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Assimilation Ideology in *League of Legends*: Crafting and Dismantling Constructed Identities on
Summoner's Rift

Recent years have witnessed the intersection between interactive media and the academic community, evolving to consolidate the significant position video games hold within scholarly literature. Alina Petra Marinescu Nenciu, in her critical examination of art games, argues that social game communities are just as—if not more—valuable to the rhetoric of art games as “procedurality and creative gameplay,” establishing the significant role players hold as co-founders of a game’s intended purpose (1).¹ Given the collaborative nature of game space, this indicates complications that arise when taking into account the various game genres and their separate audiences. Rather than the game or an individual alone, the interpretation of a message is refined by the community and its discussions, and yet a wide selection of games and their players exist that lack any intention to convey meaningful insights. These leisure games maintain no particular stance on societal concerns but, rather, hold both explicit and implicit manifestations of issues that reflect our lived world and can be openly accessed by its users. That is not to say, however, that casual games are incapable of social critique. In contrast, they maintain a degree of influence that extends beyond those of games made specifically to be activist.

¹The label, “art games,” refers to serious games which consciously attempt to convey a particular message about life and society. They often reflect a concern about an aspect of the modern world and act as art objects to be interpreted as social commentary.

When it comes to *League of Legends*, this ambivalence reveals an inconsistent representation of social and cultural interaction within creative play. Accordingly, the virtual worlds of many games are made jointly by their developers and players, who inevitably bring elements of “self” into a constant cycle of rebuilding and reforming space. What differentiates *League of Legends* from most other games, however, is its unprecedented furthering of those social implications. Released in 2009, the multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA) *League of Legends* is centered around player-versus-player combat, where a team fights as selectable “champions” to defeat the opposing team. Although there are several available options, in the main game mode and the focus of this research, normal Summoner’s Rift, a team of five wins by pushing into—and destroying—the primary objective structure in their enemy’s base: the nexus.² These victories, especially because the game concedes much strategic agency to its users, are often dependent on player skill, knowledge, and game awareness, both at an individual and team level. This has reignited ongoing conversations regarding intelligence and interactive media, such as in the psychological study, “‘Because I’m Bad at the Game!’ A Microanalytic Study of Self Regulated Learning in *League of Legends*,” where scholar Erica Kleinman shares Marinescu’s acknowledgment of the gap between individuals’ game experiences, but attributes that disconnect to their intentions when playing a game (10). Even while the game’s design lends itself to making self-assessment and self-evaluation so accessible, I contend that *League of Legends* captures a human desire for enculturation, an extension not to be overlooked by present controversies on the critical impacts of imaginative play on patterns of human society and culture.

²Summoner’s Rift is a map used for several game modes. There are also many other maps, each offering vastly different styles of gameplay. The main game mode, however, is often referred to as “norms” by the *League* community, and is unanimously the classic queue type.

While it integrates imaginative function with aspects of lived reality that are seemingly inescapable, the game grants its users a copious level of agency over play; its multidisciplinary elements allow a wide degree of individual freedom in terms of unrestricted play style and engagement. Through visual analysis of artistic design, this research will evaluate how the game orients perspective and identity towards dominant, real world power systems. From this vantage point, a rediscovery of *League of Legends*' fantasy and storytelling through narrative and historical lenses will reveal co-dependencies between intended environment and representation in its worldmaking. Even still, the elements of interactive gameplay are significant factors that intensify the game's regulation of consciousness, perpetuating a culture centered around power and dominance that posits binary oppositions between a player's self and excludable others. The game's more recent attempts to control and limit player agency, through an ethical lens, have been undermined by the seemingly incompatible implementation of advocacy within a leisure game. Because of the permeable barrier that exists between them and reality, we often look at video game worlds as mediums to engage with persistent communities that react to and shape society. Such implications are inevitable, but *League of Legends*' multifaceted construction of an interdisciplinary game world promotes the adoption of assigned identities and provides moral incentives for the prevailing culture, thus facilitating assimilation ideologies. The goal of this research, then, is to explore how *League of Legends* implements multidisciplinary worldbuilding that reinforces social identities and ideologies desired by the prevailing culture—encouraging the internalization of power-oriented perspectives—and to negotiate constructive awareness of enculturation and assimilation during play in interactive worlds.



Figure 1. A map of Summoner's Rift

These intricacies are brought forth on Summoner's Rift, a battlefield landscape that houses various obtainable resources and comprises a virtual environment, constituting a structured interactive space to encourage othering notions of allies in relation to enemies. This arena consists of each team's base on opposite sides, three connecting lanes, and a wide river that runs across the map, separating its halves. Objective structures and minions, non-playable entities that exist solely to defend their bases, are visually differentiated by their color to designate which team they belong to. By default, the player's team is represented in a cool blue tone: seen to embody freedom and heroism, while opponents are painted a directly contrasting red: a color often associated with intimidation and control. Although this display qualifies as an aid for visual clarity, the innate contrast ultimately serves as a juxtaposition between the teams of players, emphasizing a binary opposition between allies and enemies—a classification that rejects certain individuals—and forces upon them an otherness that, otherwise, would have been less rigid in its severance. Sociologist Olaf Kühne speculates that this materialization of landscapes in games such as *League of Legends* is synthesized in response to “certain internalized, especially aesthetic” and cultural, contents of individual consciousness (3). Despite this discrepancy with Marinescu's confrontation of game message interpretation, which relies on

creative interaction and procedurality rather than self-concept, a reconciliation of both observations reveals there are decisive game environment contributions in stimulating perspective alignment. Given the divisive function of conflicting visibilities, *League of Legends* activates an oriented world model, denoting presumptions of self-superiority through exclusionary representation.

This highlights an insuperable conscious gap between opposing teams, and yet the game's spatial design of landscape defines further chasms between players even within the same team, with Summoner's Rift forming a "stage" prepared to accommodate players in their assertive "performances." Three lanes are evenly spaced across the terrain, each of their otherwise clear pathways interrupted by several turret structures distributed throughout both sides of the map, where weaponized towers integrated by the arena instigate the development of militant and territorial dispositions.³ Meanwhile, jungle areas fill in the regions between them, their overgrown and lush design lacking the artificial architecture found in the lanes. These visual distinctions between regions make for the emergence of spatial awareness which, as they become living realizations of the landscape's fantasy, develop a player's sense of territory. Individuals inherit an anxiety over allegiance and devotion to the land with this transformative image of the battlefield as they travel and act across space. This series of relational divisions serves an ideological function; *League of Legends* alienates individuals from each other—both across teams and within them—by distorting their perception of the "other" through visual representation that insists on incompatibility in itself, and thus, characterizes a validating fantasy of self-serving play. The players, who learn to develop caution and sensitivity towards these distinctions, subconsciously grow dependent on the systematic division of players into these

³For each of the two bases on Summoner's Rift, there are two turret towers guarding the Nexus, and for each of the three lanes, there is a tower in front of an inhibitor structure which guards a base entrance, an inner, and an outer tower.

categories, which reduce individuals to an “other” to be defeated. As Kühne (1) and Marinescu (3) suggest, equivocal game interpretations depend on the individuals who engage with them. However, there must be a reciprocal awareness that the spatial construction within the medium invites subconscious assimilation, and therefore, introduces new complications of perception that extend into the “real” world.

Accessing this landscape in the virtual world of *League of Legends* as a “stage” first requires that players embody selectable characters, whose visual designs bind the individual to predefined perspectives and representations that justify and preserve the “status quo.” Among nearly two hundred playable champions, there are just five or so that are officially non-binary; all of them nonhuman, either monstrous or machine-like avatars.⁴ For spectators, Kindred, one of *League*’s few non-binary avatars, is the game’s way of offering players an opportunity to express gender neutrality. When dissected, however, we see that “they” are really “he” and “she”—a female Lamb and a male Wolf—consisting of two entities who form a team playable as a single

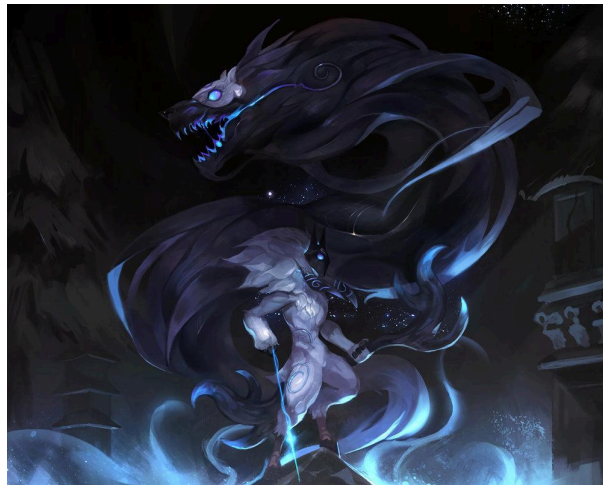


Figure 2. Kindred is a team (female Lamb and male Wolf), rather than a single character

⁴As of patch 14.11, a game update which was released on May 30th, 2024, non-binary champions include Blitzcrank (a robot), Fiddlesticks (a demon), Kindred (the twin essences of “death”), Cho’Gath (a monster), and Nocturne (a demonic entity). While Taliyah is rumored to be transgender, that remains a mere speculation by the community.

champion. Thus, what first seems to be sensitivity to inclusive presentation reverts back to a binary social system that draws upon visual masculine and feminine distinctions, and an inability to humanize non-binary identities. When it comes to a multiplayer online game that enables social interaction, “the level of identification” plays a significant role in self-concept and the feeling of “belonging to a certain group” (Kordyaka and Hribersek 4). However, even beyond affirming heteronormative codes that already dominate much of the game’s assemblage of self, *League of Legends*, by incompletely attempting to “lose” social norms, ensures that those normative paths are ultimately inescapable. Raising disproportionate ratios of representation, the game’s design of characters—whose identities are to be assumed by its players—articulates a false sense of compromise with gender identity and expression that not only discourages deviation from this binary classification of gender identity, but expects individuals to conform to socially accepted standards.

In maintaining this gender binary and its systems of power, *League of Legends* corroborates stereotypes through a monitoring of characterization that reduces the individual to a set of hierarchical beliefs attributed to capitalism, that are inherited by the self and, in turn, enforced upon its “others”. Further inspection of Kindred’s design raises questions of intentionality behind designing the female as the white Lamb and the male as the black Wolf. This reveals a binary opposition situated visually through both animals and shades, a cultural semiotic of innocence being victim to raw sexuality that, like a majority of *League*’s champion designs, draws upon gender stereotypes in mass media where—as Gege Gao stresses—“women are usually perceived as passive, subordinate, and dependent to men” (308). In addition to Bastian Kordyaka and Sidney Hribersek’s observations of gender stereotype exchanges in

League of Legends (3), female characters throughout the game are often presented “with [sexual] and improper clothes” (Gao et al. 308). These are prominent concerns, but it must also be



Figure 3. Miss Fortune, a pirate captain

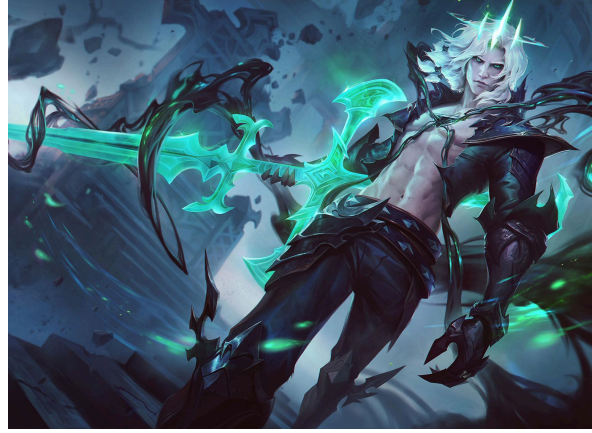


Figure 4. Viego, the ruined king

emphasized that male champions in *League of Legends* are subject to this trend of sexualization as well, frequently depicted with exposed and exaggerated masculine bodies—such as Viego, Sett, and Sylas, to name a few. In Shaun Prescott’s interview with Riot Games’ champion designer August Browning, he reveals that characters are made to “feel a certain way” since, as a business, the game company’s main priority is to keep players engaged.⁵ Particularly as interest and attraction become ingrained in development processes, intentionality behind the deployment of visual clichés reveals capitalist motivations to capture dominant societal preferences, which fundamentally justifies excitement for sexualization as functions of social dominance. As players engage with them through gameplay, visual portrayals of characters as standardized objects become integrated with human activity in the world—in turn, affixing internalized stereotypes of identity to participation in the virtual space—which limits the game environment to one that asks

⁵With its free-to-play business model, *League of Legends* is monetized through purchasable character customizations. Thus, visual design is a concern for the company.

players to laud conventionalism and further enforce it upon “others” who disrupt that accepted normality.

In the wake of landscape and avatars, the simulacrum narrative of *League of Legends* defines historical and cultural contexts that, by enriching the world in which settings and characters interact, motivates the adoption of the ideologies promoted through its visual mediums. Lore about Runeterra, *League of Legends*'s fictional universe, is conveyed through fragments of historical context scattered throughout stories associated with each champion in the game, that allows its designs to maintain thematic cohesion across parts of the world as it evolves.⁶ Additionally, what makes this game unique from most others is that, despite extensively portraying fictional archeology, “following a storyline or narrative is not required” for gameplay, but may instead offer sensationalism (Landa and Thompson 1). In the original story, the Institute of War had been established to maintain peace in Runeterra, designating Summoner's Rift as a place to settle conflicts through Summoners—players—who would summon copies of champions from their world to battle in an alternate dimension. In this version, *League of Legends* was the main source of lore: an axis from which storylines introduced the structural schemes of the map and its content. But Riot Games has since torn down the old timeline to reconstruct it, erasing Summoner's Rift from Runeterra's history, and thus, no longer framing *League of Legends* as the anchor of narrative, but as an abandoned temporospatial realm of displaced images and copies of ideas to be traced back to no other origin but itself: a simulacrum.⁷ Therefore, the renouncement of narrative reveals a neutralization of reality in mediated storytelling, but this series of disconnects and inversions of storyworld

⁶The world of Runeterra is built collectively both inside and outside *League of Legends*. Cinematic trailers, online official posts, animated series, and related games from Riot contribute to the development of narrative, giving its history, geography, civilizations, religions, magic, etc.

⁷In 2014, the company behind *League of Legends*, Riot Games, revised the game's backstory to allow the development team more creative freedom, scattering much of the old lore, and silently discarding several elements of its storyline.

building serves another crucial ideological function by projecting an otherness onto the player. It alienates Runeterra from the “real” world and further alienates the game world from that fictional universe, distorting the individual’s sense of estrangement and familiarity, to dismantle pre-existing ideological systems to promote the authority of its own. In his analysis of video game narratives, game studies researcher Gerald Farca argues against the disposability of lore, and instead suggests that video games are a powerful medium through which players can immersively experience and “alter narrative delivery or even story itself” (6). But when we introduce narratives to design goals in a medium where they influence each other, they reveal unprecedented complications that arise from the very nature of storytelling within interactive spaces. If Farca claims that player engagement can alter narratives, then in turn, game narratives have the potential to alter immersive player experience. Therefore, because they are able to obscure settings and characters, the primary implication of storytelling within *League of Legends* is not limited to imitating phenomenalism, but extended to enhancing true interactivity and insistently furthering the ideologies of that virtual world to the individual through gameplay. Just as design is modeled after narrative goals, storytelling in a game serves a supplementary function to the adoption of ideologies presented by those elements of design—aiding assimilation frames within the game. These series of narrative worldmaking define how immersion is shaped through social and cultural interaction by individuals, and thus, the degree to which they realize identities and perspectives through gameplay in *League of Legends*.

With this reconciliation of its stage, narratives, and actors, *League of Legends* crafts othering incentives embedded in the game’s design that encourage expansionist and exploitation ideologies, justifying the moral codes of the dominant culture to prompt a desire for its preservation. Because the primary goal for each team over the course of a match is to push into

and destroy the enemy team’s base, individual performance is calculated through kills, deaths, and participation in claiming objectives, which is publicly displayed and rewarded with in-game bonuses. Since the game urges self-monitoring and evaluation, Kleinman’s previous observation of gaps in player experience resurfaces, suggesting that these game features escalate “attributions and adaptations” while asking individuals to self-reflect (3). In this way, power and dominance become a shared ambition among players in the game—structuring its gameplay into dominance, competence, and deference hierarchies—and turn not only the acceptance of those ideologies, but their execution into social and moral obligations that are perpetuated throughout both the virtual and lived worlds. Meanwhile, the game objectives include killing enemy entities, structures, and jungle monsters, all of which may reward the player with in-game currency used to purchase self-strengthening items and experience to upgrade their character’s abilities. Bigger objectives come with bigger rewards, such as four types of elemental dragons that, when slain, transform the terrain and boost that team’s combat statistics according to their elements. This



Figure 5. Teams compete to slay monsters in the jungle for rewards exploitation of the land and its resources are competed for, providing individuals a predatory perspective of the world that glorifies materialistic values. By incentivizing disruptive movement through space as heroic conduct—conquest-oriented intrusion upon enemy others to enhance the

self—the game allows players to indulge in the pleasures of an expansionist fantasy, a subconscious acquisition of those ideals as not only faultless, but necessary to achieve a certain world vision that has been made both righteous and desired.

To further the worlds and ideologies desired in *League of Legends*, its interactive space presents to players certain freedoms and limitations over play style and strategy—enabling the manipulation of game mechanics to reinforce incentives—that facilitate the realization of players’ roles as actors, motivating them to adopt the identities they are assigned. In a typical Summoner’s Rift game, players select from five unique roles on either team, decide what champions to play, and ban certain characters from the enemy team. While preferences are considered to an extent, certain limitations in selection priority may force some players to fulfill roles that are undesired.⁸ Even without this limitation, given the collaborative nature of the game, design pressure to maintain the status quo often forces players to assume identity-limiting roles, such as female players who “tend to be afraid of being criticized” and are far more likely to play support and other passive roles, rather than aggressive ones (Gao et al. 314). While fascinated by the tensions that emerge from player agency and underlying design bias, I believe that *League of Legends* does not merely offer opportunities to actualize normative performances. Rather, the game indoctrinates players to concede to dominant systems of beliefs and adopt identities that, through evasive promises of agency, are concealed until subconsciously internalized and reinforce stereotypes of the prevailing culture by social convention, ultimately imposing assimilation ideologies onto the individual.

Fostering this distorted frame of agency and intentionality further, as a multiplayer game, communication is an essential mechanic that allows allies, enemies, and the game system to

⁸In a normal Summoner’s Rift game, only one person may fill each role, there can be no duplicate champions in a match, and random players may be grouped into the same team, occasionally revealing conflicting interests.

impart information to the player, and makes desirable worlds heavily reliant on groups of people coordinating their values and beliefs into action. Players are also free to participate in activity within the boundaries of the game's interactive design, such as movement across space in Summoner's Rift, pursuit of objectives, or employment of game strategies. Contrary to the value Marinescu attributes to game community discussions, social anthropologist Max Watson claims that in multiplayer game spaces such as Summoner's Rift, social interaction and online communication are "arguably secondary to playing itself" (239). While both maintain indispensable significance to game interpretation and experience, because players are able to maintain such high levels of agency, the large variance in potential outcome when it comes to how mechanics can be manipulated reveals that in casual games, players tend to bring vastly different intentions for interactive play to the same space.⁹ It should be recognized, then, that *League of Legends*'s design extends its social and cultural implications to audiences even further than serious games with insightful messages, since the intentionality which draws them to it as a particular medium proves far less limiting. These ideologies, then, tend to perpetuate more aggressively when individuals are unaware and unconfined to a strict structure of participation, allowing *League of Legends* to more strongly redirect the social acceptance and curation of identities.

Precisely because *League of Legends* is a casual game—accommodating a wide range of audiences and intentionalities—its influence lies with communities much broader than those of games explicitly labeled as serious commentary and, therefore, more extensively promotes social enculturation. Appropriately enough, the distorting nature of simulacrum is revitalized through Summoner's Rift and permeates to external world communities that respond to the game's layers

⁹Gameplay can be for fun, serious competition, etc. Some may find entertainment through harassment, while others may be professional gamers.

of mediated representations, reducing authenticity to a point where the worth of sincere advocacy has been effaced, a community of which communication studies professor Mia Consalvo observes may “decide to shun” malicious behavior, “rather than do something radical” such as actively advocating for change (338). To a certain extent, its intentionality indeed remains ambiguous, but the game’s designs and incentives carry underlying implications which inevitably affect the individuals who interact within its virtual world so that, despite being a leisure game, *League* still reveals societal concerns, remapping relations between individuals, society, and culture in a way so that its players become completely dependent on problematic notions. *League of Legends*, being a game with team-based structure where failures quickly accumulate into heavy disadvantages, constructs a world that traps players, catching individuals in a reproduction loop of toxic interaction, by promoting antagonistic and othering ideologies. Although the broadness and complexity of that term often leads to a misinterpretation of offensive behaviors, Jeremy Thomas Miner, in his analysis of gaming culture, emphasizes the game’s toxicity stereotypes, and suggests that expressions may have different interpretations between the game and real world cultures (15). In response to this, the game has implemented various features, including an honors system that rewards sportsmanship and punishments for frustrating behaviors, such as intentionally sabotaging performance or making offensive comments.¹⁰ Given these recent pushes for social change, Marinescu and Rughinis’ clarification of the ambiguous “aim to stimulate ethical reflection” in video games, where players maintain “decisive contribution in formulating” game world morality, comes to life (7).

¹⁰Toxic behavior includes the concept of “griefing”, where players find entertainment in trolling—making deliberate provocations—and intentionally sabotaging their own team. Alternatively, players with low performance, regardless of honest effort, may also be reported.

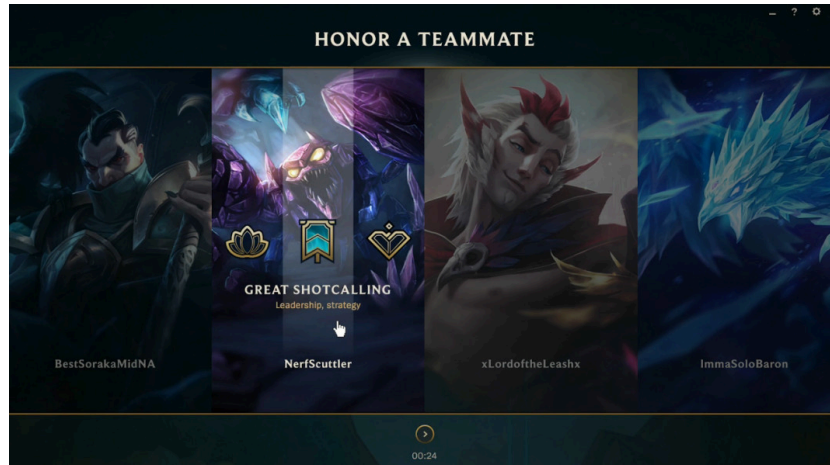


Figure 6. After a game, players may honor a teammate

However, the *League of Legends* community tends to misuse these design efforts, once again challenging the ability of its interactive game world as a vehicle to deliver serious insights. Although this feature has since been restricted, players would abuse the honor system by honoring the worst player on their team, leading individuals with higher honor records to be shunned in future games. But this perversion of social critique on Summoner's Rift unpacks an alternative perception of intentionality in *League of Legends*, in which explicit social action elicits vastly different audience responses because individual perception is directly inherited from ideology posited by the game world and lived society. The threat posed upon human activity through built worlds, then, calls into question the interactive medium itself—perhaps superficial liberalism and diversity, when insincerely supported without addressing its ethical roots in that world, may break immersion. Significantly, affirmative action in *League of Legends* coupled with its assimilation frames blurs the boundary that separates the game and real worlds. Thus, interaction with video games provides opportunities to engage with society in virtual worlds where interaction crosses cultural and social barriers. I believe that we must negotiate these terms of participation and remain conscious of how *League of Legends* facilitates the

assignment and adoption of ideologies and identities—which are not fixed, but rather, multifaceted combinations of varied perspectives—through interactive play.

Cultural artifacts are mediums through which humans imagine desired worlds and raise questions about lived reality. The means through which we negotiate these visions, however, grow increasingly complex under the dynamic nature of interactive spaces, changing in accordance with audience input that varies greatly by nature. Although Alina Petra Marinescu Nenciu establishes the significance of participatory culture in art games (8), which turns out to have major contributions to *League of Legends*' social and cultural implications, we must not neglect that the game itself prompts that community to epitomize assimilation ideologies of the presiding culture. While the virtual game world reflects, and therefore, inherits values from society, I contend that the multidisciplinary elements of Summoner's Rift's interactive world both explicitly and implicitly assign and urge players to adopt identities and perspectives, even while they may be undesired. In doing so, this video game builds a world that induces players to actualize roles that, whether consciously or not, inhibit the individual's deviation from a "normative" system. I find no fault in the appreciation of *League of Legends*, but as humans continue to participate in the construction of its world, it is crucial that we remain conscious of its repercussions that extend to the real world. Consequently, we must actively seek critical analyses of how *League of Legends* and other casual games, being less restricted in audience than serious games, redirect players' perceptions of the Self in relation to the Other. This requires that we acknowledge and consider the dynamic relationship between human participation and world (re)imagining, and investigate how institutions may take advantage of video games—which act simultaneously as spaces for immersion and escape—to develop existing and construct new societies in our lived world.

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