

Critically Approaching the Playful and Participatory Genealogy of MOBAs

Josh Jarrett

University of the West of England
Digital Cultures Research Centre
UK, Bristol, BS16 1QY
joshua2.jarrett@live.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper gives close attention to the term ‘Multiplayer Online Battle Arena’ (MOBA), establishing what it implies in popular discourses as a term with specific generic connotations and more critically, what its short but eventful history represents alongside wider participatory trends across the Internet. Despite its far reaching influence and now commonplace usage, MOBA is not a neutral term and it signals a precise transitional moment towards a new normalisation of playful, cultural and economic control for the genre. Through adapting Foucault’s term of the ‘dispositif’ and applying a genealogical approach towards mapping the transition from the mod of *Defense of the Ancients (DotA)* to the genre of MOBA, this paper argues that MOBAs continue to be laced in significant bottom-up movements and characteristics. It is these lingering characteristics of playful and participatory residue that many of the genres most notable game design and paratextual aspects can be found. However, it is also here that critical questions surrounding the platformed state of these relations also make themselves evident.

Keywords

MOBA, DotA, League of Legends, Participatory Culture, Dispositif, Platform Studies, Playful Genealogy.

INTRODUCTION

It’s hard to deny that gaming is in the age of the MOBA. Valve’s *DotA 2* is the most popular game on its Steam service; *League of Legends* is arguably the most popular game in the world. How did a genre that started from the humblest of beginnings — a genre whose definition and even very name is in dispute — come to take an industry by storm? (Funk, 2013)

In September of 2013 when this statement was made the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre had already assumed its position as one of the most played online genres in the world for over a year (Gaudiosi, 2012). In the span of time since late 2009 when the first commercial iterations of this genre began to be released, MOBA has become the predominant term used to refer to this genre by the games industry, journalists, academia, and players alike. This paper gives close attention to the term MOBA, establishing what

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it implies in popular discourses as a term with specific generic connotations and more critically, what its short but eventful history symbolises alongside wider participatory trends across the Internet. Despite its far reaching influence and now commonplace usage, MOBA is not a neutral term and it signals a precise transitional moment towards a new normalisation of playful, cultural and economic control for the genre.

MOBA AS 'DISPOSITIF'

Foucault's (1980: 194) notion of a 'dispositif' provides a useful theoretical tool here for framing this rapid but nonetheless genealogical shift in power dynamics. Foucault describes a dispositif as

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the dispositive. The dispositif itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (Foucault, 1980: 194)

Although Foucault's original use of this term was in appropriation to wider societal frameworks in which power circulates and knowledge is produced in a reciprocal dynamic, a 'dispositif' perspective on power dynamics as the 'system of relations' provides an apt way of grasping the diverse and deeply networked actors at play in MOBAs. Avoiding a one dimensional account of top down influence, this approach echoes the co-constitutive ontology of games explored by various games scholars (Steinkuehler, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Giddings and Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, 2009; Kennedy and Crogan, 2009) and emphasises the interplay of heterogeneous actors as crucial to the becoming and maintenance of established power dynamics. Consistent with Foucault's genealogical approach towards historically contextualising the contours of power structures to elucidate the becoming of their norms, a dispositif can be read as a provisional category for the ensemble of these contours. As Bussolini (2010: 91) notes in a close reading of the term, 'the dispositif would seem to be a kind of moving marker to allow some approximation of a particular preponderance or balance of forces at a given time'. It is with this particular usage of the term that this paper is concerned as MOBAs represent a similar ensemble of nonlinear and networked systems, actors and discourses.

It is here that this paper follows recent linkages made between notions of the dispositif with regards to participatory culture (Schäfer, 2011: 15) and the critique made by various Internet scholars that 'participation' or 'Web 2.0' has served as an enabling tool for heterogeneous cultural or social relations that implicitly support uneven economic power structures (Scholz, 2008; Dijck and Nieborg, 2009; Berry, 2011: 59). Through contextualising the short but nonetheless eventful genealogy of MOBAs the aim here is to move towards an understanding of the way different networked actors co-create the experience of this genre and in doing so, reinforce similarly uneven power structures. In following the history of how various actors have come to embrace or negotiate their respective roles in this model of co-creativity, similarities to wider participatory trends that have moved towards a more platformed and affectively valued state of relations

become evident. If as Crawford et al suggest (2011: 281), online games must be framed alongside ‘the potential histories associated with the Internet as a historical artefact’ then what does it mean to consider the political economy of the Internet alongside an inherently online genre such as MOBAs? It is with this central question concerning the context of MOBAs becoming and their wider online political economy that this paper is largely occupied.

Although many different explanations are often given for the popularity of MOBAs, this paper also offers an account behind what the most influential and definitive aspects of this genre are. Through critically contextualising the online history behind MOBAs, three broad categories that are essential in their networked milieu emerge as particularly influential features of MOBAs. They are:

1. The vast network of relational actors and paratextual spaces.
2. The bottom-up mode of collectively playful co-creativity.
3. The ‘fair’ model of free to play.

In each of these features many overlaps between differing modes of agency and affect are traversed. It is between these three, however, that phenomena such as playful emergence, live streams, e-sports and the profoundly affective model of free to play monetisation intrinsic to these activities all open themselves to critical analysis. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to account for all of these trends, it is the aim here to provide an insight into how these contours of power have come into being and what they mean when critically conceptualising MOBAs as a *dispositif*. Despite MOBAs worldwide popularity and far reaching influence they remain an emerging field for games studies (Ferrari, 2013; Egliston, 2015; Winn, 2015) and one that should not overlook significant bottom-up movements that have been fundamental to the participatory network MOBAs represent. This paper posits these emerging trends as constitutive of what defines MOBAs and why they are particularly influential not just from a popular perspective, but also in a political economic and participatory scope.

The research that informs this paper is part of a larger PhD orientated online ethnography that is concerned with the political economy of MOBAs and the role that play and participation have in their co-creative becoming. The relationship between play and participation is not the specific focus here, however it is a claim implicit in the argumentation that both play and participation are similar in terms of their agency and bottom-up relationship with overarching power structures (Jarrett, 2015). To begin framing the above developments into the critical contexts that derived and define them, it is necessary to start with the precise moment that MOBA as a widespread discursive term emerged.

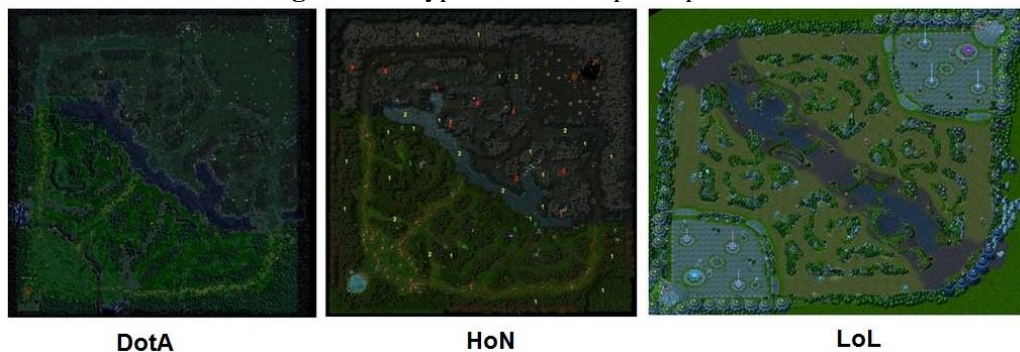
THE MOBA Moment

Tracing itself to the *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998) custom game named *Aeon of Strife* and subsequently, *Warcraft III's* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002) *Defense of the Ancients* (*DotA*), MOBA is a word that first came into widespread use with the release of

League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009 - present) in late 2009. MOBAs typified by *League of Legends* (*LoL*) are temporal and typically last 20 – 60 minutes. They involve two teams in an enclosed ‘arena’ space and they contain many intricately considered in-game features archetypal of an ‘emergent’ game (Juul, 2002) that allows players to be creative in the way they play (Ferrari, 2013; Jarrett, 2014).

In the span of time since *LoL*’s release and the widespread adoption of the term MOBA, many different variants of the genre have arisen. In addition to archetypal MOBAs such as *LoL*, *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation 2013 – present), *Heroes of Newerth* (S2 Games, 2010 – present), *Dawngate* (Electronic Arts, 2014), or *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015 - present) that retain many overt Real Time Strategy (RTS) conventions (see Figure 1) and are exclusive to PC or Mac formats, there are now many different iterations of the genre. 2D Side scrolling MOBAs such as *Awesomenauts* (Romino Games, 2012 - present), 3D third person MOBAs such as *Smite* (Hi-Rez Studios, 2014 - present) and mobile format MOBAs such as *Vainglory* (Super Evil Megacorp, 2014 - present), to name a few, all widen and expand conventions of what a MOBA can encompass. Due to their widespread influence and the networked identity already outlined, the focus for this paper is upon the more archetypal MOBAs with *Dota* and *LoL* being the central case study. It should be emphasised however, that the genre continues to expand in many novel and expansive ways.

Fig 1: Archetypal MOBA map comparison.



A Brief History of Collective Play

Among the members of the custom game cultures *DotA* grew out of before the release of *LoL* and the use of the term MOBA, the genre was known by the acronym of the most popular modded map, *DotA*. Despite being a popular mod for *Warcraft III* that the platform developers had a stake in, Blizzard Entertainment took an extremely hands off approach with regards to the actions of the *Warcraft III* custom game space until 2010 (Lynley, 2010). Although Blizzard Entertainment benefited greatly from the development of modded custom games through the increased popularity and exposure it provided their platform game, *Warcraft III*, their involvement with the activities of the custom game space was always notably absent and this was reflected by the independently run paratextual spaces that surrounded *DotA* as well as ultimately, the game of *DotA* itself.

DotA was an amalgamation of different grassroots influences, actors and motivations. Steve Feak (more widely known as ‘Guinsoo’), an influential community member and modder behind *DotA* along with a subsequent founding designer of *LoL* noted in 2010 that ‘*DotA* wouldn’t be where it is today without the many contributions the community has made over the years.’ (Fronczak, 2010) For Feak, *DotA* represented the opposite to an authorial piece of game design as bottom-up play collectively iterated the moving structure and viability of the genre through successive mods or ‘patches’. In addition to this collective mode of game design were expansive networks of fan assembled paratextual spaces such as ‘www.playdota.com’. These spaces were fundamental in giving the community a voice and sense of coherence that enabled the collectively iterative mode of game design to function. Symbolically, *DotA* can be read as exemplifying a more grassroots, collectively organised, and non-commodity classification of the genre that in many ways epitomised the original promises of the Internet as a tool that would connect the capacities of users and level economic power dynamics as early cyber theorists often predicted (Turner, 2006; Flichy, 2007).

The release of *LoL* in late 2009 marked a new chapter in the history of this genre and for the commercial developers Riot Games who included several prominent community members involved with *DotA* (Parkin, 2014), they sought to build on the core conventions of the genre in their own seemingly distinct way. Free from the constraints of the original *Warcraft III* engine that shaped *DotA* in many unavoidable ways, Riot Games built a game engine specific for this new genre through *LoL*. Similar to many platforms across the Internet that promise new potentials for participation and connectivity, *LoL* promised its players’ new technological innovations and gameplay opportunities designed specifically for this genre (LeJacq, 2012). It is in this moment between *DotA* that represented many of the early participatory potentials of the Internet, and *LoL* (that would become synonymous with MOBA) the re-platformed and more explicitly commercial of the two games, that requires close attention here. Far from a simplistic progressivist narrative of commercial innovation resulting in MOBAs as the newly influential genre they are now known as, there is a much more nonlinear and unofficial history at play behind the transition away from *DotA*.

Paralleling many wider examples of ‘affective economies’ where the means of online monetisation are often obscured through heterogeneous sociality (Andrejevic, 2011: 85; Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012) or voluntarily given through networks of fandom (Jenkins, 2006: 61; Bennett et al, 2015), MOBAs are a hybridised commodity form. Their bottom-up playful structure, vast network of relational actors and free model of monetisation all echo the genealogy of their grassroots past in various ways while paradoxically, enabling new structures of control in other ways. In no other moment was the transition of these traits more pronounced than during the precise moment when *LoL* was released and the use of the term MOBA first begun to displace DOTA. For any definition of MOBA to be adopted critically, it is crucial to contextualise this moment and what it represents for MOBAs as exemplary of newly emerging ‘hybrid’ power relations (Banks, 2013; Jenkins, 2013).

It is through contextualising the developments that lead the genre away from the name DOTA and towards MOBA that this paper moves towards a conceptualisation of MOBAs as a significant new dispositif. In doing so, the analysis that follows surrounding the context of MOBAs creation also gestures towards recent bodies of work surrounding socio-technical histories (Montfort and Bogost, 2009; Therrien, 2015) or archaeologies (Huhtamo, 2005; Apperley and Parrika, 2015) of games platforms. Although the focus here is specifically upon an influential transitional moment as opposed to a comprehensive historical account of an entire media platform, this paper shares an approach towards mapping what Apperley and Parikka (2015: 4) describe as the underlying ‘potential pathways, technological dead ends, lost histories, circuitous routes, and alternative conceptions’ inherent behind any widely accepted technical or discursive construct. Following this approach, it is necessary to briefly reflect upon some of the characteristics and limitations of *DotA* the mod, as these would be fundamental to the inception of MOBAs.

RE-PLATFORMING DOTA’S GRASSROOTS GAME DESIGN

Due to its status as a total conversation mod, *DotA* was always inherently limited by its technological architecture. In comparison to its platform game of *Warcraft III*, the custom games *DotA* grew out of were considered as one influential *Warcraft III* professional player named ‘Grubby’ put it, a feature that ‘will get casuals’ interested in the platform game (Schenkhuizen, 2012: 30). Using ‘casual’ as connotative with non-competitive play, Grubby’s assertion is problematic when applied to *DotA*. As already discussed, the myriad of playing practices that flourished in custom games such as *DotA* would dispel any notion of the play being an exclusively non-competitive activity. However, there is an important point in Grubby’s assertion that mirrors Blizzard Entertainment’s stance towards *DotA* and the custom game space in general. In contrast to other notable developers of modding platforms such as Valve Corporation, *DotA* was nearly always treated as something peripheral and non-competitive by Blizzard Entertainment, even when the playing practices represented something else entirely.

For players of *DotA*, this dismissive treatment by the platform developers did not stop their competitive mode of play from flourishing into an innovative new genre (and indeed, even assisted in its creation, see: Walbridge, 2008). However, there were consequences for the potential of this new genre upon the *Warcraft III* platform. For players of *DotA* and any *Warcraft III* custom game, many dissatisfactions with the platform existed that included a lack of dedicated player profile accounts, reconnect functions for players that disconnected from a game, and a lack of skill based matchmaking systems. In contrast to the non-modified mode of *Warcraft III* play that Blizzard Entertainment supported through a more apt technological architecture which supported many of these features, the culture of *DotA* had to be creative in playing around these limitations.

For players of *DotA* these dissatisfactions with the limitations of the platform were often mitigated through various paratextual spaces. These paratextual spaces were however, impossible to implement in the game of *DotA* itself. For example if a player wanted a

reliable game of *DotA* where the players that disconnect are held accountable and the outcome, win or lose, is recorded, then the only way to find such a game was through paratextual clients such as the popular *Garena* client (1). Or alternatively, through pre-arranged games among players that already knew each other. These paratextual attempts to realise the potential for this new genre as a reliable, persistently social, and competitive activity were often problematically difficult to access for players as these features were built around external clients, forums, and identities that were paratextually tied to those external spaces. For the especially competitive team based genre that was emerging here, these persistent identities and opportunities for more structured and meaningful games were essential to realising what this genre could potentially become. Due to the limitations of *DotA* as a mod and Blizzard Entertainment's hands-off approach however, this more competitive and persistently social mode of play was resigned to the status of niche activity for large parts of the world (2).

Although it is not the aim here to delve deeply into the specificities of the *DotA*'s playing culture, the requirements for playing *DotA* in this more meaningfully competitive and social way serves as an important indexical marker into the original technicities inherent during the formative stages of this genre. That is say, with clear comparisons to Taylor's (2006: 67) description of instrumentalised power play as a mode of play only accessible to those with the required time, social connections and technical capabilities for playing in this particular way. In Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) these power modes of play are supported by the technological architecture of the game. In many examples of MMORPGs the prevalence of these modes of play are essential to the functionality of the game world as the formation of groups or 'guilds' of players and the persistency of their social networks are responsible for many unique playing practices that balance and co-create the system (see for example, Steinkuehler, 2006, Taylor, 2006; Corneliussen and Rettberg-Walker, 2008; Chen, 2012). *DotA* differs from MMORPGs in the scale and duration of its game sessions, but it is comparable to them in the complexity of gameplay and the complete reliance upon online teamwork dynamics. The clear difference to MMORPGs however, is that the platform *DotA* appeared on was never designed to support this power mode of play. Despite players' not insignificant paratextual attempts to push *DotA* in a more intensely competitive and persistently social direction, it would take an entirely new platform designed specifically around this mode of play to realise the potential of this genre.

***League of Legends* the platform changer**

Accessibility to this power mode of play changed dramatically with the release of *LoL* and subsequent commercial iterations as these dissatisfactions were largely resolved through the new technological affordances of platforms designed specifically for this genre. In *LoL* for example, reconnect functions were fully implemented, skill-based match making was made a core feature of the game, and persistent identities tied to player accounts were required to play. Jakobsson (2011) has persuasively argued that due to the

ubiquity of persistently observable achievements in games, player accounts and the information they convey about playful practices resemble an identity that mirrors avatars in MMORPGs. In a very similar vein, games of *LoL* and comparable MOBAs were given much more significance with the onset of these features as expressive information about the intricacies of a player's style could be viewed through their integrated account.

Individual MOBA games that typically last 20 – 60 minutes in duration began to take on a much more social role by default here as player accounts acted as signifiers for a persistent in-game identity. Through individual games contributing towards information that constituted player profiles, detailed identities surrounding a player's in-game preferences or their 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2009) could be conveyed here. In contrast to the more ephemeral identity of players of a *DotA* game, *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs were widening the more persistently social and structured mode of play that had only previously existed as a problematically difficult to access paratextual mode of play. In a sense, the process of re-platforming these more 'power' modes of *DotA* play were bringing the genre closer to the more widely accessible and persistently social appeals associated with MMORPGs.

For the original playing communities of *DotA* that pioneered these more competitive and persistent modes of play out of their dissatisfactions with the constraints of the mod, this commercial widening of their play style echoes the monetised trajectories of many susceptible sub-cultural innovations or styles (Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1982). Through re-platforming a more social and competitive mode of play here, Riot Games transformed what were problematic paratextual resources previously maintained or moderated by fans into seamlessly implemented features; easy to access and available to anyone upon playing.

The notion of new technological innovations fulfilling 'dissatisfactions with social reality and desires for a better society' is a fundamental claim behind conceptions of a 'technological imaginary' (Lister et al, 2009: 73). Although there is no explicit societal progress being made through re-platforming this genre, this moment can be read as part of the wider trend towards a commercialisation of the Internet through new technologies that promise new forms of affective participation and connectivity. The promise inherent to platforms such as *Youtube*, *Facebook* or by extension, *LoL*, is that the innovative potential of the platform on offer can realise new forms of networked sociality, expression and capital (cultural, social, economic) crafting. As Gillesepie (2010) notes in a critical re-appraisal of the term 'platform' and its digital connotations,

'platform' emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, lifting up those who stand upon it.' (Gillesepie, 2010: 350)

Through implementing features integral to paratextual based *DotA* play into *LoL*, what was achieved here is a widening of the 'power' mode of play and a similar promise of 'lifting up' the play of those who use this new gaming platform. It is through the more

persistently social and competitive mode of play that was widened here that *LoL* and subsequent MOBAs achieved their initial popularity over *DotA* and it is here that this paper returns to the platform studies question that is a critical underpinning here. That is, was there any other alternative to *DotA* being re-platformed?

Alternative MOBA? Alternative Internet.

In Zittrain's (2008: 8) analysis of the creative potential inherent to Internet technologies, he describes the trend towards using 'tethered appliances' as one that limits the potential for user generativity and in doing so, undermines the networked potential of the Internet that has been central to many of its more collective and egalitarian movements. The problem as Zittrains sees it is that,

Internet users are again embracing a range of "tethered appliances", reflecting a resurgence of the initial model of bundled hardware and software that is created and controlled by one company. This will affect how readily behavior on the Internet can be regulated, which in turn will determine the extent that regulators and commercial incumbents can constrain amateur innovation, which has been responsible for much of what we now consider precious about the Internet. (Zittrain, 2008: 8-9).

The *Warcraft 3* custom game space was by its name and form, very far from the entirely non-generative type of online space Zittrain warns against. However, it was also far from a perfectly generative space that is malleable on the level of its underlying platform. This distinction between generative potential over the play space and generative potential over the platform is what in essence defines mods and it is this vital distinction that also played a crucial role in constraining *DotA* as a new genre. For any participatory or fan culture that is even tangentially related to source material, be it a television show or a gaming platform, the relationality of their cultural output to source material has always been problematic from a perspective of economic valuation. As Hills (2002: 35) notes on the subject of fan works, 'fan 'appropriations' ... or 'resistances' to consumption can always be reclaimed [by the original content producers] as new instances of exchange value'. *DotA* is different in so far as it was not the original content producers, in this case the platform developers Blizzard Entertainment, who 'reclaimed' the output of this cultural economy. Rather, it was another but no less industrially motivated developer, Riot Games, along with subsequent commercial developers that utilised these grassroots modes of play (3). However, what if *DotA*'s platform had been completely malleable? What if the generativity that Zittrain argues is intrinsic to the Internets dispersed structure had allowed modders and fans to resolve the original dissatisfactions with the platform and open up the power mode of play before *LoL*'s release?

These are unanswerable questions, however they do hint at an alternative conception for how this genre could have continued to develop outside of hybrid logics of economic, cultural and playful control that MOBAs now represent. For *LoL*, this moment of technological innovation through commercial investment in new platforms specific for this genre was fundamental at signaling the arrival of MOBAs as a hybrid power structure where bottom-up movements and affectual relationships remain integral but are

under constant valuation from above. To return to the dispositif of MOBAs already outlined, this process of re-platforming grassroots modes of playing towards a more widely adopted power mode of play is only one example of the bottom-up agency that contributed towards MOBAs current form. Although the account of technological re-platforming described here is not an entirely problematic development for many players on the face of it, critical questions quickly arise when these new precedents for platformed power relations are normalised and they extend far beyond merely hosting a new game.

THE PARADOX OF RE-PLATFORMING COLLECTIVE PLAY

Tim Caldwell, a design director at Riot Games, noted exactly this two sided aim behind the creation of *LoL* when he revealed in a 2012 interview that,

We believed that a standalone game could bring players much-needed functionality like matchmaking, persistent game features, and so on,' Caldwell tells me in an email. 'And we also believed there was a ton of room for exploration and improvement in terms of game design there. (LeJacq, 2012)

For Caldwell and Riot Games, the opportunity to re-platform this genre represented a moment that the play of *LoL* could be redirected towards their own vision that, in a paradoxical way, was also a break from the collectively assembled structure that pioneered this genre. Riot Games' new game engine built specifically for this genre in 2009 sought to smooth out many of the more nuanced and often exploitative game mechanics that defined the original mod (Remo and Sheffield, 2008). Borrowing Consalvo's (2009, 114) definition of 'exploits' as functions of a game that were never intended by designers, *DotA* and its entire model of collectively playful co-creativity were laden in this definition of exploits.

Riot Games break from the collective game design philosophy of *DotA* can be seen in *LoL*'s absence of many influential *DotA* mechanics that were pioneered through its play. To take one influential example that was prominent in *DotA* called 'creep denying', it is clear how Riot Games began to redefine the genre in this moment. Creep denying is when players land a killing blow on friendly non-player characters (NPCs, or as often referred to, 'creeps' or 'minions') on low health to deny their opponents the in-game experience and currency they would otherwise gain from killing the NPC themselves. As an in-game mechanic creep denying was never intended to be a central feature of *DotA* play when the mod was originally developed however due to its emergent centrality through *DotA* play and the in-game skill required to deny creeps effectively, it became a commonplace feature in every iteration of *DotA*. Creep denying is just one example, but it crystallises what made *DotA* unique as both an example of emergent play and collectively playful co-creativity. For latter commercial sequels such as *Heroes of Newerth* (S2 Game, 2010) or *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013) mechanics such as creep denying remained central to gameplay in an attempt to recreate the appeal of *DotA*, however in *LoL*, creep denying and many similar mechanics were actively resisted.

Through removing many exploitative conventions that had become commonplace in the conventions of *DotA* play and introducing a set of game design principles explicitly for the purpose of making the genre ‘fun’ and ‘accessible’ (4), Riot Games sought to craft out a more widely appealing but no less complex identity for their game. The accessible, complex and inherently ‘fun’ structure of League of Legends can be attributed to a number of game design principles that Riot Games actively resisted including ‘Power Without Gameplay’, ‘Burden of Knowledge’, ‘Unclear Optimisation’, and ‘Fun Fails to Exceed Anti-Fun’ (4). To briefly expand upon one of these principles named ‘Burden of Knowledge’, the principle here is that no in-game ability should give an advantage to a player solely based upon their knowledge of the game. If for example, an ability stops another player from moving by destroying their health if they move, then as a player knowing not to move against this ability is essential to survival. Due to the particular piece of in-game knowledge required to competently play here, this would be considered an in-game ‘Burden of Knowledge’ mechanic and resisted as a result. This example closely resembles a popular mechanic in *DotA* named ‘Rupture’ that has been subsequently replicated in *Dota 2*, however in *LoL*, game design choices that reflect this kind of mechanic are absent. Again, a facet of competitive play that was collectively negotiated through the grassroots space of *DotA* was being redefined by *LoL*.

These principles were listed in an influential forum post made in 2010 (4) that summarised why Riot Games balances and updates their game in the way they do and they serve as a distinct example that differed from *DotA*’s more collective decision making regarding game design choices such as these. On the subject of commercially tied knowledge communities, Lévy (1997: 236) has claimed that ‘By preventing the knowledge space from becoming autonomous, they deprive the circuits of commodity space...of an extraordinary source of energy’. For Lévy, the freedom of participants to act freely in the way they want and not be constricted by any overarching power is essential to ushering in a new form of creative intelligence he dubbed ‘collective intelligence’. Although Lévy never discussed the application of these ideas into game systems, the similarities in underlying logics between participation and play are evident here. Bottom-up collective game design that emphasises the centrality of emergent play is opposed by more centralised top-down game design that puts emphasis on an original vision of the game that exploitative (as opposed to ‘emergent’, following Juul, 2002) play compromises. These differing philosophies of regulating the playful properties of actions in these systems has consequences for the co-creative relations inherent to online games and with the release of *LoL*, it was exactly these relations that were beginning to be contested.

It is here that differences in game design philosophies begin to become pronounced as games such as *Dota 2* or *HoN* can be framed as closer to *DotA*’s original collectively intelligent model whereas *LoL* abides by a more top down and imposed mode of game design. On the subject of *DotA*’s identity and what makes commercial iterations distinctive, it is relevant to expand upon Steve Feak’s position outlined above (see page 5) as he noted in 2010 that,

DotA is a mod that many of people have contributed to, not a single person or development team like most typical games. As soon as you step away and create a new game, like we at Riot Games did with *League of Legends*, it's no longer *DotA*. After all, *DotA* wouldn't be where it is today without the many contributions the community has made over the years. (Fronczak, 2010)

For Feak, the identity of *LoL* and in particular *Dota 2* (that overtly attempts to capture the identity of the mod through its name) would have always struggled to capture the same collectively grassroots identity that defined *DotA*. The game design philosophy outlined above that is enforced from the top down begins to hint at the tensions that arise as game design decisions are implemented by commercial designers who are not motivated by the same collectively communal goals that this genre was pioneered through. As Feak notes, for this genre to become commercial and abandon the collectively grassroots identity it forged through *DotA*, it would need to take on a new identity altogether. The challenge for developers such as Riot Games has been to commercialise this collectively crafted genre and retain the same devotion and affective appeal that it relied upon to sustain itself.

During the same period of time Feak made this statement, the hybrid identity of MOBA was beginning to emerge as *DotA*'s cultural importance started to become displaced altogether. As *LoL*'s popularity grew at a rapid rate and Riot Games the small scale indie developer rapidly transformed into Riot Games the global developer and brand responsible for the most played game in the world, MOBA became the accepted name for the genre and its many different iterations. To some players the term MOBA continues to be a point of contention as 'Dota' or 'Action Real Time Strategy' remains the more authentic definition of the genre that aligns with their own sense of gaming capital (5). These views are however, increasingly a minority. As of 2015, the second most popular user-defined tag for *Dota 2* on Valve Corporation's online distribution platform Steam is 'MOBA' (second to 'Free to Play'). Considering *Dota 2* is the game that most closely resembles the genres modding history in name and content along with *Dota 2* developers themselves opposing the term 'MOBA' (Nutt, 2011), it is understandable to see why statements such as 'gaming is in the age of the MOBA' have become normalised and unquestioned.

CONCLUSION

The network of influence MOBAs now extend into is vast as playful, cultural and economic activity pervades into many spaces, cultures and industries that are not explicitly within a games developers' control. Video or streaming platforms such as *Youtube* or *Twitch*, expansive worldwide e-sports industries and fervently active paratextual spaces such as */r/leagueoflegends* upon *Reddit*, to name a few, all complicate the relationality of online power structures for this genre. Following Dijck's (2013: 18) conception of social media as a 'connective ecology' of interrelating platforms, or 'microsystems', that are sensitive to the changes in other parts of their respective ecology, so too are MOBAs conduits for paratextual flows that speak to their surrounding ecology and its respective motivations.

Whereas players of *DotA* participated with the game but were constrained due to limited in-game functionality, now players of MOBAs participate without those same limitations but are subject to many commercial and connective logics that obscure the direction of the genres continued development. In contrast to the open collectivity that defined *DotA*, MOBAs mirror the wider transition towards platforms across the Internet. The challenge for developers of MOBAs is weighing up decisions regarding the iterative games they co-create along with the ecosystems they curate through such decisions. Although different developers negotiate this role differently as has been touched upon in this paper, it is an area for further research to fully comprehend what extent platformed game design decisions affect players and wider connective stakeholders. For researchers however, the critical challenge here is to uncover these connective flows that often begin through bottom-up movements as commonplace as play but quickly circulate through affectively commercialised networks to a point where their new form seems normalised and unquestioned; despite its industrialisation by political economic motivations.

For the Internet more widely these participatory networks of uneven agency are what have come to define the connective ecosystem of platforms that is now prevalent. The MOBA genre is archetypal of this platformed landscape and the dispositif of its overlapping power relations continues to complicate and hide bottom-up flows of agency through new modes of connective decision making and affective control. Although it has been beyond the scope of this paper to fully consider the full extent of bottom-up agencies or affect that are laced throughout this genre, in delving behind the transition from *DotA* to MOBA this paper hopes to have started a conversation around what bottom-up flows continue to be obscured by the various contours of power that constitute the dispositif that is the MOBA genre.

ENDNOTES

1 *Garena* was a popular external games hosting client that was popular for players of *DotA* seeking more structured play.

2 A notable exception here is South East Asia where the combination of a prevalent games café culture and *Garena* being based in Singapore meant that *DotA* gained a significant cultural traction. See for example, Rayo, 2012.

3 The process of commercial developers other than Blizzard re-platforming *DotA* has not been entirely smooth. When *Dota 2* was announced it was met with hostility from both Blizzard Entertainment and some fans of the original mod. See Welsh, 2010.

4 These principles were listed in an influential forum post made in 2010 that summarised why Riot Games balances and updates their game in the way they do. The forum post can be found here: <http://forums.na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=293417>

5 There are many large discussions from MOBA players that question the name of the genre, particularly in the first few years of MOBAs usage. See for example: <http://www.liquiddota.com/forum/dota-2-general/454364-moba-arts-dota-does-it-really-matter>

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