

Game Narrative Review

=====
Your Name (one name, please): John Dusseau
Your School: DigiPen Institute of Technology
Your Email: John.Dusseau@gmail.com
Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2013

=====
Game Title: *League of Legends*
Platform: PC
Genre: Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA)
Release Date: October 27, 2009
Developer: Riot Games
Publisher(s): Riot Games, Tencent Holdings Ltd, Garena
Game Writer/Creative Director/ Narrative Designer: Marc Merrill, Brandon Beck

Overview

League of Legends has dethroned *World of Warcraft* as the world's most played game. *League* is based off of a *Warcraft III* mod called *Defense of the Ancients*, and is a member of the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) genre. Players compete in a 20-60 minute, 5v5 match; in each match, players progress through 18 levels and advance their abilities while acquiring items to become more powerful. At the end of each match, the players' progress is reset and the champion begins again at level one. Unfortunately, Riot Games and its critics have stated that they believe narrative to be one of *League's* weakest elements, but I believe the game has a very strong narrative if you know where to look.

Characters

It is important to be clear about my interpretation of "characters" within the *League of Legends* universe: while each champion clearly has its own characterization, I must focus on the roles that these characters take in order to show the expression *League* offers to its players. My choices in organization come from the current player-preferred strategies (or "meta-game") but it is important to state that *League's* gameplay has no restrictions on how the five players interact, therefore limitless additional roles exist. These specific roles have taken on a life of their own, becoming authentic Jungian archetypes [1] that emerged as a result of the player subconscious. These characters are the key pieces to the game's strength of narrative.

- **The Marksman** – *The Prodigy*; it is the rest of the team's job to protect, nurture, and care for the Marksman as he goes through the trials of transcendence into their role as the team's primary *Hero*. Arguably the most important character on the team, the Marksman is capable of dishing out

enormous damage once he has reached maturity. When positioned correctly, the Marksman can use his superior range and powerful auto-attacks to take out the entire enemy team without ever being in critical danger. His weakness, however, comes from his fragile early-game presence where he is defenseless and near-infantile. While other roles, specifically the Mid Lane Champion and the Top Lane Champion, have the opportunity to carry the team, a strong and well-protected Marksman is the most assured path to victory.

- **The Support** –The Support acts as the Marksman’s *Mentor* figure by supplying the Marksman with anything he needs to acquire the gold and levels necessary to complete his journey to Heroism. Supports often have abilities that shield, heal, help minimize any mistakes, and remove any threats the Marksman encounters. They can also serve as an aggressive initiator to set up situations heavily in the Marksman’s favor, eventually granting them the kills. Later in the game, Supports are able to fill this role for any member of the team during skirmishes around the map. Regrettably, the Support is often the last chosen role on the team. When big plays are made, the Support often receives little to no credit and goes unnoticed to the untrained eye, but this only furthers its accurate representation of its archetypal counterpart (the *Mentor*, the *Caregiver*). Without the Support’s service, the Marksman would not be able to reach transcendence and become the late game threat it needs to be.
- **The Top Lane Champion** – Alone in a lane on the outskirts of the map, the Top Lane Champion represents *The Lone Wolf* or *The Outrider*. They are matched against another champion in lane and have to fend for themselves. If they fall behind and cannot take on their lane opponent, they may be completely ineffective for the rest of the game (transforming from *The Lone Wolf* to *The Damsel in Distress*), all the while creating an unstoppable force in their opponent, the enemy’s Top Lane Champion. As such, the Top Lane Champion carries a heavy burden: sustain enemy harassment without much assistance, while adequately collecting the resources they need to be an effective member of the team. In the later phases of the game, they often explore dangerous areas, risk their lives to protect the Marksman, and lead the team into battle.
- **The Mid Lane Champion** – Like the Queen in Chess (*The Mother* figure), Mid Lane Champions have a huge presence in the game map. They are located in the shortest lane directly in the middle of the map, where they can quickly level up and affect the other lanes early on. Their abilities often come in bursts and deal massive amounts of damage, or they can work by controlling specific elements of battle in skirmishes. Many of the champions chosen for this role are great assassins that can either fight from a distance or quickly jump in and out of battle. Like the Marksman, these champions are important for the team to keep safe and can often lead the team to victory themselves.
- **The Jungler** – Often hidden to the enemy team, Junglers create opportunities where they emerge from the shadows and become the embodiment of *The Deceiver*. Spending most of his time exploring the jungle between lanes, the Jungler works his way through areas of limited vision, gaining gold and experience by attacking NPCs. After gaining extra powers from killing certain NPCs and using his stealth as his main weapon, the Jungler is able to suddenly appear from the shadows to surprise enemies and initiate fights.

- **NPCs** – There are multiple types of NPCs in *League of Legends*. In lanes we find each team's allied minions. These minions are the foot soldiers and the primary focus of the early game. Champions use these minions to gain early levels and apply pressure on enemy towers. In between lanes, there are camps with medium-sized neutral monsters that are mostly fought by the Junglers and bestow buffs to the champions that kill them. There are also two major monsters located in the void between the areas controlled by either team; these are known as the Dragon and Baron Nashor. The Dragon is a mid-to-late game objective that gives a large amount of gold to the team that defeats it. Oftentimes the first big battles occur when both teams fight over the Dragon's bounty. Baron Nashor brings the game's largest reward in the form of a powerful buff given to the entire team that defeats it. Baron Nashor's buff is so powerful that it can often lead to the end of the game, and as such, Baron Nashor's pit is the location of some of the biggest and most decisive battles.

Breakdown

League of Legends' lore is where most people look for the game's narrative, but I believe that the real narrative lies within *League*'s gameplay. The traditional narrative consists of a long story in another universe that contains paradoxical elements and shallow character backgrounds. In the words of Riot Games' own, Christina Norman states "League of Legends isn't a narrative focused game. Story isn't what keeps the average player engaged for an average of 30 hours a week." [2] In reviews of the game, one amateur critic even rated *League*'s story as "N/A," [3] but how can a game so successful not be offering a story to its players? My answer is: it can't. Within gameplay lies a vast narrative that focuses on the individual layers of each player's personal narrative, as well as the team's narrative as a whole. There is an epic story following the hero's journey that is teaching players about life and keeps them coming back day in and day out.

League's traditional narrative is played out in a world called Runeterra. Increasingly large battles between the different nations began to cause "violent earthquakes and horrific magically-fueled storms." [4] As a result, the Institute of War was created to enable sustainable warfare in the form of political battles on the Fields of Justice. Players in *League of Legends* take on the role of Summoners who control the power to bring forth a champion to act as their avatar in the Fields of Justice. [5]

"These champions have joined the League for various reasons. Some are soldiers who have pledged their allegiance to a particular nation and fight in their nation's interests. Some are renowned warriors who seek to prove themselves against Valoran's most powerful beings. Some are prisoners of the League, forced to do the League's bidding as punishment. Some may even be strange creatures from other worlds, hoping to bring stability or further discord to Runeterra." [6]

While the idea of Summoners being able to control any champion they want fits well into how the game actually plays, it creates certain issues with how the champions exist within this world, and how each champion's own character premise remains largely unexplored. For example, Jarvan IV is of Demacian royalty, and he can easily be played on the same team as Swain, his sworn enemy and leader of Demacia's greatest threat, Noxus. While story shenanigans could be written about an event that involved

Demacia and Noxus somehow ending up on the same side, the narrative falls short and finds itself, in some ways, paradoxical. The explanation that makes the most sense is that all of the champions in the League are turned into mindless drones that bend to the will of the Summoners, frequently against the champion's own goals or virtues. Also, while the lore is available in small chunks in the game client, the traditional narrative requires piecing together through many different sources. Even after hours of research, one will have trouble piecing the complex nature of the traditional narrative together. It is not a fundamental part of the game and is not necessary for gameplay, leaving such lore often overlooked. However, the narrative that I find the most interesting lies at the heart of *League's* gameplay.

League of Legends provides a unique "personal" narrative that allows players to experience their own "hero's journeys" every match. The individual's chance at expression begins with "champion select," where they are able to choose one of the 5 main archetypal roles. They have the choice of 117 champions to represent themselves. Players are given multiple options for the customization of their chosen champion, even before starting the game: runes and masteries allow for character-building and stat buffs, skins change the appearance of the champions, and a choice of two Summoner spells provide additional utility. At the beginning of the game, players can visit the shop and acquire their first set of items. As the game progresses they have the opportunity to level up any of their four abilities in any order of their choosing and they decide on the different items they would like to build, again specifying their champion's strengths. Once reaching level six, players are able to learn their ultimate ability. These ultimate abilities represent certain transcendence for the character, in a way unlocking their true power. The choices are near endless in deciding what type of character players would like to create through all of these channels of personalization.

As a character develops in the game and proceeds through the challenges the game has to offer, they are given the full experience of the hero's journey. After each player has their own unique call to adventure, decides on an avatar to represent themselves, and is given a role to fill, the story begins. Each champion starts the game at level one within their team's base and is in a relatively infantile state. They are weak and have only a single special ability outside of their basic attacks. They are given a small amount of gold to buy their initial items and then head off to battle. At this stage of the game, everything around them provides relevant threat. In this road of trials, enemy minions can deal significant damage, enemy towers can kill champions in only a couple hits, and the players are faced with the challenge of staying safe while they level up and collect gold. Players are forced to focus on *self* and individual mastery of their abilities to defeat their opponents in mostly one-on-one duels. Slowly, champions are able to start venturing out of their lanes and start affecting the battlefield as a whole instead of just their small corner of the map. This phase ("mid game") represents a type of awakening where players begin to focus on their roles as part of the collective and move from a stage of *birth* into *adolescence*. They begin to come out of their shell as they receive their ultimate abilities and start one of their first major conquests: slaying the Dragon. Still relatively weak and lacking in essential items, champions must make their moves very carefully and avoid giving the other team an early advantage. At this stage of the game, the Dragon takes 2-3 champions to slay without any interruption, but the other team is doing their best to contest. As a result, the Dragon's lair is a common place for the first team battles, and as such, is where most player roles are first realized. Player positioning and use of abilities is of critical importance in winning any fight. As the game rages on, players begin killing enemy minions in one shot and start sieging enemy towers. Hiding beneath your own towers no longer becomes safe as certain enemy champions are able to take more harassment, falling further into their roles. Marksmen begin to deal moderate damage, Junglers and Top Lane Champions

gain more health, Mid Lane Champions' damage bursts become more dangerous, and Supports assist their team by providing protective vision in the form of ward totems placed around the map. Both teams get into small skirmishes when they happen upon each other, each gauging the other's strengths and weaknesses; meanwhile, both team's structures slowly begin falling. The champions themselves reach a level of *adulthood* where their roles are realized. Abilities of the champions are maxed out, their items are complete and an apotheosis occurs where the individual players die and the cohesive team is formed. Eventually, the team becomes strong enough that they can take on the challenge of defeating Baron Nashor, the strongest monster in the game that requires the entire team to vanquish. If the team is successful, they are rewarded with a large amount of gold and the ultimate boon—Baron Nashor's buff, which greatly increases the team's power as one. At this stage, the team as a whole has ascended into its final form and begins to enter the enemy's inner base where the destruction of the enemy's central Nexus secures their victory. The challenges laid out by this narrative represent a very robust, living story that players experience in each game. The fulfillment of one's role and achievement of victory enlightens the player to a part of their own self, represented by their role's psychological archetype. The resurrection can occur, leading the player to start the game anew, allowing them to take on different roles and create new personas to fill those roles.

As the player experiences each of the archetypes represented by the roles available, they are able to glimpse at individual pieces of the collective *Hero* within *League of Legends*, and in effect, individual pieces of the human psyche. As we live out our lives, we are demanded to be many different versions of our *selves*. Like the Support, there are times in our lives where we must serve one another to achieve our goals. Other times, we must take on the precision role of the Marksman to lead a project, using our honed skills to tackle hurdles that others cannot. As players play through multiple iterations of *League*, they are able to complete the hero's journey through multiple viewpoints. While in one game they may have carried their team to victory by evolving a Mid Lane Champion into an unstoppable burst damage mage, the next game may require them to assist their Marksman, sacrificing themselves for the good of the team. This repetitive role reversal leads players to better understand, and sometimes completely redefine, what it means to be a part of a whole.

It seems as though the narrative of *League of Legends* has taken a life of its own, exploding past the base, traditional story the game originally attempted. Just after the inception of the game, the core gameplay had the essentials of the hero's journey, fascinating players and enticing them to keep playing. Players took part in the game by discovering the best way to use the five members of each team to win the game. Over time, players were able to identify different roles and eventually end up with the ones described in the character section. The community created these very archetypal roles (the "meta game") that resulted in a harmonized team, extremely balanced and capable of a lot of flexibility. Players are able to use champions, each with their own personality and skills, rich with expression through customization to create their own stories full of personal narrative, some even becoming world renowned stars. No two games are ever the same, yet each one contains all of the elements of the hero's journey, creating an enjoyable experience for the players.

Strongest Element

One of the strongest elements in *League of Legend's* narrative is the player's ability to express him or herself by embodying one of the Jungian archetypes defined by the roles of the "meta game." With currently 117 champions, and more on the way, the players have a large pool of champions to choose from. They get to recreate themselves within the *League of Legends* universe through 355 skins, 177 items, 34 different runes and 30 points to put into masteries. This level of player immersion is one of the first steps to telling the player's story of how they played their part in obtaining a victory.

Unsuccessful Element

The base story the game provides and the individual character premises for each champion are relatively weak. Many players choose to bypass these storylines all together due to their irrelevant nature to gameplay. The entire story, including all of the characters and their motivations, can only be found in pieces and requires players to seek out that information on their own.

This is a problem that most multiplayer online battle arena games have been facing since their inception. The primary reason of this narrative shortage is that the in-game narrative, previously broken down, provides the elements players need to enjoy themselves. Each character has a short background that can be explained in a couple paragraphs but really what the player is looking for is an archetypal representation of the character that the player wants to become. The rest of the story is about how the player wielded an individual champion and the choices they made along the way. A natural narrative that arises from the community might bring forth a more satisfying story. The characters themselves could serve only to create a basis for the players to fill instead of trying to take on too strong of a life of their own. Giving the players a stronger ability to narrate the life of the champions they use as their avatar might lead to a more satisfying storyline.

Highlight

The "perfect team fight" is quite a spectacle to watch. Players are constantly doing their best to make sure they are providing their team with the necessary support that their role offers. When each member correctly plays their role in a full 5v5 team fight, the depth of harmony that can be achieved through team work is shown. So many split-second decisions have to be made during fights that you really have to trust your teammates to be there for you when you find yourself making a risky play. During the broadcasting of professional matches, fights are often slowed down and replayed over and over to fully understand each player's contributions to the fights. When everyone is able to make the correct plays and work together as a team, the true greatness that players are trying to create is realized as the team unifies and strives for victory.

Critical Reception

League of Legends as a whole has seen much praise from the gaming community for its exceptional gameplay, receiving an average of an 8/10 from critics. The biggest complaints of the game include the large learning curve and a verbally abusive community. The game's story receives very little attention,

with one little known critic even exclaiming “Story? What story?” after giving the game a 5/10. [7] On the positive side, *League*’s visual effects, customization, and fun value has caused many critics to give the game a high rating. [8][9][10] It is quite hard to deny giving a high rating to *League* based off of its amazing success.

Lessons

1. There are many facets to narrative in games which can often be overlooked.

When I first began this review, I had no idea where it would take me. Like some of the other reviews, I was tempted to take the story that was handed to me instead of delving into what *League of Legends* actually has to offer for narrative. After beginning my research, it started to become clear to me that there was something much bigger that I was stumbling across. As games evolve, it is not always clear *what* stories are being told or *how* different games will affect individuals. Taking time to dwell on the experiences and lessons a game has to offer can yield surprising results.

2. Repeatable narrative allows the player to slowly take in important morals within a story.

In going through the hero’s journey multiple times in one sitting, the player starts to grasp an overall narrative that is not accessible through only one viewpoint. By taking on the Support one game and the Marksman in another, players are able to grasp complex interactions and understand more about how to fill either role.

3. Given a large “playground,” communities will create their own universe within it.

An easy example here would be the game *Minecraft*, where players are given a world to explore and building blocks that can be used to create anything they can imagine. Where *Minecraft* used Lego-like pieces, *League of Legends* uses champions, players, and a battleground to achieve much the same effect. The meta-game was created by player’s interaction with one another, slowly building a strong, well versed idea of what it takes to make a winning team.

Summation

League of Legends exploded into the gaming scene for a reason. With a billion man-hours being played monthly, people have found something in the game that is new and extremely satisfying. It explores a personal narrative that is among the first of its kind. Players are able to write their own destiny and create very accurate fantasy characters to represent them on a battlefield. To a certain extent, I think the majority of *League* players can’t quite put their finger on what really drives them to keep playing. The call to adventure is strong, but where is it leading them? What mysteries are yet to be unlocked in the narrative of *League* and future games that are able to take advantage of the elements that make *League* what it has become today?

Citations

1. Jung, C. G., Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. New York: Pantheon, 1953. Print.
2. Narcisse, Evan. "What's Wrong With League of Legends?" *Kotaku*. N.p., 15 Nov. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2013.
3. "Review for PC: A Badly Needed, FRESH Review of League of Legends." *GameFAQs*. N.p., 9 May 2013. Web. 13 Dec. 2013.
4. "Runeterra." *League of Legends Wiki*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Runeterra>>.
5. "Summoner." *League of Legends Wiki*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Summoner>>.
6. "Champion." *League of Legends Wiki*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Champion>>.
7. Willis, Phillip. "League of Legends: Clash of Fates - Staff Review." *RPGamer*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.rpgamer.com/games/other/pc/lol/reviews/lolstrev1.html>>.
8. White, Billy. "A League of Its Own!" *Game Industry News*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.gameindustry.com/review/item.asp?id=1624>>.
9. Hicks, Tyler. "League of Legends Review." *GameSpot*. N.p., 10 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.gamespot.com/league-of-legends/>>.
10. Butts, Steve. "League of Legends Review." *IGN*. N.p., 6 Nov. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/11/06/league-of-legends-review>>.