

The Well-Played MOBA: How *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* use Dramatic Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This paper will analyse the two most popular games within the MOBA genre, *DotA 2* and *League of Legends*, as performance-designed spaces. By analysing MOBAs as performance and using Marc LeBlanc's (2006) *Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics* as an aesthetic framework the aim is to posit a greater understanding of the ways in which e-Sports and MOBAs specifically can be designed in order to create dramatic tension within the increasing variety of available viewing platforms. In this way, this paper helps present new ways to think about how games can be designed/structured in order to be satisfyingly performed and consumed through increasingly diverse viewing methods.

Keywords

performance, dramatic structure, spectatorship diversity, MOBA, League of Legends, DotA 2

INTRODUCTION

E-Sports are a growing part of digital gaming culture, capable of attracting hundreds of thousands of concurrent, international spectators to watch teams compete for multiple million dollar prize pools (Ditmarsh, 2013; Popper, 2013). The online nature of most e-Sport tournaments (often fuelled through services such as TwitchTV {Ditmarsh, 2013}) means that digital spectatorship presents a new avenue for cross-cultural diversification as spectators from different countries/backgrounds congregate on streams and use their shared enjoyment of e-Sport spectatorship as a middle ground for new friendships and relations. But what is creating this enjoyment? The goal of this paper is to use Marc LeBlanc's (2006) *Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics* as a possible aesthetic framework for games as a spectator sport, analysing them as performance designed spaces, specifically constructed for the creation of dramatic tension and scenarios. This will be done through conducting an analysis of one of the most popular genres within e-Sports – the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA). This paper will explore the ways in which MOBAs are performative and analyse the ways in which they are designed and structured for the creation of dramatic tension. In doing this, we will explore the ways in which e-Sports and MOBAs specifically are designed to provide dramatic tension within an increasing variety of available viewing platforms.

This paper will attempt to answer the question:

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- in what ways do *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* use traditional or alternative dramatic structures and techniques in order to create dramatic tension within their increasingly diverse online spectatorships?

In order to answer this question the paper will first explore the extent to which MOBAs can be viewed as performance, drawing on various different definitions of performance, looking in detail at Schechner's (1988) basic shared qualities of performance, and applying these ideas to digital games and, specifically, to *DotA 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013) and *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). We will then look briefly at one potential aesthetic model for drama and highlight LeBlanc's (2006) key factors of dramatic dynamics within digital games as a possible aesthetic model for the ways in which *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* create drama. Once this has been done we will be able to move on to an analysis of the diverse ways in which drama is created within the different phases of a game within *DotA 2* and *League of Legends*.

VIEWING MOBAS AS PERFORMANCE

Before discussing the ways in which MOBAs can be viewed as a performance, a definition of what performance is must be established. The performative essence, the core of what it takes for an activity to be considered a performance, is, as Schechner (1988) puts it, 'extremely difficult to define' (p. 30). Goffman (1959) writes of performance as a 'quality' which can be applied to any activity, making performance a mode of behaviour rather than a specific genre, whilst Cage (1965) argues that by simply framing an activity 'as' a performance it can be given the performative quality. Following either of these arguments would mean that MOBAs, e-Sports, and digital games en masse could be viewed as performative or not purely based on their framing; the common presentation of digital games on stage, online or within living rooms, with groups of willing spectators, being enough to qualify them as performative behaviour within those specific instances.

However, these are necessarily a priori arguments. Just because a game *could* be described as a performance does not necessitate that it *should* or inform us of what qualities prescribe it as such. For this reason, Schechner's (1988) outline of the basic shared qualities of different performance media will be used to provide a matrix for performance which e-Sports and MOBAs can be tested against. Schechner's (1988) basic qualities for performance are: a special ordering of *time*; a special value attached to *objects*; a *non-productivity* in terms of goods; the presence of *rules*; and *performance spaces*. Fernández-Vara (2009) already writes on the application of these qualities to digital games and, by analysing the ways in which e-Sports and MOBAs specifically fit with these basic qualities, this paper hopes to better place *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* alongside existing performative media and achieve a better foundation for analysing MOBAs as dramatic performances.

Time

The most basic element of time within a performance is that it is *adapted* to the events which are taking place. This means that time within performance does not have to be mono-directional or consistent with any sort of real world clock; time passes as slowly, quickly or in whatever direction is needed for the type of performance taking place. Schechner (1988) defines three different types of performance time; *event time*, where the performance will continue for as long as it takes for a specific event to be achieved; *set time*, where a time limit is provided for the performance; and *symbolic time*, where the amount of time taken for the performance to complete is intended to be representative of

a separate amount of time (either longer or shorter). These different time-structures can be mixed or presented simultaneously within one performance.

All three of these performative time scales –event time, set time, and symbolic time- can be seen used within digital games and similar temporal terms have already been used to great effect in literature by games academics (Juul, 2005; Zagal and Mateas, 2007). Fernández-Vara (2009) specifically writes of the ways that these time scales can have application within digital games. This paper will expand on this through specific application within MOBAs:

Event time is the most common structure and is used within both *DotA 2* and *League of Legends*; players are given an objective (destroying the opponent's main structure, the Ancient/Nexus) and play continues for as long as is necessary for this objective to be achieved. *Set time* exists within *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* through the scaling in strength of both minions and monsters. Even though the game never explicitly states it, games have a sort of time scale until we reach the point where the minions become strong enough to overpower the defensive structures present on the map without player interference. *Set time* is being explored within upcoming MOBA *Arena of Fate* (Crytek Black Sea, TBA) as a potential structure for the genre. *Symbolic time* is harder to apply though its presence can be seen within *DotA 2* through a day/night cycle which shows the passing of diegetic time throughout play, implying that the game is taking place over a much larger time-scale than players can perceive.

Objects

Within performative activities objects are given a value far different from that which they have outside the performance. In stage performance this could be through the value assigned to a crown or to a sword: outside of that performance these objects have limited value (they may be made of cardboard, wood or tinfoil) but, within the performance, they have the diegetic power to create a monarch or to slay a dragon.

This concept can be applied to digital games in the sense that the objects present are only lines of code, highly valued within the game but with no real, tangible value. Within MOBAs we can also apply Schechner's (1988) definition of objects within performance to the different objectives present on the map. These are the objects which frame the whole activity and which players are encouraged to base their actions around. For example, the turrets within *DotA 2/League of Legends* are of great importance to any team wishing to achieve victory (it is only through their destruction that players gain the ability to push toward the opposition's base and achieve a win condition) but have no value outside of the game. Players are willing to fight to the death for these objects in the same way that an actor in a stage performance is willing to fight for a tin-foil crown; to apply Schechner's (1985) definition, these towers are 'of extreme importance, often the focus on the whole activity' (p. 9). This argument can also be applied to map objectives such as Barracks/Inhibitors or neutral objectives such as Roshan/Baron Nashor, objectives which many of the battles within individual games will form around and which we will discuss in greater detail later.

Non-productivity

Schechner constructs this quality of performance from the key characteristics of play as defined by Huzinga (1955) and Caillois (1961). He writes of performance as an activity which should be inherently non-productive; not leading to any sort of wealth or goods and being completed purely for the purpose of completing the activity. This is the most

debatable of Schechner's (1988) basic qualities, challenging it himself through mention of professional sports players and actors. Similarly, the concept of play as non-productive has been challenged by Jesper Juul (2005) and by the presence of professional gamers within *DotA 2*, *League of Legends* and most other e-Sports. These players, who earn money from playing these games, seem to challenge the idea that play within digital games has to be inherently non-productive. Even the act of spectating is made productive through the presence of streams and videos which are watched specifically for improving personal play. These sort of economic arrangements lead to Huizinga labelling modern play as 'decadent' (1955 qtd. in Schechner, 1988, p. 10) but the presence of professionals within other performance media shows that this is not a problem which exists exclusively for digital games or MOBAs.

Rules

Rules, traditions, and conventions are used within performance in order to establish what the correct form of an activity should be. Schechner (1988) uses the example of baseball. Though there is a great difference between baseball played at amateur level and baseball played at major league level, the rules followed are the same. These rules represent a form which the game should reach for, a state to adhere toward, and anything which moves the game away from these rules is recognised as 'necessary compromise to what the game should be' (Schechner, 1988). These rules represent, using Callois's (1961) terms, the difference between a game being considered *paidia* (play without rules) and *ludus* (play bound by rules).

Fernández-Vara (2009) equates Schechner's concept of 'rules' with the code of the game, stating that the 'rules [of the game] are enforced by the program(s) that make up the game' (p. 3). Whilst this is correct there exists a more nuanced discussion to be had regarding the separation of rules as either: 1) endogenous: rules set by the designers and programmers of the experience or 2) exogenous: rules set by the players of the experience (Björk and Holopainen, 2003; Montola, 2005). Both of these rule types can be seen at play within the spectator and player community of MOBA games. For example, within *League of Legends* there exists both the 'code of the game' in terms of how it *can* be played, the endogenous rules of where players can move and the speed at which they can move toward them, and also the 'code of the game' in terms of how it *should* be played, the exogenous rules of the different positions players should inhabit and the times at which they should inhabit them. Within traditional, non-digital games exogenous rules are often referred to as 'house rules'. Within MOBAs these rules are often referred to as the 'metagame' and, though they are never explicitly written within the games themselves, players often view their transgression as a compromise in terms of how the game *should* be played and will often aggressively defend them if broken.

Performance Spaces

Schechner (1988) writes that the performance space exists so as to separate between the real world and the performative world. Examples of this are easy to see within the great arenas, stadiums, churches and theatres which are constructed for the purpose of traditional performance but it is harder to see within digital games. Fernández-Vara (2009) compares the concept of performative space with Huizinga's (1955) 'magic circle' and the idea of there being a separate mental space which players enter when playing or spectating a digital game.

Within MOBAs there appears to be two, more nuanced comparisons to be made. The first, literal comparison being the recent 'stadiumisation' of e-Sports events – the growing

tendency for large companies to rent out sporting arenas for the performance of professional MOBA competitions (the KeyArena for The DotA 2 International 4 or the Seoul World Cup Stadium for the League of Legends World Championship 2014). This comparison is immediate and direct. A less immediate comparison would be the in-game clients of either *DotA 2* or *League of Legends*, the digital spaces where players gather before beginning play or spectator (figure: 1). This is comparable with the reception of a religious hall or the ticket barrier of a football ground as it represents the space before the performance; where spectators gather, prepare themselves, and meet friends before entering into the performance/game space proper. Within *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* specifically players can create ‘parties’ or groups with friends and spectate high-level games from their in-game clients, a feature which highlights their parallel to more traditional performative spaces:

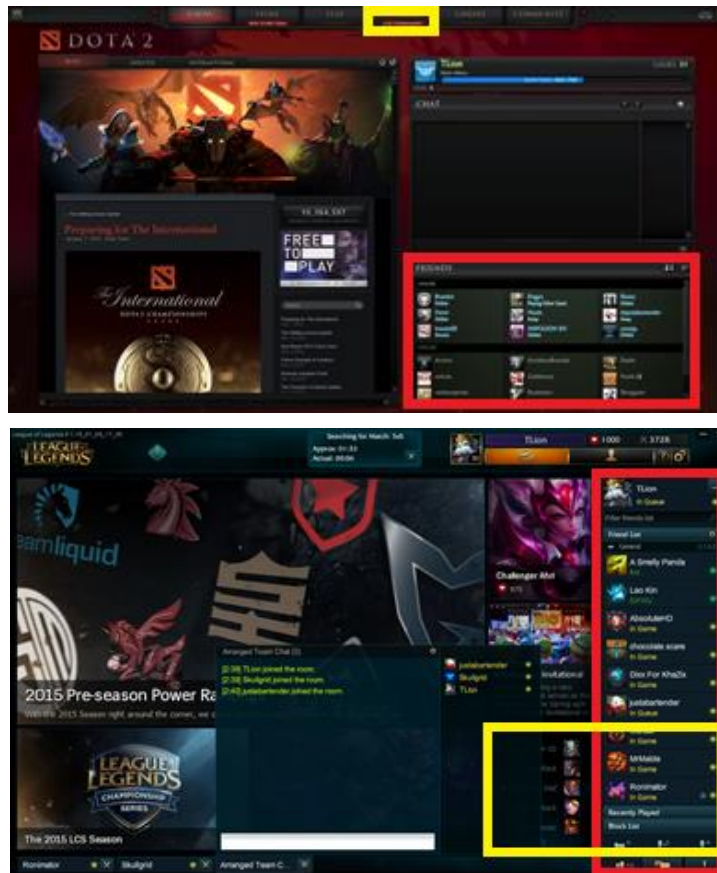


Figure 1: The in-game clients for both *DotA 2* (top) and *League of Legends* (bottom). The red box shows the space where players can contact their online friends, organise parties together or discuss things individually. The yellow box shows the space where players can look through recent/current high-levels games and spectate them either individually or as part of a group.

THE STRUCTURE OF DRAMATIC TENSION – MEASURING DRAMA

Before analysing *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* for the presence of drama a working model is needed. As LeBlanc (2006) puts it, we require: ‘some kind of yardstick we can hold up to our game design to determine how well it succeeds or fails at being dramatic’

(p. 442). What LeBlanc is describing here is an ‘aesthetic model’. The most well-known aesthetic model for drama is the dramatic arc (figure: 2):

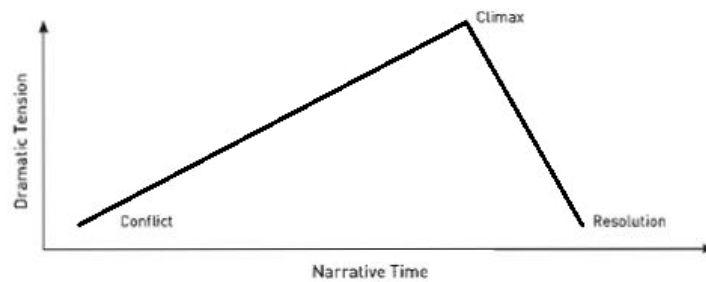


Figure 2: The dramatic arc (from: LeBlanc, 2006, p. 443).

This is the dramatic arc as defined by Freytag (1863). It is a development on the Aristotelean ideal that a story must possess a beginning, middle, and end, all of which must show logical progression and necessary ordering. The model is intended to represent the rising and falling action of a ‘well-told story’, the idea of slow escalation building to final climax and satisfying denouement. It presents the idea of dramatic tension as a quantifiable force which can increase and decrease as time passes and, because of this, the size and proportions of the arc are not important; what must be taken is its *shape*. The shape represents a story as a form of dramatic rubber-band which is carefully stretched, being made progressively tauter until reaching climax, the point where it can be stretched no more, and having to be released, denouement.

It is important to note that, though the dramatic arc is most often applied to a story as a whole, it can also be applied to smaller events within a story; these smaller mini-arcs are referred to by Burroway et al. (2011) as ‘connections/disconnections’ (p. 225) and show the many complications a hero may face on their journey to resolution. These minor skirmishes each follow their own, smaller dramatic arc which contribute to the overall dramatic arc of the tale (figure: 3). If we can imagine ourselves zooming into the arc then it would be possible to see these connections/disconnections within almost every scene of a movie, act of a play or level of a game:

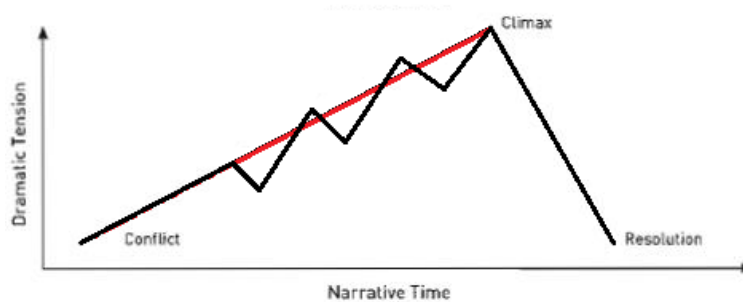


Figure 3: The many miniature complications which can make up a dramatic arc. The red line shows the original arc while the black line shows the connections/disconnections which make up a full arc.

THE INGREDIENTS OF DRAMA - HOW IS DRAMA CREATED?

The above model gives one idea of what drama could look like, the patterns it may follow, but still leaves the question: how is drama created? Drama, within Western storytelling at least, is often said to come from conflict –either immediate conflict or the knowledge of conflict in the future. Borroway et al. (2011) writes of conflict as the fundamental element of fiction whilst Robert Olen Butler (Berry, 2012) describes fiction as the art form of human yearning –saying that it is the yearning of characters, alongside the thwarted or blocked attempts at fulfilling this yearning, which provides the scenes around which plot is constructed. This concept can also be applied to the structure of a MOBA: both teams are provided with an objective (a yearning) and it is the many attempts of the characters (players) to reach this objective, combined with the opposing players’ attempts to stop them, which creates the dramatic elements of the performance. Using this definition it seems necessary for any game which involves two teams with differing objectives to have a certain level of dramatic tension – a sentiment consistent with the writings of Marc LeBlanc (2006): ‘drama originates from conflict [...] in a game, the conflict comes from the *contest* around which the game is built’ (p. 444). Building on this, LeBlanc (2006) offers two different factors which must coexist before drama can be produced:

- *Uncertainty* without which the outcome becomes predictable.
- *Inevitability* without which the outcome seems distant.

These two factors combine in order to create experiences where players/spectators are uncertain who the winner will be whilst also being acutely aware that a winner will, eventually and inevitably, be crowned. LeBlanc (2006) goes on to describe various tools which can be used within the design of digital games in order to produce both uncertainty and inevitability. These tools form a potential aesthetic model for the analysis of *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* as, by knowing the sorts of features which a game can include in order to emphasise dramatic tension, we will be more equipped to recognise them when they are at play. This is a key tool if we are to properly identify the ways in which *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* create dramatic tension for both players and spectators alike.

METHODOLOGY

DotA 2 and *League of Legends* were chosen as the sample games for this analysis because they are the most played and financially successful games within the MOBA genre (Maiberg, 2014; Grubb, 2014). Though neither of these games can be credited with the creation of e-Sports (an activity which finds its origins in the 1970s {Taylor, 2012}) they can be credited, at least in part, with the recent absorption of digital game spectation into main-stream gaming culture and are important if we are to consider properly the ways in which e-Sports create dramatic tension.

Data collection for this paper began in 2013 through the author’s playing and spectation of both *DotA 2* and *League of Legends*. In this time the author has played over three-hundred hours of *League of Legends* and spectated a larger number of hours cumulatively between both *League of Legends* and *DotA 2*. The games’ match-based structuring and constant evolution through patching means that it is impossible for them to be ‘played to completion’ as more traditional, narratively-structured digital games could be, and, for this reason, a complete experience of every possible variation of play within these games, even with 300 hours of game play, cannot be assumed. The quantity of play and spectation, however, should provide a solid basis for analysis. Though various different modes of play are available within both games this analysis will focus on the most

common modes for competitive play: Captain's Draft within *DotA 2* and Summoner's Rift - Draft Pick within *League of Legends*.

Data collection was completed through both play and spectation and compiled through the use of Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) toolkit for the qualitative study of digital games. Of the techniques used, the completion of an object inventory was found to be the most useful and focused on the different map objectives present within both of the sampled games, exploring them for ways in which they produced dramatic tension. Analysis was organised through the phase-based organisational structure of MOBAs as suggested by Ferrari (2013) and revolved around the different ways in which these objectives produced dramatic tension through application of LeBlanc's (2006) aesthetic model for dramatic dynamics within games; searching for techniques or design decisions which deliberately produced either inevitability or uncertainty. All of the objectives were also analysed to find if a similar object existed within the alternative game.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Draft Phase

The draft phase occurs before the game begins. Within narrative terms this is the 'exposition' as we are introduced to the characters and performers whom will be taking part within the performance. Within gameplay terms we are watching two teams take turns banning characters that they do not want either team to use and selecting characters whom they do want to use themselves. Selected characters cannot be used by the opposing team whilst banned characters are denied from both teams.

Both teams can only take so long over their choices before they are punished; this is a very simple way of ensuring that inevitability is being maintained within this phase of the game and is referred to as a 'ticking clock' (LeBlanc, 2006) (figure: 4):



Figure 4: The drafting screens within both *DotA 2* (top) and *League of Legends* (bottom). The red circle shows the location of the ‘ticking clock’ as discussed above. The yellow box shows information on which champions have been banned. The blue box shows information on which champions have been selected.

Dramatic uncertainty is maintained throughout the Draft Phase via ‘hidden information’ (Costikyan, 2013) and ‘semi-transparency’ of the information which is presented (Ferrari, 2013). To begin with spectators are titillated by the uncertainty of which characters will be selected but, as more selections are ‘locked in’, this curiosity develops into uncertainty regarding which roles each of those characters will be filling and which other characters will be selected to go alongside them. This information is important to spectators as it provides ‘hints’ as to what they can expect from the performance they are about to spectate: for example, the role of a character will dictate what they do throughout the game (their positioning, the items they purchase, the abilities they learn) and spectators know this, understanding that a character will play very differently if they are picked as a ‘Support’ as opposed to if they are picked as a ‘Tank’. By not making this information immediately evident to spectators, whilst still providing enough for speculation, dramatic tension is being created. An extreme example of this occurs whenever a team selects an unusual character/combination of characters. This is an exciting moment for spectators because at this point uncertainty is maximised. Spectators have no basis for the information they are seeing –they become excited for the experience of a new, unknown variable and strategies which may develop from it. This is also one of the reasons why new characters and balance patches are released so regularly for these games; if specific characters become too centralising then their presence becomes a certainty. Balance is important so that spectators can constantly feel uncertain as to which characters may feature within the next performance.

Opening Phase/Laning Phase

The Opening Phase/Laning Phase involves the different members of both teams separating out into their designated zones or ‘lanes’ across the map. Whilst there is some variation between the ways lanes are constructed within *DotA 2/League of Legends*, the basic, accepted rules remain the same. There is almost always at least one person present within every lane and the aim is always to amass gold/deny gold from your lane opposition whilst also attempting to damage and, hopefully, destroy the opposing teams’ tower. Amassing gold occurs passively over time but is more quickly achieved through the ‘last-hitting’ of lane minions (delivering the killing blow upon the minion and securing the gold from its death for yourself). Of course, delivering these last hits requires proximity to the minions and this is where the concept of ‘denying’ your opponent comes from, harassing them and forcing them away from their main avenue of gold. Destroying the opposing teams’ tower is important as all towers within at least one lane must be destroyed in order for victory to be achieved. Destroying towers also removes ‘map control’ from the opposing team by lowering the number of safe zones they have across the map.

The Opening Phase/Laning Phase occur at the very beginning of the game, making it important that uncertainty is maximised as, at this point, ‘the outcome of the game is unknown, and seems miles away’ (LeBlanc, 2006, p. 445). This is another space where balance is important: spectators cannot feel as though a lane is decided before it has begun, regardless of the characters present there.

As the game progresses the outcome will become necessary clearer and thus uncertainty will decrease and inevitability will increase. However, even at these early stages, inevitability is present. As the Laning Phase progresses both teams begin to deliver damage to the opposing teams' tower; this damage is permanent, every hit moving the game further toward its conclusion. The health of these towers constitutes a 'nonrenewable resource' (LeBlanc, 2006) and represents another ticking clock within the games design. It is only through the attrition and destruction of these towers that victory can be achieved and, by designing the damage of these towers to be a 'nonreversible process' (LeBlanc, 2006), the end of the game is constantly being held in view, being brought ever closer, and prohibiting backward momentum. This same ideal can be seen within the passive gold which players receive. This presents an unavoidable 'forward motion' as characters are constantly becoming more powerful; even if a character is being denied any sort of last hit or experience they are still amassing gold and increasing in power with every passing second.

The biggest threat to uncertainty at this point in the game is one team 'snowballing' (using an early advantage to grow exponentially) from an early advantage into a win with no resistance. This is the worst case scenario for a game which intends to produce dramatic tension as if the outcome seems certain from a very early stage then tedium will quickly set in. In order to decrease the chance of this happening *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* feature various 'negative feedback systems' (LeBlanc, 2006) which handicap players as they approach victory. An example of this can be seen within the towers themselves as the act of attacking a tower puts a player at a necessary disadvantage for a number of reasons. Let us look at the position of the tower upon the top lanes of both *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* (figure 5):



Figure 5: The top lanes of *DotA 2* (top) and *League of Legends* (bottom). The red circle represents the threat range for the towers. This can be viewed as a safe zone for the team which owns the tower (at least in the early stages

of the game). The yellow line represents the battle line where the minions will meet without interference. The blue arrow represents the route from which members of other lanes are most likely to approach if ‘ganking’ (discussed below).

Without player influence minions will gather in the middle of the lane, equidistant from the towers of both teams. As a player attempts to destroy the opposing team’s tower they will require their lane minions to move forward, to ‘tank’ the tower’s attacks and allow them to attack the tower from safety. The act of moving minions forward like this is known as ‘pushing the lane’ and involves a player quickly defeating the opposing minions, ‘pushing’ the battle line forward and closer to the enemy tower. Doing this means that 1) they are forcing their lane opponent closer to their tower and 2) they are moving further away from their own tower. This is known as a ‘decelerator’ (LeBlanc, 2006) and constitutes an ‘illusionary’ technique for producing uncertainty, making the game seem closer than it is without actually ‘forcing’ any change in the power of the two players.

Let us think of this in terms of spectation and hypothetical values: we are spectating a game between two players on the top lane. Player B made some early mistakes or ‘silly plays’ and thus Player A has gained an advantage. Player A has ‘ten points’ and Player B has ‘five points’. This early advantage makes us feel as though Player A’s victory is inevitable, perhaps even certain. Now, imagine that Player A starts to push the lane. This gives Player B the advantage of being within close proximity of their tower (a ‘safe zone’). Let us say that, for as long as Player B fights within this safe zone, they receive a hypothetical environmental bonus of five points (as the tower will assist them with any fights which occur within its perimeter). With this taken into account our scores now stand at: Player A=10 and Player B=5+5. The game is now perceived as even again though the power of the two players has not actually changed. Uncertainty has been restored for as long as Player B stays within the safe zone of their tower. This effect is referred to by fans as a ‘defender’s advantage’.

Of course, the above example assumes that our hypothetical top lane exists within a vacuum which separates itself from the players and influence of all other lanes upon the map. This is not the case. It is common for characters to ‘rotate’ and conduct targeted assassinations upon players within other lanes, usually in order to help a lane which is experiencing trouble or to ‘suppress’ a character who is known for their strength within later stages of the game. This is known as a ‘gank’ and represents a ‘hidden energy’ (LeBlanc, 2006) which spectators need to consider. These ganks can be considered an ‘energy’ as they represent a player’s ability to ‘score’ within their lane (a successful rotation will often lead to the securing of an objective) and this ‘energy’ is ‘hidden’ because it is a factor which spectators are not fully aware of. For a full explanation of this we need to understand that the hypothetical points we used in our previous example were relevant to only that lane: when we assigned a point value of ten to the top laner of Team A and a point value of five to the top laner of Team B what we were really saying was that the top laner of Team A was twice as strong as that of Team B. This point value may be different if the same characters were present within a different lane but spectators cannot be fully certain of this. The segregated structure of the map, the fact that it is separated into different lanes and the tendency for the laning phase to be largely separated into various one-on-one match-ups within the different lanes, means that spectators never have a full understanding of how the different lanes would compare to one another if they

were to interact. In this way the true power of each of the characters is hidden from the spectator.

For example; we are spectating the same game as before and Team A is still winning within the top lane. In response, Team B ‘rotates’ their mid lane character to top lane and performs a ‘gank’. Spectators cannot be certain how effective this gank will be. We are aware that there are two characters fighting one (providing a numbers advantage) but we are also aware that Team A has, until this point, been completely ‘dominating’ within the top lane. Perhaps Team A’s gank will go flawlessly and Team B’s mid lane character is strong enough to defeat Team A’s top laner with only a small amount of help. Alternatively, perhaps the Team B top laner is strong enough to fight both opposing players simultaneously and is about to get a double kill. Spectators can make an educated guess but they cannot be certain as they have yet to see Team A’s mid laner battle Team B’s top laner. The power of the two players is still incomparable, injecting uncertainty into the game.

This uncertainty of incomparable variables only grows as the laning phase comes to an end and the different characters start to come together to form fights involving all members of both teams. Once this occurs the game has begun its transition into the ‘teamfight phase’:

Teamfight Phase

The many minor skirmishes of the Laning Phase are over and we are now approaching the game’s climax. The main goal of both teams has now switched from the slow amassing of gold to the taking of objectives and the pursuit of a final ‘gg push’ (a push which ensures victory, forcing surrender and ‘good game’ from the opposition). For this reason, large confrontations begin to form around objectives. These battles are known as ‘teamfights’ as they often involve all members of both teams. The aim for this phase is for one team to eventually gain an advantage in a fight, through poor positioning of the opposition or any other such factor, and to take objectives using the ‘space’ (opportunity) which that victory provides. *DotA 2* ensures that these fights occur by telling players whenever one of their towers or other objectives is under attack, effectively making a ‘call for arms’ for the defending team and putting pressure on them to respond to the opposite team’s aggressive movement. By encouraging this defensive movement *DotA 2* is creating conflict and thus drama. Though *League of Legends* does not make use of these ‘calls to arms’ it does something similar by giving all members of a team full vision of the areas around their own towers, ensuring that (with proper attention paid) they will always know when the opposing team is attempting to perform a sneak attack on one of their structures.

We discussed in the previous section the ways that objectives within both games (turrets/towers/inhibitors/barracks) are positioned in order to act as ‘decelerators’, to provide advantages to the team which is playing from behind and to give the illusion that the game is closer than it is. As play continues these decelerators become stronger; as we get closer to the opposing team’s base their towers start to hit harder and the greater the distance becomes between our objectives and our closest ‘safe zone’. The strongest decelerator occurs just before players enter into the opposing base (figure: 6):



Figure 6: The innermost tower of the top lane within *Dota 2* (top) and *League of Legends* (bottom). The red circle represents the threat range for the towers. The yellow line represents the walls of the base. Notice that the threat range for the tower covers most of the ‘ramp’ or entrance to the base.

This is the strongest defensive position that a team can have upon the map. While this is a powerful tool for the creation of uncertainty within the game (perhaps Team B can make a perfect defence and mount a counterattack) it also endangers inevitability. If a ‘decelerator’ is too strong then spectators begin to doubt if the game will ever end; the game begins to stagnate and inevitability disappears. Spectators do not wish to watch a game where it feels as though Team A will certainly win but that the winning move is a great distance away. One way to combat this is through positive feedback systems designed to break the equilibrium of the decelerators and to move the game toward its final denouement (LeBlanc, 2006). Within *Dota 2* and *League of Legends* this comes in the form of neutral objectives upon the map. These are objectives which are outside of either team’s immediate zone of influence but which provide powerful bonuses to whichever team can ‘secure’ them. These objectives present opportunities for a team which is ahead to gain incomparable advantages over their opponents, advantages which help in the short term and allow them to ‘break the base’ of the opposition. The largest neutral objectives, and the objectives which we will be analysing here, take the form of Roshan and Baron Nashor within *Dota 2* and *League of Legends* respectively (*League of Legends* also has a secondary ‘large objective’ known as Dragon but for the purpose of this analysis we will be focusing exclusively on Baron Nashor –though many of the points made could also be made regarding Dragon).

Here is the positioning of Roshan and Baron Nashor upon the maps of both games (figure: 7):



Figure 7: The minimaps of *Dota 2* (left) and *League of Legends* (right). The red circle represents the location of Roshan. The purple circle represents the location of Baron Nashor.

Both Roshan and Baron Nashor are powerful creatures with large health pools and highly damaging attacks, designed to require multiple teammates working together in order to be defeated and offering, in exchange for this effort, substantial bonuses to whichever team delivers the last hit. These bonuses come not only in the form of gold and experience but also in larger, more substantial and unique rewards. By defeating Roshan a team gains access to The Aegis of the Immortal, a beating heart which gives its carrier a second life, whilst Baron Nashor provides the Hand of Baron buff, an aura which increases the power of all minions standing near its possessor. It is important to note that both of these bonuses are fleeting (the Aegis is eventually reclaimed and the Hand of Baron only lasts for three minutes, or until its possessor dies). This means that teams who have gained these advantages cannot wait for these neutral creatures to spawn repeatedly and stall a game out that way, maintaining inevitability. Both of these bonuses are mechanically different but functionally similar; they are ‘base-breakers’ and they force inevitability upon the game.

The structure of our game, the script of the performance, seems simple then: Team A gets ahead within the laning phase but, because of the decelerators and ‘defenders advantage’ of Team B, cannot win immediately. This means that they wait until they have created enough ‘space’ to be able to take Roshan/Baron Nashor and use that advantage to tip the scales in their favour and win. Unfortunately, these objectives become a more daunting task when we realise that they also act as decelerators. Let us look to the surrounding areas of both Roshan and Baron Nashor (figure: 8):



Figure 8: The ‘pits’ of Roshan in *DotA 2* (left) and Baron Nashor in *League of Legends* (right). The yellow line represents the wall of these pits. Notice the compactness of these pits alongside their singular entrance/exit.

Players who are fighting within these pits are forced to stand close together, limiting their manoeuvrability and making them susceptible to area of effect damage. Teams which enter into the pit are placing themselves at a large and noticeable disadvantage, reminiscent of the advantage which we discussed towers giving players before. This decelerator is much stronger, however, as the presence of whole teams within the pit means that it is often possible for entire teams, teams which were ahead before, to be defeated at the same time (known as being ‘aced’ or ‘wiped’). This provides a large amount of gold/experience to the team who won whilst also gifting them with the ‘space’ necessary for them to either take Roshan/Baron Nashor themselves or collect other objective on the map.

Moments like this re-establish uncertainty within a game which spectators thought was over. This is, in part, because of an effect known as ‘escalation’ which means that the longer the game goes on the quicker the score is capable of changing (LeBlanc, 2006). This effect is created through the scaling power of the characters present within a MOBA. For example, near the beginning of the game it could take twenty seconds of non-stop attacking for a player to destroy a tower, but this timeframe will decrease as characters become stronger and slowly outscale the towers until, eventually, it may be possible for the destruction of a tower to be achieved within only three seconds. This, combined with respawn timers (the amount of time a player is ‘dead’) which exponentially increase as the strength of a character grows, means that it is possible for the ‘score’ of the game to change very quickly if the opportunity to ‘ace’ an advantaged team presents itself late within a game.

Endgame

Eventually a teamfight will occur from which the opposing team cannot recover. This is the point where the climax is surpassed and the Endgame begins. LeBlanc (2006) describes the climax of the game as the ‘moment of realisation: the moment when the outcome of the contest is known, and the uncertainty has been dispelled’ (p. 445). Within *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* these moments of dismissed uncertainty and looming inevitability often come after a particularly disastrous teamfight; all five members of Team A are defeated and Team B has two free minutes to secure the final objectives and win the game (something which they do quickly due to the escalation discussed above).

At this point uncertainty and inevitability are not important: rather, what is important is that players and spectators alike are provided with closure. It must be clear at this point why the losers lost and the winners won. Within both *DotA 2* and *League of Legends* a large part of this closure is provided through a post-mortem of the performance (figure: 9). These statistics tell spectators and players alike the number of kills, deaths, and assists each player had, the ‘net worth’ of their character (the amount of gold they had accumulated), and the number of objectives they had secured. This information is often the subject of commentator analysis or social dissection –discussion of the information as a justification for why the outcome turned out the way that it did. This is important as, without this, games can feel incomplete, confusing or random. Dramatic tension can linger and spectators without an understanding of why the game has ended can feel lost and unsatisfied.



Figure 9: The post-game screens of both *Dota 2* (top) and *League of Legends* (bottom). The red box shows kill, death, assist scores. The yellow box shows economic details. The blue box shows the levels of each of the characters. Each of these pieces of information presents possible reasons for why a team may have lost a game (being behind in kills, gold, or experience).

CONCLUSION

Within the discussion and examples above we have considered the various ways in which the two most popular games within the MOBA genre encourage dramatic tension through creating feelings of uncertainty and inevitability within spectators. In doing this we analysed the ways in which these games could be considered performative and also identified and applied an aesthetic model of dramatic dynamics. Very little theoretical work has been done on the culture of digital game spectatorship or the design of games which take advantage of it and, though this paper has focused on the structure of MOBAs, by positing and expanding upon the idea of games as performance there is hope that future studies will have a starting point to build from in analysis of other e-Sports games or genres. The increasing diversity in available viewing platforms presents opportunities for the attraction of increasingly large audiences and plays a role in the continued growth of e-Sports. The opportunity of diversification of audience which the online nature of e-Sports offers is not exclusive to MOBAs and it would be of particular interest to see whether other genres of popular e-Sport games (first-person-shooters such as *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* {Sledgehammer Games, 2014} or real-time-strategy games such as *Starcraft II* {Blizzard Entertainment, 2010}) follow this aesthetic model of dramatic tension or if another, better model exists. The view of e-Sports as a spectator and performative medium opens up new avenues of accessibility and diversity within

digital game culture and it is my hope that future scholars will be able to use some of the ideas presented here as stepping stones for similar or expansive discussions or, at the very least, as a challenge to the ways in which they traditionally think about e-Sports.

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