaviors converged with the real world the older they get. Overall, the findings of the study suggest that the real world and play world are more connected than some theories suggest, and that toxicity is a phenomenon that is as unique as it is universal.

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"I've never felt so horrible as a person than when I play this game. I stop playing and forget why I left, and then like the idiot I am, I come back. So thank you, you toxic assholes, for reminding me why I quit."

I wrote this quotation down from a teammate after losing a game of League of Legends. The first reply to this person came from another of our own teammates, "Glad to help!" Then an opposing player replied, "That's just how league works. Welcome to the thunderdome noob." The aggression and insults directed toward this particular player throughout the game were varied and incessant, finally prompting their comment after the game was finally over. Perhaps surprising to some, this interaction represents a common experience that almost every player, if not all players, encounters when playing in this game, toxicity.

Whether from the enemy team, or one's teammates, toxic comments and behaviors abound among gamers in League of Legends (League for short) as well as other games. Looking at the above experience more in depth reveals not only a facet of toxic behavior and what it can cause a player to do and feel in the real world, but it showcases the idea that there is a toxic facet to the identity one adopts within the game of League. But do those behaviors, emotions, and facets of identity from inside the game, carry outside of the game as well? As Wieland (2010) has pointed out, individuals tend to believe themselves to be what others think they are. In other words, "whom one sees oneself as and… whom others see that person as are closely linked" (Wieland, 2010, p. 506). Within game studies there is a concept known as 'the magic circle' (Stenros, 2014), or a space of play that separates the real world and the play world. This theory helps to separate reality and the play world, allowing an individual to act according to a different

set of norms while in the fantasy world, even if those norms go against the norms of reality, such as with negative behavior. I contend that in certain cases, the play world and reality are more connected to one another than the magic circle describes. Thus, toxicity in one realm can affect another, even in a game world.

The idea of toxic behavior is not new to scholarship. One group of scholars define toxicity in gaming as "various types of negative behaviors involving abusive communications directed towards other players and disruptive gameplay that violates the rules and social norms of the game" (Beres et al., 2021, p. 1). I argue that toxicity is communicated uniquely in every sphere in which it is found, with each community's nuances and culture affecting how toxicity is enacted. League of Legends is no different, with unique ways in which toxicity is communicated and viewed. At the same time, there are great commonalities shared in every sphere regarding toxic behavior, and though a specific instance of negativity might appear wholly unique, it nevertheless parallels other instances of negative behavior in different spheres. With the known toxicity levels in League, there is an opportunity offered to observe and understand better the toxic facets of the self, as well as how identities formed within one sphere can potentially bleed into another. Thus, there is a possible link between toxicity and a person's identity/behavior in a game, and out of game behavior and feelings.

Before proceeding, I wish to be clear that I am not saying League is necessarily a bad influence in society. That it does have an influence in the gaming world is evident through the active player base, as since launching in 2009, it has become famous globally with over a hundred million players (Riot Games, 2022). YouTube videos, Twitch.tv, Facebook, and other media sites stream game after game of League, giving it hundreds of

thousands of hours' worth of exposure every day, further extending its impact on the populace. If indeed there is a connection between toxic behavior in a game and an individual's identity, why does it happen and how is this toxicity communicated? What are potentials causes, and does toxic behavior carry outside of the game itself?

The following project is aimed at exploring the relationship between toxic behaviors and an individual's gaming identity, how certain behaviors are uniquely enacted within League, and if toxic behaviors, emotions, feelings, and gaming identity bleed into the real world. This study aims at challenging the concept of the magic circle (Stenros, 2014). While in many instances the magic circle is completely valid, there are instances where the separation of play and non-play may not hold up. Where those lines are is an important question. Is it just an intersection or is it more? The magic circle itself does not speak about how behaviors within fantasy realms and real worlds intersect, and I believe that League is one of the cases where toxic behaviors, emotions, and feelings have the capacity to blur the line between fantasy and reality.

Tracy and Trethewey (2005) introduced the idea of what is called 'crystallized selves', or how identity in an individual is faceted and that there are many identities in a person at once. It is more than just donning a hat and then discarding it for another. Just as all identities are part of an individual, the play world and the real world can connect and the division between them becomes blurry. Thus, the notion of a magic circle in game play as a separation between the game and an outside reality is in tension with the concepts of a crystallized self as well as the idealized self that is impacted by the opinions of others.

To analyze this phenomenon, I conducted a qualitative study of the discourse that runs through the League of Legends player base by interacting with the players themselves. I asked each to describe how they see toxicity within the game, and how the persona they adopt in the game affects how they think and act, as well as if there are any effects after they finish. Interviews with players will be discussed later in greater depth. To analyze the following data, three major theoretical lenses are used. Firstly, the magic circle, (Stenros, 2014) which deals with identity in play spheres versus non play spheres. Next is the idea of crystalized selves (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) combined with idealized selves (Wieland, 2010), both theoretical lenses that help one to view how identity and behavior interact.

Context for Online Gaming and Identity

The Magic Circle

The metaphor of a magic circle is commonly used in gaming studies. It describes the border that "delimits an instance of playing" (Stenros, 2014, p. 147). Whether or not certain behaviors are acceptable for an individual can be seen in terms of the context of playing. Examples of this idea are shown in physical sports like football games, board games, video games, and more. The magic circle is a space created for playing, a material or conceptual temporary world dedicated to the act apart (Stenros, 2014). The seriousness of reality is replaced by a world of play. It is more than just social rules set up for a game space. "The psychological border set up by adopting a playful mindset and the border set up socially through negotiation often coincide, but they are two different things" (Stenros, 2014, p. 147). In the context of video games, the magic circle explains how an individual can play a game and have their behavior be acceptable in the fantasy realm in

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terms of reality. The sphere in which they are acting is a play world, one with its own rules and norms apart from society. Thus, in this play world, an individual can assume an identity and disregard social norms since the world they are in is different from reality.

One of the ways the border of playfulness becomes established is through rules. Rules are constitutive and they not only regulate the activity of play, but enable it (Stenros, 2014). The magic circle of gameplay is entered into voluntarily. It is "self-sufficient, set apart from ordinary life in locality and duration, and its rules and norms differ from reality" (Stenros, 2014, p. 147). These new rules give gamers their limits and establish the norms of their fantasy play world. Jahn (2016) explained rules as tools for sense making and how "one way to think about rules are as important tools for making sense of hazards, and developing experience is to consider how they are devised and used…" (p. 363). Whether it be sense making of hazards, developing experience, or establishing realms of play versus the real world, rules are integral to the process of a play world. In the context of gaming, rules are created by gaming companies that both allow the player to make sense of their play world, as well as how to navigate through it. However, players also make rules, although many are unspoken, thus players are co-creators with gaming companies. The players' rules also become norms, a differing set of norms that go either congruent or completely against the norms and rules set by game creators.

League is a world bound with rules, many rules being formal, and many others being informal. But League is not a static game and is always changing. Due to the unstable nature of the many rules and norms within it, the individual's play world changes too. Hazards, such as breaking these norms and interfacing with other players

with differing ways of play, are reexamined as an individual adapts to the changing online world. It is the rules that help an individual to navigate hazards, which in certain contexts can be behavior toward other people and their interactions between themselves. Rules shape reality as well as the play world, and in the gaming world, participants as well as creators play a part in their creation.

The philosopher Kurt Riezler (1941) makes two distinctions about the magic circle. First, a social division exists between ordinary life and what he called the 'playworld'. The second distinction is a mental division between serious and playful attitudes. Playful and serious are opposites in his thinking, and there is a clear separation. For him this playworld is separate from the ordinary world and is entered into voluntarily.

During play, there are numerous scenarios that are enacted, and the participant has many roles that they adopt throughout each one (Stenros, 2014). In this way, Stenros builds off of Riezler and dissects the mental division between serious and playful behaviors. A video game is entered into voluntarily, however, within the game there are serious aspects and playful aspects, both of which have intersection and are not always clearly defined. In the general context of gaming, this is alright as the lines between reality and play are meant to be blurred to help create an immersive gaming experience and give a player freedom. Most gaming companies work hard in their world building to further give their players this immersive experience. League is no different and as a game, is a "fantasy world apart" (Stenros, 2014, p. 147) complete with its own rules, all of which give players a unique experience in strategic gameplay, inviting certain identities and playstyles over others in order to win the current version of the game. Due to the online interaction aspect of League, opposing players collide, bringing teams in

direct conflict with one another. While conflict in and of itself doesn't necessarily breed toxicity, a possible byproduct of these online confrontations creates specific gamer behaviors and identities, with facets of toxicity in the gamer identity as a whole. In this way, identities that are created within a play world can be multifaceted (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), with one identity and set of behaviors potentially being toxic. Within the magic circle, players in a fantasy world still create identities within it, possibly multiple. These identities are emergent over time and can be observed as one plays the game, either by stepping into a particular role on a team or playing as a certain character. Whether fantasy or reality, an individual still has a sense of self and an identity that goes along with it. Further, players are interacting with other player identities – that mix of the magic circle, but enacting identities is the interesting part. Does it go here or in the discussion is the question. Maybe raise it here and then explore that interaction.

The Online Disinhibition Effect

One question that arises when speaking about toxicity is how a person can say and do things in an online realm and yet not say and do those things in real life. A concept called the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) helps describe, in part, why toxic behavior manifests the way it does in online realms. The ODE refers to "the perceived freedom an individual feels in online environments to express themselves in ways they would refrain from exhibiting in offline settings due to decreased behavioral inhibitions" (Beres et al., 2021, p. 3). The effect consists essentially of two components, a benign disinhibition and a toxic disinhibition. Benign disinhibition allows us to share feelings with online entities or individuals we would otherwise be hesitant to share with otherwise. It also includes acts of kindness and other generosity that one would otherwise not participate in. This is

showcased in how two complete strangers can open up to each other online and divulge intimate information, while in person that information sharing may never occur. On the other hand, toxic disinhibition expresses itself through hateful and aggressive language, swearing, and toxic behaviors (Beres et al., 2021). Toxic disinhibition has a variable of anonymity with it, as most times an individual is not known when they interact with others online. Interacting together, toxic disinhibition and benign disinhibition combine to create the disinhibiting phenomenon.

Looking through the lens of video games, studies using the ODE focus particularly on the anonymity and invisibility a player has in facilitating either toxic or benign disinhibition (Beres et al., 2021). What is known is that online disinhibition is a predictor of toxic behavior, and specifically that toxic disinhibition is a "more meaningful predictor of toxic behaviors in the context of video games" (Beres et al., p. 3, 2021).

Toxicity

The gaming world is a complex one with many ways in which to express toxic behavior. Indeed, many players think that toxicity is an integral part of gaming itself. There has been research relating specifically to toxicity (Ghosh, 2021; Kwak et al., 2015, Beres et al., 2021), or what some more commonly hear it called as cyberbullying or online harassment (Milosevic, 2016). However, the realm of video gaming is a growing field for communication scholars to explore, and relatively little to nothing is written on how toxicity is communicated nor how toxicity affects player identity in online gaming.

Before moving forward, this study is not focused on whether or not video games cause violence. Current scholarship on the subject is mixed, with some voices claiming

that violent video games cause further aggression in individuals that possess that trait already (Anderson & Dill, 2000), while others find that there are "no strong effects associated with aggression" (Williams & Skoric, 2005, p.228). While League can be classified as a violent game, in that a player must kill another player in order to take their resources, it is not to be grouped with other violent video games containing higher graphic violence, or more immersive violent actions with their corresponding scenarios.

When using the term toxicity, it can be understood as a nuanced term with what constitutes toxicity changing according to the context in which it is seen in. For example, toxic behavior in a multiplayer farming game will look different in both language and action compared to a multiplayer game that is all about war. Due to the broad content of multiplayer games, what comprises a toxic action can change from platform to platform. The term toxicity has been used by social media companies interchangeably with online harassment and cyberbullying (Milosevic, 2016). However, it is not the same as either term but is better understood as "a specific form of peer aggression that is distinct" (Milosevic, 2016, p. 5167). As previously stated, Beres et al. (2021) describes toxicity as "various types of negative behaviors involving abusive communications directed towards other players and disruptive gameplay that violates the rules and social norms of the game" (p. 1).

A question that can arise with this definition, which adds to the complexity of toxicity, is 'does everyone view the same behavior as toxic or not?' What exactly constitutes abusive behavior? What about micro aggression? In some senses, toxic behavior can be very receiver based, with one person viewing an action as toxic, while another may not. It is perhaps because of this that the player base of League has a

difficult time coming up with a solid definition of toxicity. However, what Riot, the company that produces the game, identifies as toxic behavior is simply defined as "direct or indirect verbal or behavioral aggression" (Cook et al., 2019, p. 294). This is a broad definition of toxicity, and because of this there is significant tension between the player base when complaining to Riot, because what the player base sees as toxic isn't necessarily what Riot sees as toxic. Essentially, according to whom is a behavior toxic, Riot or to the players? The play world that Riot has created is co-authored in the norms that, when broken, constitute toxic behavior, and there is a disconnect between the masses and the main creator on what exactly that entails. Whether the norms broken by a player are those set by Riot or by the player base is hard to determine, but navigating what is and isn't considered toxic behavior is a juggling act every player will have to manage.

While toxicity can be generally defined, determining what behavior is offensive or not can be a tricky business. Due to this, I am led to ask if there isn't a more complete definition of toxicity that might include the more nuanced aspects of what is perceived as toxic behavior. For example, saying "ok" or "good game" shouldn't be considered toxic, as those are inherently positive terms, but through in-game culture, such words can be toxic. Beres et al. (2021) provided a useful definition of toxicity, which I will use going forward with the addition of one thing: the perspective of the individual, which takes into account the receiver in an interaction. The unique nature of how toxicity expresses itself from game to game necessitates additions to the definition to better express the nuances of toxicity. An example are positive comments that come across in text chats as sarcasm, which can be just as grievous as any negativity in the right contexts. Though Riot has its

own definition of toxicity and which behaviors it deems toxic, the player base may very well have a very different view of what is toxic, holding some of the same views as Riot itself while expanding it in other areas according to the individual. Players look at toxicity through their own personal lens as well as what the community defines as toxic, which is why I put a purposeful addition to the definition to look at receivers, allowing for behaviors that are seen as toxic by a culture or community to be defined as such, even if those behaviors aren't inherently toxic by themselves. I want to know what *individuals* understand as toxic communication from their perspective, whether it be positive actions and words taken as sarcasm, negative actions and words, or what they are told to view as toxic by the community.

Much of the relatively sparse literature that studies the phenomenon of toxicity involves only the data collected by gaming companies or reported by the player base on websites such as Reddit (Ghosh, 2021; Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015). One notable study on toxicity that focused on League of Legends was in 2015 by Kwak, Blackburn, and Han. Their data came from the disciplinary reports provided to them by Riot through the company's Tribunal system, or the entity they created to deal with toxic behavior and punish players accordingly. This Tribunal is "a crowdsourcing system to make decisions on whether reported players should be punished or not" (p. 2). With this information, they were able to test hypotheses dealing with individual player traits, behavior regarding a player's own team and the opposing team, and impacts on socio-political factors, all surrounding a player's decision to report another to the Tribunal. They found that on average, League players do not actively report toxic players. For the Tribunal to review a case of toxic behavior, a player needed to be reported a few hundred times. (Yes, a *few*

hundred times.) Of those that were reported, one in four were deemed toxic by the Tribunal and consequently penalized. Of note is that the Tribunal is an entity of Riot made up by their own employees. That so many reports of toxicity were filed by the community, only to have three out of the four considered not toxic, speaks to what the players define as punishable toxic behavior versus what Riot views as punishable toxic behavior. If League were a game one paid to play, instead of being free to play, these numbers might be different. One interesting development with this study is that by the time their findings were published, the system called the Tribunal which dealt with player punishment had been dismantled. It no longer existed. A question for today would be if toxicity was an issue then, is it more of an issue today or not? Data about player traits and dispositions is needed, but studies from the point of view of the players, and how toxicity is communicated and recognized are lacking.

Another study of toxicity (Ghosh, 2021) focused on the toxicity within a wide array of online competitive games. These games included League of Legends, Minecraft, World of Warcraft, and the like. Using Reddit, Twitter, and other social media, they analyzed the comments used to describe these games, being either negative, positive, or neutral. Their findings varied across games, but regarding League, most posts they found describe the game as positive, although there were slightly less neutral and negative posts. While an interesting study into the only postings of how League is supposed to be portrayed, this study did not explain how it affected the player in game, nor the consequences on players in their real lives.

Toxicity in League is often encountered through their chat systems due to the nature of communication in League. Most toxicity here is seen in the form of insults or

small phrases that communicate toxicity, some being unique to the game. A receiver-based definition of toxicity helps explain why these insults are offensive due to the special language within League. In examining insults, Korostelina (2014), found that many insults are "low-intensity aggressive actions that are perceived by the insulted side as intentional and illegitimate" (p. 214). Insults can create bitterness, and this embitterment can lead to revenge. "Revenge as a social act can derive from subjective experience of injustice, victimization, or violation of personal rights and claims, or a response to insults, humiliation, or threats to the sense of personal or group identity" (Korostelina, 2014, p. 214). Insults both enact and create further negative behavior, as the behavior of one person can cause a chain reaction in others.

One reason for the importance of studying toxicity and gaming identity deals with the relation between toxicity and text chat. Negative behavior amongst the League player base has become so severe that Riot Games has taken away a main mechanic of their game in certain regions, 'all chat'. All chat is an option which allows players to communicate from one team to the other. Riot's reasoning for doing so is because of the increased incidents of verbal abuse, yet despite taking away the players speaking privileges, nothing more is being done to mitigate player behavior in those areas. Currently, chat privileges are available to players, and each person I interviewed also had chat privileges.

Korostelina continued the nature of insults by describing types that might be encountered in interpersonal interactions, which in multi-player games are the principal interaction. These types of insults are identity insults and projection insults. Identity insults are insults that are connected directly with the self-esteem of both individuals

involved and have ties with Social Identity Theory (SIT). These insults strike directly at the identity of an individual, calling into question their place in the hierarchy or social group. These insults can be given in order to preserve the identity of the one giving the insult. Projection insults are more for when the frustration of one individual gets transferred onto another, so the anger of one is projected onto another and an insult is given. For example, a player that is doing badly in accruing a currency in game will then criticize and demean another player for not accruing currency well either. According to Korostelina (2014), as insults occur, behavior is negatively affected, and detrimental talk is reacted to with action. Thus, one mean word leads to another.

In analyzing toxicity in certain online spheres, Beres et al. (2021) described toxicity by including that many gamers view toxicity as "acceptable, typical of games, as banter, or as not their concern" (p. 1). This is significant because, to date, I have not found another study that looks at how gamers themselves view toxicity within their own communities. Beres et al. explored this concept further by stating that another potential reason for bad behavior is that "toxicity is an inextricable element of how gamers interact in competitive gaming contexts… this tacit acceptance of negative and abusive behaviors, justified as being simply part and parcel of the gaming context, represents a normalization of toxic behaviors within gaming culture" (p. 1), which is consistent with how I am defining toxicity with the addition of how receiver's view it. What this study shows is that in terms of the magic circle, the realm of play that gamers enter is intrinsically linked with toxicity. How these toxic realms of play interact with an individuals identity is the next step.

Identity and Crystalized Selves

What then is identity? It is the answer to the question "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). There are many definitions of identity, and the one that I align with most, and that I will use going forward in this project, was stated by Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley (2008). In a personal context, personal identity is defined as "a person's unique sense of self" (p. 327.) The ways in which this unique sense of self is formed and communicated is one of the allures of studying identity. Humans cannot exist in a vacuum, and so a person's sense of self can be modified through interactions with the world around us. But there is not just a personal identity that one adopts. There are social identities that get added to the mix, identities which are created through interactions with others. This social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the values and emotional significance attached to that membership." (p. 327). The values and how they are enacted help to create these social identities, and the gaming world, as in the real world, is full of behaviors and ideologies unique to a social identity. Moreover, "social identities are shared by members and distinguish between groups, whereas personal identities are unique to the individual and distinguish between individuals" (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008, p. 327). The distinguishing between groups draws lines, separating behaviors into the realms in which they are appropriate, both socially and personally. The gaming world is a social one, one where a social identity forms alongside that of a personal identity. Along with balancing these two identities, many other identities exist in an individual. However, none of these identities, social or personal, are perfectly stable or unitary. They shift and change, which is why the idea of crystalized selves is integral to this study.

Tracy and Trethewey (2005) propose the idea of a crystallized self to express the idea that there are many identities within an individual. Crystalized selves is "a positively valanced term, to speak about, understand, and experience the self in more appropriately politicized and layered ways" (Tracy & Trethewey, p. 186). The crystalized self confronts the idea of a person having a real self and a fake self. According to Tracy and Trethewey, an individual is neither real nor fake, but is multidimensional in their identity, multifaceted even like that of a crystal. This concept interacts interestingly with the magic circle because, if the magic circle separates the real and play world, crystalized selves suggests that the 'play identity' is still part of the crystallized whole, potentially linking areas of play and real. For example, toxic behavior or specific identities within a play world can be behaviors and identities encountered in the real world because it is part of the individual.

With many identities existing within a person, the idea that one of the identities is more 'real' than others is directly challenged by crystalized selves.

> The crystallized self is neither real nor fake. The crystallized self is multidimensional- the more facets, the more beautiful and complex. Certainly, crystals may feel solid, stable, and fixed, but just as crystals have differing forms depending upon whether they grow rapidly or slowly, under constant or fluctuating conditions, or from highly variable or remarkably uniform fluids or gasses, crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 186).

Crystalized selves allow one to understand how the different facets of identity are not just separate fractured parts of an individual resulting in an amalgam of different selves, but that all facets represent the person completely. Thus, a person juggling the differing identities such as friend, child, student, and worker, doesn't need to feel that one of those identities are more fake or real than the others, they are all part of their 'real' self, which is the whole crystal. Since each identity according to the theory *is* part of a whole, then here the play world is connected to the real world, as the identity facets in the play world are still part of the person. This possibility allows for the study of how identities and actions in a play world can affect the identities and actions in a real world, since the connection exists. This means crystallized selves is a useful lens through which one can study the gaming world and its possible effects on the real world.

The varied nature of gaming means that along with the myriad types of games comes differing ways to play, and even different ways of being. This allows for many different playstyles, values, and even identities to be enacted within each unique gaming sphere. These identities help put players into a specific mindset and effectively cause the crystal that is their identity to shift from facet to facet for every game. These identities played in game can be considered 'parts' of the whole self, and none of them are any more real or fake than the others (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). With so many facets of identity that a player juggles in game, all of them part of the whole person, how do these differing identities interact? Do they bleed through and overlap as well? Does negative behavior associated with one identity bleed into other areas, staining the other facets of identity with a bit of negativity too? That would depend in part on how fluid the line

separating play world and reality is, but perhaps in part the answer lies with how ideal selves interact with the identities that exist within the crystalized self.

For every identity that one takes on, there is a corresponding preferred self. If an individual takes on the identity of a student, then there is a preferred and exemplified way of being a student that one would try to adopt. "Ideal selves are culturally situated and discursively constructed expectations for whom one should be that shape identity work and identity regulation" (Wieland, 2010, p. 511). In other words, the ideal self is "the self that I want to be" (p. 511). For example, the ideals put forth in video games through rules and norms help individuals know what kind of self that they want to fashion (Wieland, 2010). Ideal selves help one to understand that for every identity, there is a standard to aspire to, so each facet of the self will be constantly trying to reach a particular ideal. Because such ideals exist, that opens the possibility for identities to be more fluid and susceptible to change, since an ideal self exists for any given identity. These ideal selves are most usefully approached as discursive resources that shape identity work and regulation (Wieland, 2010).

No matter what kind of identity a person has, there is always identity work and regulation that goes with it. "Identity work—the process by which one constructs, repairs, and maintains an understanding of whom one is—results not only in a self-construction aimed at the identity worker but also as a way of presenting oneself to others" (Wieland, 2010, p. 510). How these processes occur varies, but that it happens can be seen through another study in a different sphere by Tracy and Scott (2006). Both researchers were studying identity construction in the context of firefighters and correctional officers, seeing in what ways they managed their personal identities and occupational identities.

They explained that in these occupations, individuals experience physical taint and social taint in relation to their 'dirty jobs'. People are just people, but the jobs they take on have identities with them. Physical taint refers to the jobs associated with dirt, garbage, death, and the like, while social taint refers to more servant like aspects of work such as maids or domestic workers (Tracy & Scott, 2006, p. 9). Individuals navigated who they were as people, and how the world saw them through their work. Some things that subjects did to manage others' perceptions of themselves due to their 'dirty work' included reframing, or "transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatized occupation" (Tracy & Scott, 2006, p. 9). A second thing was recalibrating, or adjusting the standards used to assess a work attribute, while a third was refocusing, or shifting attention away from stigmatized areas and focusing on the more positive ones (Tracy & Scott, 2006). Multiple identities and ways of looking at oneself interacted here, and in like manner, this can happen in others spheres such as a gaming world. There are stigmatized events that occur in a game, and players have perceptions of the organizations and identities that they encounter, as well as the having those same perceptions for the groups they identify with. Working towards an ideal self while dealing with less than ideal circumstances that are given to the player in a game is one aspect that players balance as they switch through the varying facets of their gamer identity.

What is the relationship between toxicity and identity? It is entirely possible that there is a preferred self that manifests itself with toxic behavior. If toxicity is a normal part of online gaming (Beres et al., 2021) then there is possibly a sphere in which toxicity is an identity trait that is to be adopted given certain circumstances. Not only that, if there is an identity for toxic behavior that one adopts, then there can possibly be a preferred or

ideal self regarding toxicity. How toxic one should be, and in what ways, can be a certain

standard that one shoots to attain. The magic circle would say that if there was a toxic

identity within a play world, that the identity would stay within the play realm, separate

from the real world. Conversely, crystalized selves posits that all identities are part of an

individual, and therefore it is possible that an identity with toxic attributes manifested in

one realm can manifest in another because that identity is still part of the individual. Here

is an underlying tension that exists when these two ideas combine, the magic circle

implies self is left behind, but crystalized selves affirms that an identity, such as a gaming

identity, is always present and real. This interaction between these ideas is where videos

games intersect with the real world.

While one could say that behavior in games is more a case of role playing versus

identity creation, the question arises of how long a person can adopt a way of thinking

and acting before it becomes an identity. League of Legends encourages players to

specialize in their roles, or their purpose on a team, as well as giving them the relative

freedom to choose how best to move around in their respective duties. To progress in the

game, the best practices according to the norms of League are to specialize, which means

that players will regularly play a certain role or character. This can be *thousands* of hours

of playing the same thing. With a possible intersection between the magic circle's real

and play world's through crystalized selves, not all behaviors necessarily spill over. A

player choosing to be a giant cat holding a knife in game doesn't mean that in the real

world they will suddenly grab a kitchen knife and meow menacingly. There are

separations, yet at the same time gamers are certainly affected in every reaction as their

'real' self is always present. Toxic behaviors don't just impact avatars, they impact the person piloting them too.

The crystalized self is further appropriate in the context of League because, in my experience, a player cannot traverse the game with a single identity and playstyle per se, but must adopt many, or at least be flexible enough to change. In fact, League itself encourages many different styles of play and offers an individual to step into another self, whether that be through position assignment or character choice. Each player is tasked to become what their role is, and to use the skills their character has at their disposal, to think and do as their character and role might necessitate. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) stated that "people come to understand themselves through overlapping identifications with multiple organizations and professions" (p. 172). Each individual round of League is a new experience, and since players are meant to adopt different selves for each new game, their identities and behaviors change as well as overlap. There is a preferred self for each style of play, character, position, and role that a player can encounter, each with norms and customs unique to the spot they fill on their team. While there are separations in the facets they adopt, they are all still connected to the whole. One game a person might be tasked to protect their team, while another they may be tasked to heal it. Since those are both facets, is it possible that when tasked to heal their team one game, and then are placed into another role for the next game, would elements of healing still permeate their mindset and behavior? Maybe. In like manner, toxic behaviors may be able to spill into the various other identities in the game, making a healing role one that is mixed with negative behavior. Crystalized selves offers a way to explore connectivity among gaming identities.

League of Legends Culture

To better understand how toxicity fits into League, it is necessary to understand a bit of how the game is played. League of Legends is classified as an MMO, or massively multiplayer online game, meaning that one player has the potential to play alongside many different people every single day. The premise of the primary game mode is one where there are two teams battling to destroy the other team's base, which consists of towers and finally, a nexus. This battle occurs on a square map, Summoners Rift, with one team's base at the top right, while the other sits at the bottom left. There are three main routes in which to travel through the map, called lanes (bot-lane, mid-lane, top-lane). In between these lanes there is what is referred to as the 'jungle' or an area with many monsters to slay and paths to move around the map. These map divisions and areas are important because part of the player identity consists of the lane that they play in, as well as where fights on the map occur.

Players participate in the game by choosing to be one of more than a hundred different character avatars, called champions, each with special abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and team composition bonuses. These champions can be classified as various roles, such as assassin, or tank. These champion choices and where to play them are up to the individual player, however due to the role system that League implements, where gamers can play champions becomes more or less predetermined.

The roles within a game that an individual can choose from are split between five categories: jungle, top, mid, bottom, and support. These roles correlate with the lane the player is to compete in as well. This system encourages players to choose the right champion for the role they are given or that they selected. Rules for these selections are

given by both Riot and players over time as League has evolved. Different regions of the world have different metas, or norms, for how each lane is played, and for this study I have focused on how those in North America play. Regardless of where one is in the world, there are certain norms for roles that players expect to see. For example, an individual might be playing in the top lane. While not explicitly stated by the game, the culture and expectation for top lane characters in League are those champions who are tankier (have a lot of defense and are hard to kill). As stated earlier, a player can choose any champion to play in any given role, but as we will see, doing so can have interesting consequences as viewed by those in game.

Once champions are chosen, each team of five arrives on Summoner's Rift and goes to their respective lanes, again according to rules and norms. How the game progresses depends on how well individual laners perform. Artificial money, or gold, is a mechanic in the game, and is gained passively at a slow rate or by 'killing' or 'last hitting' minions. Players number of minions killed, or creep score (cs for short), is tallied throughout the game. Any time a player is killed by another player, a modest amount of gold is earned. Money is then used to buy items, which provide additional power for players, and alters team dynamics.

League games go between fifteen minutes all the way up to an hour long. If players choose, they can forfeit with a majority vote. Interestingly enough, game length can become an area of contention and toxicity as players don't necessarily want to be in a losing game for an hour. It can be one of the few power plays that individuals call upon to exert influence and "affect the behavior of another party" (Korostelina, 2014, p. 219).

Time is a variable in toxicity within League, and so certain game modes affect the types of toxic comments and behaviors that are expressed therein.

Through all this, gamers have the ability to chat to their teammates and to the enemy team through 'all chat', a feature which can be disabled if one so chooses. This is one area where toxic behavior is seen, while other instances occur in actual gameplay as well. The main ways players communicate with each other in a League game is through this chat, or with 'emotes' and 'pings' designed with specific prompts in mind such as "on my way" or "danger". There are rules to pings and chats, spoken and unspoken, and in this sphere many players encounter tension.

Finally, there are important chat terms and behaviors foreign to all except those familiar with the game itself. Some terms are shared with other games, but many are purely unique to League. See Table 1 below for a list of common terms in League that a player will typically encounter while playing. Note that this is not an exhaustive list and that there are many more chat words expressive of toxic or otherwise League specific terminology. This table and upcoming explanations will prove valuable in understanding the instances that occur in League games as explained by the players.

Table 1	
Chat Term	**Meaning**
feeding/feeder	Giving the enemy team kills unnecessarily and strengthening them/someone who dies constantly
counter jungling	A tactic that one enemy jungler can use to defeat their opponent and is seen as toxic though valid
inting	Purposeful dying to the enemy team in order to cause ones team to lose

griefing	Any behavior that is considered by the player to be toxic/bad gameplay that an individual should know better than to do
running it down	Similar to inting, this is where a player runs down to their lane only to die and then repeats this process, many times in other lanes
flaming	Verbal aggression to other players using varied comments
tilted	The act of being in a bad mood and thus playing badly as a result, causing the gameplay to snowball negatively
1x9	Where a player thinks that they are the only good player on their team and expresses how they not only have to fight the enemy team, but also their four other teammates
top diff	Where one top laner is inferior to the other and therefore the reason a game was lost
jung diff	Where one jungler is inferior to the other and therefore the reason a game was lost
supp diff	Where one support is inferior to the other and therefore the reason a game was lost
mid diff	Where one mid laner is inferior to the other and therefore the reason a game was lost
bot diff	Where one bot laner is inferior to the other and therefore the reason a game was lost
camping	The act of a jungler targeting and repeatedly attacking a laner so that they fall behind

salty	Mean comments of any type that result in losing a fight to another player or anger towards another in general
ganking	What a jungler does in either coming to aid their team or attacking the other team
kys	Kill yourself
k	Ok, but in a condescending and contentious way
ffs	For fucks sake
ff15	Forfeit the game as early as possible at the 15 minute mark

(Reddit, 2022)

To summarize as we get into the project itself, the magic circle helps define League as a place apart, one with its own norms and customs where players form an identity through organizations and gameplay as they interface with one another in the gaming world. The crystalized self is a lens allowing for a union of the play and real worlds described in the magic circle, stating that identities are neither real nor fake, but all part of a greater whole. Therefore, a gamer's identity can be seen as fractured, with many facets and parts making it up. Within this great crystal is the possibility for an identity tainted with toxic behavior, and if that exists, to what extent is it able to penetrate other identities and can it bleed through into the real world? If part of gameplay in online realms is toxic itself, how deep does the toxic culture go? Furthermore, what does the unique toxicity of League look like in practice? Three specific research questions fuel this study.

RQ 1: How is toxicity communicated in League? Is toxicity an element in gaming identity?

RQ 2: How do participants in League of Legends articulate their gamer identity?

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RQ 3: What is the relationship between a person's gamer identity and their offline identity?

Each research question is geared toward a player's gaming identity and how toxicity in League modifies that identity. Additionally, the first question focuses on how toxicity is enacted and what that looks like specifically within the world of League of Legends. The third research question is to help ascertain whether negative experiences in League spill over into real life. In using these questions, one can analyze the many moving parts in League and how players themselves view what is toxic (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015).

Methods

Positionality

My position in relation to this project requires clarification. I am not only a scholar but also a gamer myself, thus I am an observer-participant. (Tracy, 2020). I have been playing League of Legends for almost ten years now, which allows me certain insights into the toxic culture that exists within it, as well as intimate knowledge of many minute and specialized ways of communicating within the game. This positionality offers both positives and negatives. For some, it may be seen that my proximity to the game and my involvement in it make it hard to study the game in an objective way. However, on the other hand, my intimate knowledge with the company that produces the game, how they have evolved over the years, and my ability to exist seamlessly within the culture also offer special insights from the inside that are hard to find in other ways. Beres el al. (2021) found that veteran gamers of a game called Overwatch reported certain behaviors

they saw personally as more toxic than others that they were introduced to. A possible explanation was that these gamers "were more likely to recognize toxic interactions due to previous personal experience; alternatively, they may be less likely to dismiss online toxic interactions as unimportant or frivolous owning to the gaming context" (p. 13). So, it is with me and League of Legends. I know toxic terms from my years of experience, and in analyzing players' stories, I draw on those experiences. In essence, I have done my time with League of Legends, and I know the culture.

With that effort of transparency in mind, the following results as well as the subsequent analysis, not only sheds light on a unique gaming culture, but also delves into the realm of how toxicity interacts with an individual's, and a community's, gaming identity.

Data Gathering and Analysis

For this project, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with twenty active and retired gamers within League of Legends. Each participant was asked the following eight questions, with additional questions being asked as conversation continued or was appropriate.

1. Before you start a game of League, do you have to get into a certain mood or take on a certain persona?

2. Do you think that there are preferred ways to act and think within League of Legends? If so, what are these? Do you feel pressure to conform to these ideals when playing League?

3. Do you have any memorable stories from League players or yourself that affect how you view the game or yourself when playing the game?

4. Do you have a "gamer identity" when you play League? If so, how would you describe it and what does that look like?

5. Does toxicity play a role in the game of League? To what extent?

a. If yes, how is toxicity communicated in League of Legends? What does that look like?

b. Do you find yourself participating in toxicity on League?

6. Do you think that toxic behavior becomes part of the ideal gamer identity online?

7. Have you ever felt like what is going on in League influences how you feel or act when you stop playing League? If so, can you provide an example?

a. Is it hard to transition out of your gamer identity after you've been playing for awhile?

8. Do you think that your gaming identity, or how you view yourself and act online, impacts how you see yourself outside of the gaming environment?

Interviews were chosen because it is through these types of *narrative interviews* (Tracy, 2020) that one can get a sense of seeing the world through another's eyes. Instead of simply asking an individual a series of questions, asking also about experiences and emotions allows them to describe the reality they experience and also lets them showcase the scenes I wish to analyze. In this way, I come to understand what the other person

wishes to convey, to understand not only their words but feelings. I feel it is better to understand players through asking about specific experiences that showcase what they are trying to explain. This will allow me to gather data regarding different game modes, as experiences vary from game mode to game mode. Through *narrative interviews* (Tracy, 2020) I wished to capture a picture of toxicity, gamer identity, and how those intersect within League of Legends.

To "better seek out participant voices" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844), I wanted to come across as friends with many of the people I interviewed. They are, after all, members of a community I belong to, and their voices are important and valid. Friendship is a type of participant collaboration wherein I wished to be part of the exploration rather than simply an observer (Tracy, 2010). League of Legends is a community of friendships and strangers, and it is easy to join a group of new people and quickly become their acquainted. One of the allures of the game is that it is easy to grow a friend group within it, a design that makes team cohesion during games all the easier. Because I am a member of this community already, the similarities of experience between myself and interviewees led to productive conversations. While friendly, I still wholeheartedly ascribe to following the eight criteria for qualitative research as outlined by Tracy (2020) of having a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (p. 270). To the best of my knowledge, I have adhered to those principles.

All interviews were conducted exclusively over Discord, an online medium for voice chat popular in the gaming community. Each interview was recorded with a person's consent using the audio record of the Streamlabs application. After recording,

each interview was listened to over again and typed out manually. Coding for individuals was done with a simple number system of one through twenty, while emergent themes were highlighted and then compiled once all data was gathered and transcribed. No reference to a player's summoner name, or any other given name at all was asked for or recorded. For the purpose of the study and out of respect to those interviewed, no names will be referenced if any were mentioned in the interviews. Every participant was given the freedom to answer as many or as little of the interview questions as they felt comfortable with, and sessions lasted between twenty and forty minutes.

Data analysis followed phronetic iterative analysis as described by Tracy (2020) which alternates between emergent readings of the data and then their application to existing models, theories, and explanations (p. 209), as well as a thematic approach. Themes were established based on word choice as well as content from certain statements. For example, every time an individual brought up the concept of a 'meta', I made note of it and color coded both the word and the statements regarding it. I listened for explicitly negative statements, as well as trigger words that were common among participants, coming up with themes such as 'ranked play', 'meta', 'chat abuse', 'silent negative actions', and more. As the process continued, I applied the constant comparative method (Tracy, 2020), modifying themes and coding definitions as more data accrued. This was seen in talk about positive interactions in the game, that over the course of interviews, weren't necessarily seen as positive, but as sarcasm instead. I tried to split the data up with first level codes, searching for emotions and words in the stories of individuals, and assigning colors to those statements in order both count the prevalence of

certain comments, and compile them together. In looking at frequency and number of times certain themes appeared, I was able to focus the coding to be more precise.

The following results section is divided into categories based on the most salient themes that emerged as I spoke with individuals (Tracy, 2020). Smaller themes will be touched on in the discussion section further on. These themes have been assigned after data analysis once all interviews were completed and transcribed. This is what I found.

Results

While themes emerged when speaking with the gamers I interviewed, I organized the results under three main heads relating to my research questions with subsequent themes regarding each as subheadings. Unsurprisingly, the theme of toxicity runs throughout each and every aspect of the game as conversations unfolded. At the same time, a significant amount of positivity existed alongside the darker hues. More will be given on that positivity below. As a note, the earlier section on League of Legends culture will be useful in understanding the significance of the statements given by interviewees. There was not a single response that wasn't filled with jargon from the gaming community as a whole or from the League community, and as I proceed, I will define and explain to the best of my ability. Names for the interviewees are given in capitalized numbers.

RQ1: Ways People Talk About Toxicity

Toxicity as a theme was the largest and overarching theme that pervaded all others in my data. This is not surprising given my questioning, yet the degree and reach that this phenomenon holds is interesting. As interviews unfolded, themes regarding types of

toxicity and the situations that cause toxicity quickly arose. The first toxic theme dealt with a "meta", or norm that exists in the game that I will define in greater detail below. This meta affects all mechanics and consequently the gameplay of individuals and was the focus of many toxic experiences, along with many offshoot problems deriving from it. Role models in the community were a factor in toxicity, as were overt and benign actions that constituted toxic behavior in the eyes of those describing it to me. Strangely, yet welcome, was the amount of positivity that existed alongside the negativity in game, with the good interwoven with the bad.

It's Toxic

Whether toxicity exists in League because of the game itself wasn't clear in interviews, but that it is an integral part of the game was apparent in every single response. When asking participants if toxicity played a role in League of Legends, this question received a one hundred percent response rate of 'yes'. Many were an emphatic 'yes' at that, some accompanied with laughter, while others were quite bitter about dwelling on that fact. Many told me that there is a running joke about League in the gaming community, best explained in one person's statement of "oh, I hate myself today, so I should go play League of Legends." In terms of League, toxicity is an element in gameplay, and according to participants, a sad reality as part of general gaming identity.

Why there is so much toxicity and negative behavior associated with League can in part be how individual players define it. All can recognize toxicity and describe it in their own way, with common descriptions among them along with their personal feelings on the matter. Some looked at toxicity as simply "giving up," as in when a team or player just stops playing in the middle of a game. Others, like interviewee Twelve, said that

there are "differing levels of toxicity. Some are benign and others are completely in your face." Every person that I spoke with had more or less the same idea of what constituted toxic behavior and could identify it readily when looking for it. The definition that I use for toxicity is receiver based, and in reporting the following themes and responses, what may not be toxic for the reader is nevertheless considered toxic for those individuals that are playing the game.

Game Mechanics, The Great Meta and Expectations

Is toxicity an integral part of League? Responded interviewee Eleven: "It can make or break, and often does make or break, your entire game." The answer given by all participants was a yes. The degree to which toxicity plays a role in the game varied among respondents, with some of their comments relating to how the game is set up. In a few of their eyes, toxicity, although negative and unenjoyable, is a team mechanic they can abuse to win. Continued Eleven: "It affects team play and is a mechanic of the game. You can use it for good or for bad."

While focusing on the other team's mental attitude is a hallmark of sports in general, such as trash talking, one side effect of toxicity in gaming as reported by interviewees is the creation of self-sabotaging players. For them, it isn't enough to be upset, they need the rest of the team to suffer and lose as a result. They act in ways that not only destroy their game experience but force the others on their team to have negative experiences through blatant verbal or nonverbal abuse, most of which is geared towards destroying their own team and helping the enemy team win. In many instances the behavior is extreme enough that if encountered in conventional sports or even in a business setting, it would result in expulsion of said individual. How bad is this behavior?

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Well, as Eleven and many other explicitly described, teammates like that get upset and then tell their own allies and others to go and drink bleach, use racial slurs, or demand that players straight up kill themselves. Once that happens, gameplay is no longer a focus for the team, and the group begins to give up. The mental attitude mechanic in League is integral according to many participants, and when people fall, it can be severe.

The mentality of players extends to what kinds of champions an individual chooses to play in the game. As part of the changing nature of League, players follow what they call the "meta", or the norm for what Riot and those more skilled players showcase as the "optimal" way to play the game. This "meta" is another way of identifying what can win the most in any given situation and exists because Riot tries to balance the strength of certain areas in the game, and consequently creates imbalances in other places at the same time. Those players that follow this meta watch the ebb and flow of updates to the game and play specific champions, use certain items, and play the game in specified ways in order to abuse the balancing of the game, as it can never be perfectly balanced. It is this very meta that subverts expectations of those playing while forcing the hand of others to play the game in a way they don't want to, or to fight against someone else that is playing according to the meta and struggling against them the whole time. This causes tension.

Due to this tension, sometimes playing as certain champions, because of their abilities or strength in the current meta, is considered toxic. Said interviewee Eight: "One thing I like about Sivir (a champion avatar) is that it makes my lane opponents upset... Either the support or the bot laner is going to be so mad because all they want to do is fight me, that they start making mistakes, their role as a partner breaks apart and I win

because I made them be toxic to each other, so it breaks their mental." There is a lot to unpack in this statement.

Sivir is an *adc* champion that plays commonly in the bottom lane alongside a 'support' champion meant to help protect them. Regardless of their opponent, this champion can play in a way that pushes their enemies away from their side of the map without any drawbacks. The interviewee here explained this story to me in terms of a ranked match, where there is a 'meta' and norm of people wanting to just fight instead of use more advanced tactics. This varies of course in the different tiered rankings, but in this person's experience, agitating the other team works, and so they choose this particular character in order to break the mental state of their opponent and spread toxic comments and behaviors on the enemy team. While these actions affect the realm of the play world in League, the resulting bad feelings can potentially cross the line into the real world depending on the severity of the frustration.

The toxic behavior that results from this kind of team frustration can include 'pings' or sounds built into the game. Pings weren't made for toxic purposes of course, but players use them for toxic purposes, trying to annoy their own team with them to the point where the only option for a player is to mute the noises to focus. As the interviewee said, if they can get the other players to become toxic towards each other, it breaks the team from the inside with absolute negativity. Quite literally one team forces toxicity onto another team. The types of negative reactions can be random sometimes, but any negative reaction on a team is detrimental, hopefully resulting in one team winning over the other, though it is never guaranteed.

For others, the banter going on between two teams is a normal thing, as is seen in conventional sports, but in League, banter devolves into profound toxicity in many cases. Interviewee Two explained that "when someone is toxic enough, whether on your team or enemy, you can tilt (a word for extreme bad mood with negative behavior attached). I've had an *adc* (a player's position like that explained above) tilt when we were winning and then intentionally decided to feed (purposefully give kills to enemy). They told me in team chat that they hated me, and that I didn't deserve to win, and so they ran it down (purposefully running into enemies in order to die), and we ended up losing. It affected everyone, and it just erupted in insults and stupid plays. I hate League sometimes."

Singling out those players who might have a "weak mental" is a mechanic some players use, targeting them for specific in game actions, or speaking to them in the hopes to goad them into doing something stupid, and in turn taking out a member of the enemy. Many times, this angered player will take others out on their own team in a strange reaction to their playing badly. The player's identity in this case is being enacted within the magic circle and other players are responding. However, there are sometimes unintended outcomes with this mechanic, perpetuating toxic behavior. The fact that some players exploit this is of note, because the end result they wish to have isn't a small reaction, but a devasting and explosive one in the context of the game.

Toxicity can occur on the allied team when people choose champions that aren't according to the meta, or that don't do things to the liking of teammates. The very same mechanics that are meant to harm the enemy team can, and often do, infect the allied team, leading to a bad time. What Riot Games (2023) has said in the past and works to achieve is to be able to have all the champions in the game have a fifty percent win rate.

They don't want anybody getting higher than that percentage for balance reasons, and so when they alter the stats of a champion in an effort to achieve that goal, they can "break" that champion, in other words, accidentally making them more powerful than desired, which is where players figure out what champions to play over others.

The changes that Riot makes fuel the meta in the game, and according to those I interviewed, the changes in the meta affect how toxicity is communicated too. Interviewee Three reiterated the power the meta has. "There is *definitely* a meta, and there's stuff that's preferred and there's stuff that's normal, and if people adventure outside that, then it will tend to tilt (upset) their teammates unless they're doing well." This statement is a fitting description of the ideals and expectations that exist within League of Legends as dictated by the meta. The meta exists for individuals to adhere to, and when disobeyed one garners opposition. Yet there is a double standard in the meta if the player stepping outside of it is skillful. Said interviewee Three: "If you're going as tank (a champion that's hard to kill) but decide to go full damage instead (use items not meant for a tank and are meant to do damage), people will be like, 'oh this guy is trolling', but if you are a full damage tank and you have eleven kills, then they're like, 'oh, this guy's a god!'." In other words, if somebody breaks the meta, they need to be able to do so in such a way as to go above and beyond, not only doing good, but doing great in order to make other players on their team be alright with the choice.

Following the meta can sometimes be seen as toxic, but there is more likelihood of toxicity in breaking the meta. In breaking the meta, any toxic backlash is dependent on player skill. If a player breaks on your team breaks the norms and is really talented, then the *enemy* team paints the talented player as toxic and begins to destroy their own

teammates as a result for ever having lost to a game style outside of the norm. If a player breaks the meta, but is bad at executing it, their *own* team is the one that begins bad mouthing and being toxic towards them, simply because they have broken the meta in an unsatisfactory way, to the detriment of the team. These players are often attributed by their teammates as the reason a game is lost even though like interviewee Seven put it, "it's a team game and everyone has a part in winning. I can't say that always though, because I do know that one player can cause the team to lose." While the teams are temporary, nobody wants to be the reason their team loses.

The difference between acceptance and opposition in player decision making lies in how players balance individual skill and the meta that is currently circulating through the game. What exactly the current meta is can be difficult to determine, as it is part opinion, and partly what professional players showcase. These more skilled players push less skilled players on their team to conform to what they view is the meta, becoming toxic towards individuals that choose to ignore their demands, while at the same time putting the individual being asked into a rough spot themselves, as they may not be able to accommodate. Interviewee Eight described the toxicity that occurs in this situation the best they could.

> Yeah, there are metas, but meta is more for pros, where people that are like my skill level or even higher, you'll get the plat and diamonds (player ranks) saying, we *need* to play this, it's the meta. Like can you even play to the skill of that champion and why it makes it meta? If they're like, 'Dravens really meta, you should play Draven' I'm like, I can't fucking catch an axe and watch everything else at the same time! That's going to take time for me to get there. It's not like I

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could just pick Draven and become a Draven God. I would really like to learn Draven but you're losing and losing until you figure you out. Sometimes it's more about what character do I connect with to where I'm excited to play that character.

However, not all people feel pressured into the meta, despite the threat of toxic backlash for going against it. Said interviewee Two: "I don't think I feel pressured, but I think the pressure is there. I think I fit into basically whatever meta is going on, I fit into that just compliantly." Others, like Five, say that they felt pressure to conform to ideals "when they were younger, but I was also much newer to the game." Continued Five: "Now that I'm a coach, I feel like I also have the ability, you know, in my position I have the ability to try things and not care what other people think about it. It took a lot to shift my own mental to do that though." These people cast off the pressure of the unspoken norm but are not free from any backlash that might bring with it. "There is a meta for a reason. If you want to win games, you need to play along with the meta or get good enough to not need to." The existence of the meta and the players response to the meta is one way that toxicity is manifested and communicated from player to player.

Community Role Models

Another theme that emerged when talking about toxicity involved community role models. When asked about whether or not toxicity was becoming an ideal way of acting in the gaming community, one hundred percent of participants responded yes, and while some didn't like to admit it, they still said yes. All of them followed that up with a comment along the lines that, if the gaming community was becoming more toxic, it was the fault of professional players and streamers. I found this curious and when I asked for

clarification, I received a myriad of specific examples. (Since the streamers are well

known, I don't feel the need to omit their names in the commentary.) Interviewee Two

knew a lot about this and explained. "We see so many streamers that are just toxic in their

games. For the most part it's just that entertainment value. Like with T1 (Tyler1, a

YouTuber), he is super toxic, super confident, but he is super good. That's why he can be

there. You can even see it in pro play. You can see them being toxic to each other in

broadcast games. It just goes from the top down." Another interviewee, Six, said

something similar. "I look at T1, and how you have people who literally worship this

person, like they literally fawn over him and they want to be the next Tyler1, so being

toxic like him is what they do."

     Many may not know the YouTube and Twitch personality Tyler1, but for almost

all players in the League community, he is a common name. He is one of the most

talented players in the world, and his skill is known far and wide, with his ranks

consistently being at the top of the player base worldwide. This skill has helped him

become famous, but perhaps another reason he has become famous, one that interviewees

cited multiple times as was shown above, was for toxicity. Tyler1, T1, has been

permanently banned by Riot games for toxicity before, only to be unbanned by them

because of his influence in the community. In his Twitch streams, he often rages at the

other team and at his own teammates, flaming (berating) them with both nonverbal

actions and verbal actions. He yells all the time, causing his mic to spike from the sound,

he tells players to kill themselves, he calls people dogs for not being an 'alpha player' like

he is, and is vocal in calling out the shortcomings of others. While there is a reform going

on with him, whether superficial or not, the fact that the toxic behavior by him affects the

League community is obvious with their constant citations of him in toxic experiences.

There are some people that are influenced by these toxic players because they

wish to emulate them. The fact that pros are in the spotlight for how to behave in the

game is, at least in the player base's eyes, a common reason for the pervasiveness of toxic

behavior. How the famous players communicate their toxicity is how the followers

communicate their toxicity in turn.

Overt and Benign Toxicity

The following kinds of toxicity were talked about by all participants, which I label

overt toxicity and benign toxicity. Not all negative actions are done in the shadows. Many

are done knowingly in the open, and with League, there are many players that express

their angriest thoughts in the chat, and then proceed to put their words into action. League

players are very vocal in their chats. In fact, many benign words have come to have

derogatory meanings. Interviewee Four knew a lot about the language people use to

injure others. "The gaming community will find a way to make even the most basic of

words have the intent to be mean." Abbreviations such as kys, which means kill yourself,

have been replaced with ky@ that means the same thing. "Some words off the top of my

head that I hate... touch grass, mad because bad, all of that." Four continued, "You can't

say racial slurs in chat and so people just get creative and figure out other ways to say it,

so like that is the invention of the word 'dog', like you know, you're dog at League? That

came about because you can't call people the N word and that was the word people used

to call other people in the stead of it." These kinds of reinventions are fascinating and

shocking, and many more word games were told to me by interviewees. Not all players

speak so short handedly, as there are gamers that choose to vent their frustrations in complete sentences, sparing no detail in the slightest as they try to injure another. But what about some of those that choose not to use words? Well, they use their actions to communicate that toxicity like interviewee Three describes.

> I still remember, like years ago playing a game of ranked and I had a Malphite on my team. I ended up looking after the game, this man had nothing but defeats in his match history, so you could tell he was just uber tilted or he was deranking (purposely going down in rank), but the very first thing he did when he spawned in was run into the enemy jungle completely blind and just start attacking like three enemy champions, and he donated first blood. First blood happened to be to our mid lane opponent, and then as soon as the laning phase started, also he was supposed to be the support, and so as soon as the laning phase started, he went ghost, TP, and he TP'd to the mid lane tower and then he just ran to the enemy midlaners tower and just gave them another kill, and he did this like three or four times, and he just would run into other people's lanes and like donate kills, and then like everybody was complaining about it in the chat, and like I was the jungler in that game so I had to spend a lot of time bot lane so our ADC just wouldn't instantly die on being in a two v one scenario, so it's like, you know, without just further divulging into that, you know, he did this without even saying a word, without giving a single ping.

The player in this experience did the following: they broke the meta with champion selection and consequent spell selection. While not always a game breaker, the overt nature of what happened is what makes the experience valuable. Before the game really

started, this player ran into enemy territory alone, allowing themselves to get killed for the "first blood" of the match, giving the enemy extra money in the process, and then when they revived, they used a spell to travel to the mid laner's tower, not their own bottom lane. There they proceeded to die to the enemy mid laner in order to give them an advantage. In doing this, they singly destroyed any hope for their team of coming back because there was a member of their own team actively trying to prevent them from winning. All League players have encountered this kind of overt toxic behavior and know the completely negative and frustrating feeling those games bring.

The previous example of toxicity represents the overt and targeted nature of toxicity that affects players in the community that play for fun, as well as the ranks of those in competitive. Another quote from Four shows similar overt toxicity: "I had people multiple times, only whenever I played ranked, I would have people that see that I'm about to rank up and then they intentionally feed and even say like in the chat, like 'lol' or 'good luck, you're not making it to like silver two' or whatever. They'll internally afk (check out or go inactive) or feed (purposefully die a lot). Thanks, I guess." It isn't common to see this kind of behavior in a team-based game, yet in League this occurs quite often, and I was told by multiple respondents that it can even happen over issues of gender or other types of prejudice. This hyper targeting, almost fixated toxic behavior is perhaps unique in online competitive games, but interviews weren't conclusive regarding the matter.

Benign toxicity on the other hand, is a type of toxicity that is present in some situations, but not necessarily from a person actively meaning to do something toxic. For example, according to many of those I talked with, certain champions themselves are

considered toxic from their abilities or their power. Even certain items that those champions use are toxic because of their effect on the game. Benign toxicity is toxic in a different way from overt, not purposeful in any way, but nevertheless is something that causes players to react negatively, as it is something they perceive as toxic, shifting in their eyes to a sort of overt toxicity. Benign toxicity is recognized by the players personally as a threat to their gameplay fun, essentially as elements of the game and not as individuals trying to be mean. This kind of toxicity is one that exists alongside the change in meta and the updates to the game, as well as with the introduction of new champions and their abilities. It is like the thorns on the rose, not wanted but present inherently.

Probably the most interesting aspect of this benign type of toxicity mentioned to me was regarding the skill of a player, specifically if a player is good and playing at an elo (or rank) that they don't belong in. For example, a highly skilled player, such as a diamond player, playing in a game with beginners is seen as not fair, but happens sometimes. Such talented players are considered toxic by others merely by their very presence in the game, and they are lovingly referred to as 'smurfs'. Sometimes players get into games where this skill disparity happens all the time due to how Riot matches gamers with one another. Interviewee One didn't like 'smurfs' at all. "Smurf queue (multiple game match ups with more talented players) is a real thing, and when I have all bronze and silvers on my team, but the other team has diamonds and plats, it just pisses me off." While one might see this in a pick-up game of sports where teams are uneven, the skill disparity in League is seen as toxic, which consequently leads to overt toxicity and attacking of individuals in the game itself. The presence of the skilled player makes

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the losing team react negatively and consequently cause problems for one another in their behavior, effectively shifting from benign to overt.

Noteworthy in how players talked about toxicity was how players described participating in toxicity. I asked participants whether they felt they, or others, were toxic at times simply because they were retaliating. This was answered to one hundred percent yes as well. If one person is toxic, then another will be toxic back. Players that participated in toxicity most often cited that they did so in retaliation to the perceived sleight of others. There were exceptions of course, but if all League players think they are just retaliating over perceived injustices, the idea of a receiver-based definition of toxicity truly describes why it can be so prevalent. I'll go over that more in the discussion. In reviewing participant explanations of toxic events, retaliation is seen as a main factor in perpetuating and participating in toxicity, which is consistent with literature on conflict escalation in gaming (Anderson & Dill, 2000). The feelings of those I spoke to suggest that toxicity is "contagious" and bad behavior can affect the behaviors of another, and over time those can become more ingrained and prominent. Interviewee Eleven believed it was retaliatory saying, "Yeah, I'm sure some of it is retaliatory because if they start being toxic, it's easier to join in, to roll in the mud. Oh, he wants to be toxic? He has *yet* to see..."

Positive Experiences Despite Toxic Elements

As a bright spot in the topic of toxicity in League, every participant, with the exception of two, mixed in positive elements along with the negative ones regarding toxicity. Despite the toxicity that is so prevalent in League, many people have found ways to get around it, over it, or ignore it, allowing for bright spots of positivity to exist

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alongside the other toxic interactions. Overall, most participants expressed enjoyment and social connection from playing League. Statements from various respondents were: "I have fun with friends." "It makes me happy to see those I play with getting better." "I know when I was going through an extremely stressful time in my life, one of the things I could do to escape from the stresses in my life was to play ranked in League." "It isn't always a fun time, but I still love to play, especially because I can meet new people and have social interaction."

While negatives exist, I found that the players I interviewed still loved the game. (I still love the game even though I get frustrated with it.) The love for the game and desire to keep playing is a wonderful manifestation of the resilience of the gaming community. While the comment was made that "gamers will always find a way to make something toxic," the positive stories and experiences told me that gamers will also find a way to have fun despite the difficulties. However, even though there were positive comments, the reality of the toxic environment is non disputable among those I interviewed. There are certainly ways to mitigate the toxicity, and honestly, one cannot interface in the game without encountering it. It is a fun game, but one that isn't without its ever present 'dangers'. Toxicity goes along with it and is ever present, and for some that toxicity might be exhilarating and keep them coming back.

With the exception of three participants in my study, nobody said that toxicity was their online identity, only that it was a part of online competitive gaming identity, an element that varied depending on the person and the game that a person was playing. Curiously, half of respondents believe that this trend is slowly beginning to change, and

that toxicity in gaming identity is starting to improve and become less prevalent as a whole.

While there are so many different ways to be toxic, players speak about certain things more than others. The meta is a central feature to toxic culture in League, whether inadvertently or purposefully, while role models are concerning for some as well. Behaviors stemming from various sources and for various reasons comprise a bulk of toxic behavior, yet while all this happens, there are bright spots of positivity, keeping the gaming community coming back because playing games with friends is still fun.

RQ2: Articulating Gaming Identity in League

My second research question relates to how participants of League articulate their gaming identity, both online and offline. The answer to this question is multi-faceted, with major themes running through such as casual gameplay versus competitiveness, age and online identity, role models in the community, and personal toxicity. Each of these themes have intersections with my other research questions and will be touched on later in discussion, nevertheless, these themes have unique effects related to the research question.

Competitive Versus Casual Identity

When speaking of their identity in League, participants first started with what kinds of games they played and what kind of a player they were. This was split into casual versus competitive players. With this, there was not a single person that didn't talk about the difference in these two game modes, along with its relation to toxic content and gameplay identity. Competitive League games are specifically found in one mode, which

is on the game map of Summoner's Rift. Every other game mode can be considered casual, sometimes extremely casual like when game modes come out that encourage outrageous playstyles and shenanigans. What is the difference between casual and competitive play? Interviewee Two described it to me by saying: "if I'm going in to have fun, mess around, I play casual games. When I go into competitive, I am for sure more serious. I will only touch characters I know that I feel confident in... but then it's like, do I stick with the champion that I know, and deal with the berating of my team and maybe win the game, or do I switch to somebody they prefer that I can't play as strongly, but I don't get yelled at from that." Casual was described by all as meant for fun, while nine respondents mentioned competitive play as the serious part of League. How these players see competitive play versus casual play is showcased in this statement by interviewee Two:

> In the grand scheme of League of Legends, there's this base context of like, if you're playing solo duo (a ranked match), like you're playing super serious. You're playing to be the best, you know? If you don't adopt that mentality like you almost get labeled, and I've seen this happen a lot where you win a game that's fun, and for whatever reason other players decide to join you, you queue up solo duo queue, but they're not interested in winning. Like if your mindset is not 'I'm winning this game', then why am I bothering playing with you?

The levels of toxicity that were reported among the competitive games were the determining factors for many on the kinds of game modes they would play. Some decided that casual games were the ones they wished to play exclusively because that aligned most with their online identities and they didn't feel like changing to adopt to the toxic

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nature of competitive play. Of course, there is toxicity outside of competition gameplay, but it is in the competition that people get more frustrated. Sixteen of the interviewees mentioned that part of the toxicity that occurs in ranked occurs because of the mindset that also needs to happen there. Seven continued by saying that "the mindset of competitive is to win, to beat the other team. You're not there as much for fun as you are for skilled competition."

The whole theme surrounding competitive play versus casual play revolves around the amount and kind of toxicity encountered in each game, along with the various mindsets. For some, like interviewee Sixteen, ranked is "a shit show. I don't every play ranked because if I don't like my team hating on me for how I play." As I said before, not everyone dislikes ranked, with some people like interviewee Two only playing ranked exclusively if they can help it, finding "enjoyment in the climb and becoming better than I was before." With so many different personalities playing League, it's no surprise that the split between these game modes was mentioned so frequently. For some, their real world personalities to achieve and out do others contributes to their online persona, while others are there for only a good time.

Some gamers only play casual games exclusively, their persona's being such that they don't wish to compete on such serious levels. Depending on whether or not these gamers play together with friends changes how their casual games play out, mitigating negative experiences in game and helping perpetuate the fun. Fourteen of those I interviewed spoke about casual gaming in a positive light, where it was fun and something they always did with friends. Eight of those people told me that they avoid competitive game modes at all costs. Interviewee Three told me their reason was because

of how "sweaty and try hard all the people that are in ranked are", and because they just want to relax when they play. They continued:

> I mean, I was the sweatiest, like try hard. Yeah, we would play and have fun, but for the most part, I was like, I wanna win. I don't want to just win; I want to do well. It literally took almost nothing for me to tank my mental entirely. It took my five or six years on break from that game and playing other competitive games for me to finally be just like... learning what it is to just play a game and just have fun playing it.

The identity of casual game players is one that is lax and there to just enjoy the game. These players aren't as concerned about the seriousness of play as they are with play itself. This kind of game mode allows for a greater number of friends to be added to one's team, and while ranked has a mode where five people can group up together before a game, it is in the casual games where friends join up and play League. Competitive on the other hand is one of a specific mindset, an identity of a winner, and one that is much more serious. Not everyone likes this kind of identity and playstyle in League, but there are those that do love it. In essence, players balance personas in the game modes that they choose to play, adopting various identities and behaviors depending on where and what they want to play.

Identity, Age, and Differing Game Mode

There will be more on this particular theme with my third research question, but I will include part of it here as it functions with my first question. Casual players not wanting to play the game for sport indicated that they felt their online identity was much

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more of who they are as a person, whereas when they participate in actual competitive League matches, they need to don a different persona in order to play. Eleven respondents specifically told me that in competitive there is an identity. However, as they told me this, they included that age is a factor with how they see themselves in League. Seventeen of the people mentioned that as they've gotten older, their real-world identity converges with their online identity. Interviewee Nineteen agreed. "Yeah, I would say that the older I get, the more myself I am in League. I just don't care what others think as much and I play for myself." This suggests that age is a factor in how a League player would articulate their identity.

Mixing the factor of age in League identity has interesting implications, as it would moderate how competitive play identity is articulated, as well as casual play. While I didn't ask any participant their age, the thought comes to mind of how significant age is in the disparities regarding gaming experience, gaming identity, and toxicity within League specifically. That it plays a role is only seen in the responses of those I interviewed but showcases very well how the various themes that I found throughout the interviewee's responses are intertwined with one another, so no one theme is completely free of outside factors.

Personal Toxicity in Game: Toxic Identity and Non-Toxic Identity

The theme of toxicity, while a tension in the game, was nevertheless an element of how a few League players articulate their identity, that of a toxic gaming identity. To put it bluntly, three individuals admitted personally that they view themselves as toxic in the online community of League. It is more than simply toxic behavior though, they view themselves as individuals that knowingly try to stoke the fires of frustration in others,

whether that be on their team or the enemies. Through the course of interviews, the majority of participants mentioned that there are those people that exist in League only to be toxic, which according to the admission of the prior three, seems to hold true. Interviewee Three described it to me like this: "I mean, in any game you'll have those dudes that are only there to make life hard for other people. Like, they're just there to troll, to bm (bad mouth), and just make life hard. League has those people everywhere though." However, it is significant that the other seventeen participants didn't view themselves as toxic in the online community.

All interviewees admitted to participating in toxic behavior, whether it be extremely casually or extremely purposefully, such as those individuals that I mentioned before. Of note though, when talking to these people that reported themselves being toxic "for the fun of it", none of them were difficult to talk to. In fact, they were all very nice, which lends credit to the idea of a magic circle, with identities being separated in their differing spheres. More on potential bleed through will be discussed later. That toxicity as a behavior attributed to an identity was curious, especially since a good number of the people I interviewed described it as such. Interviewee Three told me that "some people are just assholes. That's who they are." Finding individuals that identify as toxic is also interesting, yet I must describe a bit of what they told me after divulging this. All three individuals mentioned how they don't always try to "start problems" even though one liked to say that they "liked being a problem".

Despite these statements, those three did admit that they don't like being toxic, and that they honestly want to just play League. But the little things that happen in the game get under their skin, and they lash out, which causes their toxic actions. There is a

non-toxic identity that exists alongside these individuals too, one that is separate from League. Depending on the individual, the line between non-toxic and toxic is eroded once one enters the gaming world, but the other non-toxic self still exists. However, one cannot deny the power and influence that bad behavior has on the game, especially when modeled by others. Of those that were asked about gaming identity within League, I had sixteen say that the role models in the community are a driving factor in the behavior of the players, including, but not limited to, pro players, YouTubers, Twitch streamers, or overall, highly skilled players.

RQ3: Online Identity and Offline Identity

My third research question asked about the relationship of an individual's gaming identity and their offline identity, and so participants were asked whether they had a different identity when they played League versus when they were walking around in the real world. This was extended to other games as well in some of the responses. The answers were varied, making it difficult to pin down a specific gaming identity that goes along with playing League. However, there were some very curious nuances to the responses that were themes across all participants.

Regarding what kind of identities individuals felt they had when playing League, almost half said that who they were offline was how they were in online gaming settings. However, the rest said that their gaming identity was specifically and drastically different from their real life, such as Twenty described.

> So, in real life, I am very much anti-social and anxious. I don't have the most
> confidence in myself irl, but when it comes to the game, I know that I am good at

the game, and that goes into when I play other games as well. I am very confident, and I know that I can do the best I can do. I am extremely social, I message in the chat a lot, I make friends consistently. I feel like my gamer identity is a lot more positive. Honestly, gaming is a safe space for me, and I feel safer being myself, or who I want to be, when I am there versus in real life.

This statement reveals a lot about how some gamers see themselves, and how games can be an avenue to express oneself in ways that perhaps in other circumstances they couldn't. This could be one reason why part of the respondents mentioned their identity online as so different. Interviewee Twelve described the divergence this way: "A lot of times I would escape my stresses in life, and I would put on my persona online that I had created... I built him up to how I want him to be, and that online persona is the person that I see that's just serious and heavily focused and driven for competitive games." The previous comment describes the benefit that these alternate gaming identities allow for an individual, as well as showcasing that there are identities that are created and performed specifically for certain spaces. This goes along with the idea of the magic circle, but the next theme deals with a sort of bleed through or intersection into offline worlds.

The Role of Age and Maturity

When asked about the relationship with online gaming identity and the offline identities, a curious thing I found was that all those who said they feel their real-life identity matches their online identity followed that statement up with, "but when I was younger I did have a different online identity." Thus, as interviews progressed, I decided to ask if individuals gaming identities became closer to what they felt their real-world identity was as their age and life experience increased. Everyone answered something

similar, which was that when they were younger, their online identities diverged much more, and as they get older, their offline self, in some senses, aligned more with their online selves. This is a step outside of the magic circle in many senses, because reality and play selves are almost the same, at least as one gets older like Eleven discussed.

> I agree that part of my personality, it's not just a rogue personality that is not attached to who I am. I feel like it is a facet of my personality but it's just one that doesn't get a chance to be expressed. But whatever environment a sporting event can create, it gives it a chance to shine more easily, because I don't feel like my gaming personality was much or is much different to my soccer personality. Honestly, I feel like trans games it's consistent, but I definitely see that the older I've gotten, the more I can see that part of my personality starts to bridge to other environments when I get frustrated.

Interviewee Three stated it this way: "When I was younger, I was really into the game. I would make myself this completely different person. I thought and acted differently. How people thought of me and treated me affected how I acted in the game. Now that I'm older, I don't do that. My real self is the same as my online self."

This diverging of online and offline identities when one is younger is certainly not something that I had thought to encounter in my conversations, but it definitely has given me some interesting insights into the interplay between identities, online selves, and behaviors. Common across all the responses was the idea that as one gets older and experiences more of the world, the more their online selves reflect their offline self. There were exceptions of course, with those outliers being those that specifically like to switch into a different mode of thinking and acting when they play a game. While this

exception was present, all participants nevertheless stated that this separation in identities thinned the older and more experienced they became, either in a general or more specific sense.

Intersection of Online Behavior and Offline Behavior

One of the main reasons I did this study was to ascertain if behaviors and identities crossed over the magic circle, specifically toxicity. The answers from all participants said that they *were* affected, both positively and negatively, by the events that happened in League after the game was turned off. I'll go over the occurrence that prompted me to ask this question in the discussion, but I asked participants if after they stopped playing the game, if the emotions, feelings, and behaviors of the game persisted into other facets of everyday life. Interviewee Twenty responded, "Oh, for sure! If I'm having one of the best games of my life, well most likely I'm not going to stop playing after that game, but if I have to go to work after that, I am going to feel like the absolute shit. My confidence will be boosted, I'll be feeling really good. I'll think that I'll get home and game and it'll be so good. It's mainly my confidence. I just feel happy!" This is a positive effect of emotional bleeding through to the real world. However, the opposite also occurred as interviewee Eleven explained. "If I have some bad games, sometimes it only takes one, my whole evening can be shot. Sometimes the day is shot if I am playing in the morning. I dunno, I feel like the toxicity of League just seeps into my life and my thoughts." "I'm on edge for a while after I've been losing in League. I'm not fun to be around." This kind of emotional bleed through carried with it depressive behaviors, but this was not the norm with most participants and only five reported specific negative behavior related reactions after a game. Overall, the majority of participants talked of

emotions, not actual behaviors, affecting them after they finished playing their games, lending credit to the magic circle at least in the behavioral realm.

Gamers are aware that the games they play have real life effects on them. Not all gamers interface with this reality in the same way, and as I spoke with those individuals that experienced this, those games that are more competitive in nature are the ones that bleed through into reality more readily. It appears that this phenomenon occurs for particularly difficult games as well. "I love my games so much, but I don't want them to realistically affect my irl life. If I did stay on for those bad games like, I am not going to be happy afterwards. I'll be frustrated, grumpy, irritable, hopefully not for long. Maybe at the most an hour? My games can negatively affect me in real life and I don't want that." "I like to make sure that I play games to have fun. Some games get to me more than others, and so I have to moderate what I play and when. I don't want it to affect my family."

One trend in these responses was this cooldown time that the events in League had on the individual as far as their attitude and behavior went. Many felt like in terms of negativity, it would take an hour or so to get over it emotionally. A few felt like they could walk it off after a few minutes or by walking outside. In a few cases, the effects were tremendous, like with Eleven.

So specifically ranked, if I'm playing just normal, I'm normally unaffected, but whenever I play ranked, and I have more heart put into it, more care, more focus, typically if I go on a win streak afterward my day feels fantastic. It feels light, it feels like a brighter day in a sense, but if I go on a losing streak, it does the opposite. Like it very much affects my day and everything feels heavier, it feels

gloomy, like a lot of my body actually feels heavier after losing streak. I don't want to do anything after that, and I feel depressed.

This individual, depending on the quality of the online interactions, altered their day as a whole. As I've explained, these alterations can be negative or positive, but that the emotions, and in some cases the subsequent behaviors, continue outside the play realm is interesting, as many of the respondents said could happen. "Oh yeah, sometimes when I'm losing in game, afterwards I act really cold to my family, and I'll just blow up at them. That isn't good though, and sometimes I just need to go cool down somewhere." Another said that "the more I play League, the less patience I have for other areas in my life that I feel need competence. I find myself saying and thinking the same things about people as I do about my teammates in game." So, there is some evidence of negative bleeding through from in game activity to offline life in regard to emotions, feelings, and behaviors. However, there was no evidence as to *identity* bleed through.

Discussion

My research questions were geared toward understanding better how gaming identity is articulated, how toxicity is communicated and interacts with gaming identity, and if what goes on in online worlds carries outside of the play world. The results garnered through the interview process necessitates proper unpacking.

I tackle two themes in this project, the subject of toxicity and gaming identity. While gaming theorists discuss the concept of the magic circle, the differing realms of play and non-play weren't as separate as the theory states. The results from the interviews showcase that there are places where the magic circle intersects with the real world,

affecting the individual there temporarily. The magic circle doesn't crumble per se, but there are liminal spaces around the circle in regards to gaming and how the experiences there can find echoes when the power button is turned off. Consequently, the magic circle doesn't talk of intersections and maintains that the two worlds of play and non-play are maintained as separate (Stenros, 2014). I have found cases where feelings and sometimes behaviors carried over from the play world into the real world, though not permanently.

To its credit, the data shows that in many situations, the magic circle does separate play world and real world for those in League. My participants articulated their gaming identities in ways that clearly separated who they were in certain spheres, such as when they played competitive gaming modes or casual modes. Others specifically stated that their online personas were different from their offline personas, further supporting the magic circle as a "world apart" (Stenros, p. 147, 2014) and different from the real world.

In asking about their actual identities online, three openly declared that their online personas were different from the real world and meant to be toxic. Here toxicity for them was an identity, one that gave either an advantage within the magic circle, or added for while in online realms. For the other seventeen not viewing their online identities as toxic, this left me with a question. Seventeen individuals told me that League was a toxic place, yet their identity and perceived behavior online was the opposite. Indeed, it seemed to them that the environment online and others behaviors were toxic, when they themselves were not. Fundamental Attribution Error, which describes how individuals "make inferences about the causes of their own and other's behavior" (Young, 2004, p. 339), may explain the difference between these perceived actions of others compared to understanding their own actions as nontoxic. Additionally, individuals assign

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causal attributions to other's behavior while at the same time downplaying their own role in situations (Young, 2004). Within the world of the magic circle, one can understand that they are in a play world, but not acknowledge that another person online is in the same situation. The behavior of the other is considered real and outside of the magic circle.

All participants said that League was toxic to one degree or another, yet only three said they identify as toxic online and actively participate in it. Everyone mentioned at times participating in toxic behavior out of retaliation, but nevertheless they weren't toxic. A few more reasons could explain my findings. The first is that players are behaving in ways that they don't deem as toxic, thus they are not toxic, however that very behavior when seen by another is labeled as toxicity. The negative behavior in League continues and is almost perpetuated because what one person sees as alright, another may very well view as toxic. In essence, players are acting as according to what they feel is right and attributing the behaviors of others as toxic while they themselves aren't.

Another possibility deals with sheer numbers and exposure to negative behavior. There are ten players in every League match. The sample size of this project contains a ratio of about one tenth of the participants who identified as toxic. If this number holds up throughout the community, then every game would have at least one toxic person in it. Taking that and the occasional bad day into account, a player could potentially encounter toxicity in every single game they play. Despite the negative elements of League, most toxic behaviors stayed online, further supporting the separation of the play world from the real world. After all, each person I talked with was very kind.

I find that my previous comment that players recognize they are in the magic circle and that other entities online aren't is an additional explanation of the prevalence of

toxicity. Every participant recognized that League was a play world, and that the world

online was one that wasn't real. They themselves perceived that the magic circle exists in

relation to their own actions and behavior, but when it comes to the actions and behaviors

of others online, the magic circle is not always perceived. Again, the Fundamental

Attribution Error can account for the misperceptions to a degree. People understand that

they are in a world apart from the real world when they play games, but they don't look

at others in this way, even though others are also in a magic circle when online.

There is a liminal space that exists on the edge of the magic circle where the play

world and non-play world intersect, blending the two experiences. The magic circle says

that "the psychological border set up by adopting a playful mindset and the border set up

socially through negotiation often coincide, but they are two different things" (Stenros, p.

147, 2014). This is a *psychological* border, but according to my participants, there is

bleed through that bypasses the magic circle. Each participant noted that their emotions,

and in some cases their behavior, carried outside of the gaming environment. The magic

circle doesn't say that emotions from one realm can't go outside into another, it focuses

on rules and norms instead, but it is strict in that these *worlds* with their norms and rules

are separate (Stenros, 2014). In terms of gaming worlds to the offline world, there is a

tension in relation to the circle.

Gaming attempts to make what is play world seem like the real world, so when

one returns from the game, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors can follow them. This

transitionary period between the online and offline worlds was reported by quite a few

participants, and is one that I noticed too, it being the inspiration for the project in the

first place. Long ago my wife said to me that: "I don't like who you are when you play

League." An insightful comment on her part, not only for reasons that mattered in my own relationship with her, but also for how what happens in online spheres can affect those offline. Interviewee Nineteen asked their significant other while I was speaking with them if they were different when they played League, to which they replied, "oh yes, but it depends on how you're doing in the game." This liminal space exists in varying intensities, where some people found a longer cooldown from the emotions and behaviors of the play world with others not so much. The magic circle is true wherein the realities of gaming and real world stay separate, but it isn't as rigid when it comes to the feelings and emotions that exist in those spheres. There is overlap and intersection.

Another intersection point with the magic circle and the real world is seen in how my participants reported that, as they age, their online selves come more in line with their offline selves. To them, age and maturity is a factor in how their online and offline selves interact. According to them, the magic circle in their personal lives shrinks with time, experience, and maturity, blurring the line between the online world and offline world, or in their case bringing their offline selves more in line with their online selves. This shows how the magic circle's boundaries are not as defined as the theory describes. The realms are apart, but they converge over time. This isn't to say that the magic circle cannot expand to fill the question of age in separation of play and real worlds, but that it hasn't yet. Here crystalized selves explains this connection, because every identity in every sphere is part of the person as a whole (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Instead of these worlds being separate in the first place, they are just two different facets, and with age and maturity, these facets can begin to blend into one. Whether this blending over time

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occurs from a lack of an older person being judged or from less powerful social pressures isn't quite clear.

Toxicity, one of the main themes running through this study, is a more complex matter to discuss as it relates to identity and behavior. On one hand, there is an online world and an offline world, while on the other hand each facet of the self is "part of the whole self, and none of them are any more real or fake than the others" (Tracy & Trethewey, p. 186, 2005). While reports and testimonies of the level and prevalence of toxicity abound in League, the magic circle explains how the negative things happening in game aren't spilling out into the streets. At the same time there is a tension that gamers navigate as they traverse the online world, because there is a facet of their identity that is either touched by toxicity or embraces toxicity when they enter the game. Toxicity is a reality that will not go away in terms of online gaming and is one that players learn to navigate as they play as part of something that simply exists. Gamers juggle this toxicity, engaging in that behavior occasionally, or reacting to it when they encounter it. That "self that I want to be" (Wieland, 2010), meets norms and cultures in an online realm, and a delicate balance is struck between civil behavior and online identity behaviors, yet those emotions find bleed through in the cooldown period where the intersection between online worlds and offline worlds meet.

The existence of the types of toxicity in League are interesting, more so when one steps back and thinks of why it is there. Going back to Riot and how they define toxicity, then reflecting on how gamers view toxicity, there is a significant tension between the two that breeds toxic behavior. Riot says that toxicity is bad and actively discourage it, yet at the same time they allow for mechanics in the game that are toxic in the eyes of the

player base to exist. Their design of the game seems to encourage it in some settings. For example, it is part of the game itself for a skilled player to play with nine other players of lesser skill. While Riot believes that is alright and allows it to happen, the player base views it as toxic. Many other examples of this kind of disparity exist in the mechanics of the game, where Riot's definition of toxic behavior and situations doesn't align with the players in the game.

Despite every game being unique with each gamer just as unique, toxicity does have factors that manifest uniformly throughout online realms. The toxicity present in League can be attributed to other sources, one of those being that it is a play world within the magic circle with norms and rules that don't apply in reality (Stenros, 2014). This knowledge of a player that they are in a magic circle allows them to act how they want to without repercussion in the offline world. As the ODE explains, anonymity helps breed toxic disinhibition, with people expressing themselves through "hateful and aggressive language, swearing, and toxic behaviors (Beres et al., p. 3, 2021). Other variables indicating the presence of toxicity include player skill, norms or meta of the game, role models in the community, and type of game mode. Specific to League were the subtle nuanced ways of showing toxic behavior, such as the killing of certain monsters when one shouldn't, or playing characters that aren't the norm, each infraction of which is almost subjective in nature. While these kinds of behaviors can be found in other games, how they are manifest in League is unique.

Though toxicity is unique in every game it's found in, there are enough similarities in how it is expressed that a study in one area is beneficial for others. As mentioned, defining toxicity can be easy, but at the same time it is difficult to grapple

with due to tiny additions to every person's definition of what exactly constitutes a toxic act. Is it intent? Is it the act itself? My results show that what one person sees as toxic isn't always what another might. Interviewee Ten said that, "I don't think ranked is toxic, I just think it's where try-hards go to play. I could care less about it." Many respondents thought ranked League games were toxic, but obviously there are players that don't think that.

The magic circle as described by Stenros (2014) does a great job of separating the real and play world, or the gaming identity from the offline identity. But as shown in the case of League, there are areas the magic circle doesn't cover, and an intersection with the real world and play does happen, creating a liminal space. While some people act different in the play world as they would in real life, there are others that do not and their identities and behaviors are quite similar. Interviewee Nine explained how, "I've always been kind of an open book. I might be a bit more focused when I play games, but for the most part there isn't really a different persona for me when I play League." For others, these gaming spaces and behaviors are truly spaces apart where they can be different from the real world. From the data gathered, the line separating the real and play worlds still exists, but in those places where it intersects with other identities, the theory is more fluid than it originally suggests. Gamers likely won't be going around to malls and trying to zap people with magic, but one never knows.

In summary, this project found that gamers are creative in many ways, and that includes how they express negative behaviors. Toxicity for participants was communicated through a variety of methods, with commonalities and nuances tailored to the individual. In terms of League, toxicity was communicated verbally and nonverbally

centralized around idealized selves championed by Riot's 'meta' and role models in the community. Riot itself perpetuates toxic behavior through game design, coming into conflict with the players in the game. Game types and competitive identities fuel these behaviors even further. Participants agreed that, to an extent, toxicity is a part of gaming identity. Each person's gaming or online identity is unique, and while conformed to the community, it is ultimately their own, with their online self matching their offline self in some cases. This identity in some situations is articulated as an ideal they wanted to be. However, these online and offline identities were reported to merge as time went on, bringing one's online self more in line with their offline self, thus exiting the magic circle to an extent as they navigate the different facets of self that makes up their identity.

Conclusion, Implications, and Future Directions

There are many directions in which gaming studies can go. Every game has its own unique culture, subculture, language, and rules, and like a Venn Diagram, there is considerable overlap between games, yet there is still much that is unique to a single world. The similarities between them help to understand other gaming realms, while the unique among them helps to set them out as a worthwhile and interesting site of study. When gaming worlds become large enough, such as with League of Legends and its more than one hundred million player base, studying them in-depth yields interesting things, such as nuanced toxic behaviors, unique online identities, and unique created cultures. Studies such as these can be the fuel for further research and knowledge acquisition.

Potential areas for future study include how emotional contagions affect players in competitive environments, specifically in multi-player arena style video games. Another would be how gaming companies can shape their world and in turn shape the identities of

the communities that take part in their game. Various other studies that can be beneficial from this analysis include the myriad of opportunities to study toxicity, how it evolves, how humans use nuanced terms to enact it, and the role of imitation in identity formation among gamers and professional players.

Limitations of my study are many. For one, I only had twenty individuals that I interviewed, and while I am content with that, it is by no means a large sample from the millions of people that play the game. Not only that, but this was a qualitative study done by myself, who is also a gamer. Being part of the in group gives me unique insights, but also unique biases. Quantitative studies done by those outside of the community may be able to find other results of significance. Still, studies done by those in the gaming community can be largely beneficial due to the almost different language one needs to understand when entering those worlds. This can also encourage more qualitative studies in games as well.

Overall, this analysis indicates that it is possible for individuals to form identities in different spheres that are faceted, allowing for multiple ways of thinking and behaving in one individual. In the context of gaming, identities and perceptions of games are held among all participants for better or worse, allowing for a sense of community, shared identities, shared experiences, and shared values. There is also evidence for emotional bleed through into the real world from the play world where individuals go outside of the magic circle. This study also underscores the importance of coming to understand the turbulences that afflict a group of people. While League of Legends is an intensely popular game and may very likely stay that way for the future, the perception of the game by the player base is that the game itself is toxic. Reasons abound for this, but the play

worlds affect the real world, and actions in one sphere have reactions in another, even if it is only for a short period of time.

Finally, this study shows the importance of allowing people to voice their thoughts in meaningful ways, and for my study it was through interviewing them and hearing their thoughts. As I was told by the gaming community, the perception is that few to no academics understand anything about them. They may be right. To truly be a gamer in the eyes of the community represents an opportunity cost in time, and many academics don't have the time to put thirty hours a week into a game. While there are others in the academic community like me, most of us are up and coming in the field and there needs to be more gamers helping to study their community, especially since gaming has come to be such a large part of our world. Every individual that I talked with thanked me, some even going so far as to say thank you for giving them a voice. The identities and experiences had by those in the gaming world are unique. There are nuances and idiosyncrasies that need to be understood by those navigating these worlds, and some are hard to express. I can't say it better than they, and this last statement sums up my feelings on the importance of gamers studying other gamers: "Unless you're within the gaming community or gaming community adjacent, people don't really care about video games. Because it's such a big aspect in my life, it can be kind of hard for me to connect with people, like you don't have to be a gamer, or even be able to list a single game, but it's hard to talk to people who don't care about gaming, about being a little bit more than a casual gamer. It's awkward, you feel like you'll get judged, and I don't want to get judged.... I just want to be understood."

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