

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: League of Legends
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Genre: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)
Release Date: October 2009
Developer: Riot Games
Publisher: Riot Games; Garena
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Marc Merrill; Brandon Beck

Overview

League of Legends started with a story. A clear-cut tale of misty-cloaked Summoners who possessed the power to call upon one of many legendary champions to battle in their name. The origins and the tales of these champions were obscure and filled with mystery. Besides giving “Summoners” a satisfactory feel for the champions they could play, their stories remained in the background of the player experience and lingered neatly on the sidelines of what the original story had to offer.

Back in 2009, *League of Legends* started with a story—but in the 12 years since its launch, it has exploded into a universe.

A universe that boasts of furry, poison-darting gremlins, ancient resurrected gods, treacherous orange-devouring pirates and enslaved star-forgers so powerful that they hold universes within the palms of their hands. *League of Legends* has long departed from its initial focus on the Summoner. Champions are no longer simply “Legends”, mythical beings of greatness that we do not truly understand—they now stand as living, breathing characters whose identities and backgrounds are now within the players’ reach.

This type of storytelling—where the book never closes on any one chapter, where there is a constantly growing universe of character-driven stories—is unique. This is what I call **frontier narrative** and it will be further explained in the Breakdown. With the chronicle always at the forefront of discovery, narrative is given a golden opportunity to thrive.

While these stories necessarily stop short of taking the helm from the actual gameplay that has pushed *League of Legends* to its height within the MOBA and Esports world,

they peek out through the details. Overall, *League of Legends*' narrative only becomes more widespread and immersive as time goes on.

Characters

If this review was done a few years earlier, then an exploration of the established constructs of the *League of Legends* universe would certainly be in order—a tour of the land called Runeterra and its many thriving factions would be essential. Better yet, it would've demanded an inescapable survey of the roles that dominate gameplay on the battlefield known as Summoner's Rift. However, this is a review on today's *League of Legends*. While the characters explored below are a mere sample of what *League* has to offer, they each embody narrative elements unique to *League*.

- **Annie** - One of the first champions to grace Summoner's Rift, Annie is *League*'s beloved dark child. After losing her mother, Annie became a little girl battling powers beyond her control with her only guiding light lost. The only physical memory left of her mother lived on in the small, hand-sewn teddy bear Tibbers she kept by her side. Unable to control her powers when emotional, Annie killed the last of her family in an unbridled outburst of pyromancy. With no one and nowhere to call home, the pitiable girl finds solace within the towering dark woods of Noxus, forever wandering and forever in search of a companion just like herself. As a character and a champion, Annie is significant for two reasons:
 - **Flagship Character** - A complex character like Annie, with a whimsical twist on light and dark, is symbolic of the diversity and the unorthodoxy that *League* continues to strive for when creating champions and narratives [1].
 - **Ability & Lore Connection** - Annie became one of the best feats of ludonarrative integration when Riot released the *Annie: Origins* cinematic [2], which gave an entirely novel experience of Annie's origin story. The cinematic succeeds in this when featuring the emergence of her in-game abilities in the sequences of Annie growing up, trying to tackle her difficult family dynamics, and ultimately losing control of her emotions and powers. For instance, in the cinematic when Annie struggles to get along with her step-sister, Daisy, we see her seize her teddy bear back from her sister's hands [2] using her first ability, *Fireball* [3]. In another scene, after being blamed for the death of her sister Daisy, Annie retreats into her room and curls up into a ball. As she battles with a combination of guilt and anguish, she doesn't realize the emergence of yet another one of her in-game abilities—*Molten Shield* [3]. If you've seen the cinematic yourself, then the rest is history. Seeing Annie use her in-game powers in a 'real' setting makes them more real when playing her on Summoner's Rift.
- **Rengar & Kha'zix** - These are two separate champions that feature as assassins on the *League of Legends* roster. Rengar is a vastaya, a chimeric being whose specific tribe takes on the fierce traits of the lion. Rengar's design is silver-furred,

- mighty-fanged, and majestic. Kha'zix, in contrast, is a creature of the Void—alien, sleek, and a pinnacle of evolution. These champions, at minimum, can be described as *different*. Despite these differences, however, both champions relish the role of apex predator. Thus, in their lore, when the two hunters meet and predators become prey, a bloodthirsty feud is born. Now, the two are out on a revenge-tinted hunt for each other, desperate to prove who is the Ultimate Hunter once and for all. Rengar and Kha'zix exemplify two things:
- **Breadth of Runeterra** - These two champions embody the sheer diversity of characters within the *League of Legends* universe. Furthermore, their interactions demonstrate how natural character synergies can feel, even between a traditional, lion-tribe hunter and an evolving, violet-colored predator. Rengar was born a runt who had to earn his way into the hunt. Kha'zix, on the other hand, was born to evolve into the optimal form for it. Their character designs have absolutely nothing in common and their backstories set them even further apart. However, the dynamic of two champions obsessed with becoming the Ultimate Hunter allows for compelling chemistry between two very different characters. This sort of element in narrative construction shows through in many champion pairings such as this.
 - **Lore on Summoner's Rift** - It is one of *League's* priorities to deliver lore in unconventional ways since it is limited by the MOBA environment it takes on. However, the way they achieve this with Rengar and Kha'zix's lore is one of the most unique. In a custom event that only triggers when a Rengar and a Kha'zix happen to be on enemy teams, the Kha'zix and Rengar players gain personal missions in which they must kill the other first in order to earn their title as the Ultimate Hunter [4]. There is a distinct enjoyment that players of these champions experience when starting up a game. Competitive spirits rise and, on rare occasions, a role-playing frenzy between the Kha'zix player and the Rengar player can unfold—this type of lore engagement is a symbol of how *League's* universe can immerse players in its story, even in a genre not designed for it.
- **Xayah and Rakan** - This vibrant-feathered duo was the first pair of champions to be released together. Hailing from a different chimeran vastaya tribe, these two take on a distinct human-avian appearance complete with colorful plumage. While they are not the only lover duo within *League*, these lovebirds demonstrate two things:
 - **Gameplay inspired by Lore** - The abilities of these two champions were the first designed to synergize together in lane. Xayah is an ADC, which means despite being able to put out high damage, she is very fragile and easy to target. Rakan, on the other hand, is a support whose toolkit possesses the necessary defense (i.e. healing and crowd control) required to protect an ADC. In addition, whenever one of them begins to recall to their base, the other can instantly join in without having to wait the usual time to cast the spell themselves. These features mirror the pair's

- supportive and romantic relationship in a lore where Xayah stands at the head of a revolution while Rakan stands as her loyal right-hand man.
- **Gameplay enforcing Lore** - Additionally, their abilities are buffed when playing together versus playing with other champions. This is best demonstrated by Rakan's ability to dash to an ally a set distance away and shield both himself and an ally. Typically, the range of this ability is quite modest—however, when dashing to Xayah, the range is doubled. Through this small detail, gameplay has communicated that Xayah is special to Rakan. Rakan literally goes double the distance for his loved one. This pair demonstrates how gameplay can serve as a direct podium for lore, and marks the gradual narrative-immersive approach League uses in a mechanically-dense game.

Breakdown

Some of the very best narratives the gaming world has to offer follow a well-defined plot and a generously fleshed-out world.

In *Breath of the Wild*, the views are breathtaking and the hero's journey to redemption is well-orchestrated within the scope of an open world.

In *God of War*, advancing the narrative is key to enjoying the game and gameplay interactions act as a supplement that grants players the battle-hardened combat Kratos iconically offers.

This is where *League of Legends'* take on narrative and its delivery differs so strongly.

There is nothing *linear* about the vast and explosive stories that fill the *League of Legends* universe. Not only are there constant additions, revisions, and expansions to the world, but the narrative even evolves in real time. Specifically, while there is history, long-established factions, cultures, and lands that exist, advancement to the lore is not determined by the player. This, of course, makes sense—*League of Legends* is a MOBA, not a story-driven, single-player experience like the games mentioned above.

However, this has not stopped the growth of lore in the least. Riot is constantly pushing the envelope with different ideas, character mashups, in-game cosmetics (a.k.a. skin lines) that come with custom stories, and sometimes new champions altogether. So how does *League's* narrative flourish in a game mode that does nothing to impact the actual plotline? What makes *League* pursue intensive narrative development in a genre that doesn't really need it?

What makes the narrative so strong in games like *Breath of the Wild* or *God of War* is that the player has a sense of agency in those stories. This is why whenever players reach any sort of summit in the plotline, it becomes an incredibly rewarding and personal

moment—it wasn't just Link who purified the Divine Beasts in order to fight Ganon, it was the player. It wasn't just Kratos who struggled to become a good father and protect his son, it was the player. This element of agency is a tried and true way into the players' hearts; so effective, it is hard to give up.

However, these games use their mechanics (i.e. combat, item systems, world maps, quests) in order to help the player enjoy the story. Conversely, *League of Legends* uses its stories to help players enjoy the mechanics.

League of Legends is a destroy-the-enemy-base MOBA. Whenever a player queues up for a game, most of the excitement is being able to demonstrate or improve their mechanical/strategic prowess in combat. This is where *League of Legends*' sacrifice of conventional narrative delivery pays off—the lore and the stories behind the champions come into play and enrich an otherwise purely mechanical gameplay experience.

When you're buying items during a match, you do not just buy a sword—you buy a B.F. Sword; and if you *really* know your stuff about the lore, you would know that you are not just buying a B.F. Sword—you are buying a *big fucking sword*. Or additionally, when you let the lover champions, Xayah and Rakan, dance next to each other, they will begin to do a special dance only unlocked when they're together. Or whenever the gunslinger Lucian faces off with an enemy Thresh, the same soul reaper who took away his wife in the lore, in his voice lines he'll bitterly mutter “Well, well. If it ain't the ugly low-down corpse that took my Senna.”

What this type of narrative delivery gives players are fragments, the best pieces of the stories behind their favorite champion. In a way, they're a bit like the ultimate easter eggs that both draw your attention and reward you for it. This style of lore integration is the secret to slowly immersing players, new and old, into the game. As a new player, it's exciting to slowly pick up on storylines and details, especially with champions you're starting to enjoy. For veteran players, since the *League of Legends* universe is so vast, they'll either be surprised by new lore connections or Riot just might release something new that includes their favorite champion. Players aren't given a neatly-tied plotline to follow, nor do they have any ability to further the actual storyline by playing the MOBA. However, this narrative dynamic of immersion and discovery is what makes this type of lore delivery both effective and accessible for all players, no matter their hours played or skill level in the game.

Now, this approach of presenting lore as in-game easter eggs and using story as a way to enrich the MOBA experience comes with consequences. Namely, for some players the story doesn't come across at all. While other players notice the intrigue, take the bait, and slowly enter the rabbit hole that *League of Legends* lore can offer, there's certainly a portion of players who don't partake in it whatsoever. Since Riot is the main creator for character lore and creation, it can be difficult to gauge player reactions to lore-related decisions Riot makes.

Despite its shortcomings, however, *League of Legends*' narrative delivery has still managed to come this far because players *are* enjoying it. One of the greatest benefits that such lore creation provides is the expansive freedom and universe it has given birth to. The shift from the original Summoner lore into a Champion-centric one has given way to explosive narrative growth, and from this, *League of Legends* began to pursue **frontier narrative**. A frontier describes boundless uncharted territory. It could be a remote piece of land, a new field of study, but if someone calls it “the frontier”, you are challenged to explore it [5].

Riot has intentionally designed their lore such that it is not restricted to a specific domain—the storyline fragments for each champion are not necessarily connected by plot or chronology. Consequently, the narrative design team is provided the freedom to explore each and every expositional avenue for the plethora of characters the *League of Legends* roster has to offer. Riot can choose to expand on one character and then proceed to move to another completely unrelated character. This capacity for growth in every direction is what makes this frontier narrative. The constant creation of uncharted territory and new narrative lands makes *League of Legends* lore a platform where endless frontiers, challenging players for discovery, can be found.

The *League of Legends* universe can be likened to the primordial soup—a non-linear pool brimming with narrative-rich potential. This structure of the *League of Legends* universe encourages the birth of countless storylines and characters. Additionally, without the limitations of wholly-defined worlds and systems, the “primordial soup” yields a boundless range of potential character story arcs and personalities.

This places *League* in yet another advantageous position, granting it the power to adapt its meta and gameplay through the release of new storylines and characters. This is something *League* has already begun—not only have new game modes been released that accommodate a new variety of gameplay within the same universe, but also new characters and lore have emerged as a result. The strategy-based *Teamfight Tactics (TFT)* or the card-game *Legends of Runeterra* are such examples. The creation of miniature creatures known as Little Legends within *TFT*, and the appearance of characters that reveal more about the main champion roster in *Legends of Runeterra* have become new mediums to engage with lore via gameplay. While they are not the focus of this review and are expansive enough to garner their own papers, they demonstrate how the fluidity of *League*'s narrative has empowered Riot. From new game modes to character cinematics, Riot is able to redefine lore-delivery mediums to further expand their expositional frontier.

Riot's continuous grasp for new and different mediums additionally has inspired the birth of entire communities dedicated to following *League of Legends* lore. Fan-made animations featuring the meta's most recent OP (overpowered) champions have garnered millions of views on Youtube [6]. Grand selections of painstaking fanarts have been designed to celebrate the vast multitude of champions that the community loves. The onslaught of figurines, cosplays, streamers, Youtubers, song artists, and illustrators are all testaments to what lies at the heart of its unbound, fluid narrative. Wrapping players in

silvery cloaks and granting them indomitable summoning powers turned out to be the least of what *League of Legends* narrative could do. Commanding the power of narrative to grow from something as small as a cool voice line and mature into an entire world is what truly is responsible for the frontier narrative *League of Legends* is able to deliver today.

Strongest Element

Skins. In-game cosmetics that range from basic to ultimate tier are potentially *League's* most successful stunt of narrative expansion and delivery. It is not only the fresh visuals that players relish in whenever they don on a new skin—it's the ability to see a familiar character transformed in new expositional light. Skins usually take on a certain genre or theme that revitalize the familiar character model. It's almost as if the pop-fantasy champions that players channel into via gameplay go through a second metamorphosis. While the champions maintain the same personality, skins give champions a chance to cosplay and the resulting events and storylines that come about are endless. Some of the best skins in the game not only change the look of the character and their abilities, but also recolor voice lines, in-game taunts, and dances. Through skins, players get to see their favorite champions in a new light. Suddenly, a redemption-seeking juggernaut looks and fits into the arc of The Sacred Sword, or perhaps a lone-wolf samurai transforms into a Scion of the Night. While these variant champion arcs don't become integrated into the official lore, the alternative storylines that inspire these skins and the events that often accompany them create yet another space for *League of Legends* to revitalize multiple narrative frontiers.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the pitfalls an expansive frontier narrative such as *League of Legends* has is that since the newest lore, character development, and cosmetic skin arcs are completely up to Riot, there have been many times where players did not like the direction they were taking. It is because the lore is constantly evolving that the reworks, updates, or changes made to champions and their lores can become a sort of betrayal to players who loved certain features or aspects their champion had to begin with. Unlike more themed, well-defined narratives that set the tone for what the player expects and what the player wants, the common idea that *League of Legends* can always make just about any champion or narrative happen creates an expectation for Riot to fulfill player demand.

Riot acknowledged this shortcoming back in 2018 when they attempted to address player sentiments that Riot didn't "always consider the way [players] feel about [their] favorite parts of the lore before adjustments are made"[7]. While Riot has made some progress in this department (i.e. creating polls for players to vote on the next skin lines or character rework), it is definitely one of the consequences and pressures that *League of Legends* has to battle with as a result of making such expansive, open-ended lore. Continuing to survey the community, or to make base in player forums and discussions is something that may provide a start to the potential bridging of player expectation and lore delivery.

Highlight

One of the finest demonstrations of *League of Legends* lore and gameplay integration lives on in the character premier event called Butcher's Bridge [8]. One of the game modes that *League* offers is ARAM, a fast-paced variant of the usual Summoner's Rift game that has two teams of five storm down a single lane together as opposed to being sorted into roles across three lanes and a jungle. Usually, this takes place on the Howling Abyss map which features frost-tipped cobblestones, snow-white bushes, and a winter-like atmosphere that references the snowy peaks of the Freljord. However, when *League* debuted the champion Pyke, the watery phantom of a betrayed pirate, they took an opportunity to go big with the introductions.

For the duration of the event, the Howling Abyss shed its icy climate for a warm, torch-lit bridge. This was Butcher's Bridge, an actual location in *League of Legends* lore and the hometown where the new champion assassin spent his living days. The arcana-blasting turrets transformed into towering gunpowder cannons and snowy cobblestones were replaced with the dirt-packed path of the streets of Bilgewater. Billowing ships sailed glumly beneath the thick-aired battlefield and players were given true passage into an entirely different part of Runeterra's world.

Not only were the map's visuals completely transformed, but new items also made a debut and further grew this immersive peek into Pyke's world. Items such as *Ghostwalkers*, *Spectral Cutlass*, and *Bloodletter's Veil* [8], for example, were lore-infused mechanics that added the finishing touches to the pirate-fantasy tone. The most memorable was hearing Pyke's gravelly, water-logged voice echo across the bridge.

Transporting players from the niveous battlemat they had come to know into the cold-blooded waters of a champion's lore come to life did two things. Firstly, it reminded players that it was champion and world lore that was responsible for breathing life into every detail the MOBA experience had to offer. Secondly, it opened players' eyes to the multiple undiscovered narratives they had yet to explore. The soggy, dog-eat-dog port city of Bilgewater existed long before Pyke made his debut on players' screens. However, it is this type of dynamic story-telling experience that demonstrates the narrative prowess *League of Legends* has in giving a familiar game-mode new life with explosive lore.

Critical Reception

Reviewer: Steven Strom, PC Gamer

Score: 82/100

According to PC Gamer, a score of 82% means that the reviewed game is "[a] good game with exceptional moments or features; touches of brilliance. We love it." Strom makes pointed and valid criticism on the over-sexualization of the female champions in *League of Legends*, noting that "[i]t's a disappointing status quo for champions that typically play in interesting ways". When assessing the champion selection and narratives overall, however, he gives high praise on the "seemingly never-ending stream of [champions] to try". Champions offer designs that satisfy the archetypes players are after and the variety

of play styles each champion brings supplements this. He dubs *League*'s robust roster as "one of the biggest strategic toyboxes available today" [9].

Reviewer: Leah B. Jackson, IGN

Score: 9.2/10

In an updated review done in 2014, Jackson finalized her review of *League of Legends* by saying that "while the gameplay is intensely fun and the Champions are fantastic, the main thing holding *League of Legends* back is its...client. With such an incredible visual finesse throughout the entire stylized MOBA, it's unfortunate how dated the slow, buggy client is". Back in 2014, Jackson commended the art, the character stories, and the variety that stylized *League*, yet was disappointed with the client. However, it is important to note that in light of the expansive changes *League of Legends* has made since then, that aspect of the review proves in need of reassessment [10].

Lessons

1. Giving players a story to discover is more effective than giving them a story to remember.

To elaborate, the initial *League of Legends*' Summoner-central lore is a fitting example of how a passive narrative can fail, even when attempting to frame players as powerful beings that can summon mighty champions. The transition and the following success *League of Legends* experienced as Champion lore began to mature is indicative of the importance of narrative discovery and the opportunities that arise in finding new ways to deliver it.

2. Narrative can prosper without becoming a game's driving element.

The end goal of any game is player enjoyment. This means that while there are certain, proven elements that reliably provide this, this does not make any specific element absolute. When looking at highly mechanical games such as MOBA, we often see a genre that doesn't need a storyline because it cannot directly host a storyline. However, while narrative has successfully been the driving force behind many games, it does not need to be restricted to such a role. *League of Legends* is an example where narrative takes a backseat to gameplay, yet is proven to perform rather well in enriching player experience.

3. Frontier Narrative demands meticulous lore-infusion.

When using frontier narrative as an approach to creating an expansive world for lore to grow, lore-infusion is key. It is important to prioritize the inclusion of lore details into in-game features as small as the type of foliage that grows on Summoner's Rift to bigger details such as the soaring dragons that can be seen over the Rift's edge. For beginning players, this level of lore-inclusion becomes the easter eggs that they might feel before they truly understand. For veteran players, this becomes the continuous element of discovery and insider knowledge that keeps the game's style from ever growing old. The consequences for abandoning this would result in shallow lore development and unconvincing lore engagement. Both of which would lead to a highly dismissable narrative.

Summation

Despite *League of Legends* maintaining its renown and popularity for 12 consecutive years, it has undergone significant narrative evolution in order to achieve this. In fact, it wouldn't be far-fetched to say that even within the span of the past 8 years, *League of Legends* has experienced explosive narrative evolution. From cinematics that made champions dearer to the world beyond Summoner's Rift, to the continuous introduction and creation of ways to inspire gameplay interactions on the battlefield itself, *League* has succeeded in breathing new life into the champions and world it created all those years ago. By foregoing the normal constraints that accompany straightforward narratives and finding new avenues for lore delivery in a MOBA genre not renowned for its story-telling, *League* stays on the cutting edge of what game narrative can be, and is an expert in weaving a universe where legends never die.

Citations

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