

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: League of Legends
Platform: PC
Genre: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)
Release Date: October 27, 2009
Developer: Riot Games
Publisher: Riot Games
Design Director: Tom Cadwell
Lead Designer: Christina Norman

Overview

The narrative in *League of Legends* is centered primarily around the interactions between various factions in the continent of Valoran, though individual Champions do have an impact on those interactions. This conflict is driven by the archetypal struggle between light and dark, embodied most prominently through two of Valoran's most powerful city-states, Demacia and Noxus, though other factions also play important roles.

Warfare has been a part of Runeterra, the world in which the game takes place, since ancient times. These skirmishes – between city-states, as in present day, or warring tribes, as in the past – have always been augmented with the use of powerful magic. The use of magic in these battles, as discovered in recent centuries, has taken its toll on the land, altering the landscape, and causing phenomena such as violent, magically charged storms. Out of fear that another war would cause irreparable damage to Runeterra, some of Valoran's most powerful sorcerers created an organization, the 'League of Legends', to serve as a battle ground for settling disputes.

Characters

League of Legends currently boasts 117 unique Champions, each with their own allegiance and motivations, but since the overarching narrative of the game is focused on the conflicts between the world's factions, this section will cover the most influential groups, rather than specific individuals.

- **The League of Legends** – An institute founded to resolve conflicts in a more controlled space, in order to prevent any further damage to Runeterra. The League prepared various arenas throughout Valoran in which combatants would fight to settle major political conflict. Powerful individuals known as Summoners (the role that players assume), each with their own political allegiance, would summon Champions (the characters that the player controls) in these arenas to fight for their chosen cause. In order for a political conflict to be settled, the factions on either side of the conflict must be recognized as city-states by the League. Being recognized as a city-state comes with various rights and protections under the League.
- **Demacia** – The city-state heralded as a pinnacle of righteousness, primarily concerned with establishing a benevolent order throughout Valoran. Demacian law is centered around a strict moral code, and any crime is punished severely by a rigid system of justice. Demacia employs a constitutional monarchy, with an elected council serving as the legislative body of the city-state. Due to its infatuation with justice, Demacia is in a constant, bitter conflict with Noxus.
- **Noxus** – The night to Demacia's day. Generally speaking, Noxus believes in a selfish version of survival of the fittest, regarding compassion as a symptom of weakness. In Noxus, military and government are one and the same; the Noxian High Command acts as the head of both. Rather than seeking a benevolent unification of Valoran, Noxus is continually striving to conquer more territories in a campaign centered around a thirst for power. The conflict between Demacia and Noxus is the primary modern dispute in Runeterra.
- **Ionia** – An island city-state that values diplomacy and the quest for enlightenment. Ionia is concerned with the idea of balance and harmony, and as such, it originally avoided involvement with the League of Legends. This decision placed it outside of the League's jurisdiction, and therefore within reach of Noxus' campaign to expand. Noxus launched an invasion on Ionia, which its residents fiercely resisted; seven years after the invasion began, its leaders decided that the only course of action that remained was to join the League of Legends, though they made it clear that their only interest was to protect Ionia's future. Ionia eventually drove Noxus out completely through a decisive battle in the League of Legends, but retains its League membership in order to continue its protection under the League.
- **Piltover** – The “City of Progress”, and one of two city-states devoted to technological and scientific advances. Piltover specializes in techmaturgy, which is centered around the fusion of magic with modern technology. Piltover joined the League in an attempt to save Runeterra; they believe that, with the power of science, they can come up with solutions to Valoran's conflicts. Their focus on science and technology is paired with the goal of being environmentally conscious; Piltover is constantly iterating on various sources of renewable energy.

- **Zaun** – Just as Demacia is the foil for Noxus, so is Zaun the antithesis of Piltover. Zaun is the second city-state devoted to technological advancement, though they value progress far greater than they value being mindful of their environment. Zaun has few (if any) governmental restrictions, which its citizens take pride in, thinking of themselves as the freest city-state in Runeterra. This lack of boundaries allows Zaun's many scientists and industrialists to forgo safety measures, resulting in a perpetual outpouring of pollution and smog. Zaun has a rivalry with Piltover, and a loose 'friendship' with Noxus, allowing the Noxian High Command to summon Zaunite Champions to fight for them in the League.
- **The Freljord** – A city-state composed of three main warring tribes, all vying to unify and control the entire Freljord region. Although most of the Freljord's people have put aside their differences and come together under the Avarosan faction, not all of its residents are content with the Avarosan leader. The three Freljordan factions are as follows:
 - **The Avarosan** – The largest tribe in the Freljord, unified beneath the rule of their self-appointed queen, an archer named Ashe. Ashe seeks to instigate a peaceful, singular alliance throughout all of the Freljord, and bring an end to the Freljord's long-lasting era of warring tribes. Ashe and her husband, Tryndamere, were irritated by Demacia's neutral stance during Noxus' attack on the Freljordan tribes, referred to by Noxus as the 'Barbarian Pacification Campaigns', but have been negotiating a tentative alliance in recent years.
 - **The Frostguard** – A tribe that resides within the ruins of ancient Freljord, led by their own monarch, Lissandra. The Frostguard keeps archives of Freljordan history, and though Lissandra is supposedly allied with Ashe, this allegiance is superficial at best. Lissandra secretly plots to seize the land for herself and pass control of the Freljord to mysterious beings known as 'The Watchers', a once all-powerful race forgotten by those outside of the Frostguard.
 - **The Winter's Claw** – A tribe led by Sejuani, a woman who despises Ashe's attempts at peaceful unification. Sejuani values strength above all else, and is disgusted by Ashe's tribe, whom she sees as weak and contemptible. Sejuani is especially embittered towards Ashe as a result of spiritual counsel she once sought from her tribe's mystic; the seer foretold that Sejuani would eventually conquer and unite all of the Freljord's tribes under her rule. Since then, Sejuani has trusted completely in that vision, and maintains that only the strong deserve to survive in the Freljord. To that end, she and her tribe pillage weaker tribes, crippling them to the point of dissolution.

Breakdown

To discuss the narrative in *League of Legends*, one must first discuss the method in which that narrative is delivered. *League* is not a narrative-driven game; its gameplay is centered around players fighting other players (or, optionally, bots) and destroying towers with the ultimate game-win goal of eradicating the opposing team's nexus. As mentioned in a Kotaku article about the game, “People show up to fight each other in *League of Legends*. They pick a Champion, team up with others and work to figure out strategies that let them kick ass [4].” Unlike with games such as the *Mass Effect* or *Zelda* series, people don't log on to *League* for its story, but that doesn't mean that its designers can't craft an impactful narrative experience for its players; it just means that they have to find new methods of delivering that narrative.

Before Riot really started focusing on how to deliver narrative in *League*, its narrative was primarily delivered in one of two ways: champion lore, and the Journal of Justice. The champion lore consisted of two or three paragraphs about the character's background: an explanation of where they were from, and why they joined the League of Legends. The Journal of Justice was a periodical that, much like a newspaper, contained articles about current events in Runeterra. These events could be anything from stories about leaked photos of a champion in lingerie to foreshadowing about future champions, such as Graves, or Sejuani and Lissandra. The weakness of these two methods, particularly the champion lore, is that they ultimately ended up being 'walls of text' that might engage a minority of players, but not nearly as many as Riot hoped to reach.

Despite the fact that it is not a narrative-driven game, Riot is well aware that its players are invested in *League's* narrative. Christina Norman, the designer currently heading Riot's lore department, acknowledged that while the majority of players don't log on to engage in the game's narrative, they still “form deep relationships with Champions. [The Champions are] not just chess pieces moving around a board to them [4].”

Since Norman's appointment as Riot's head of lore, Riot has worked on developing characters who are simultaneously simple and compelling, and moved away from stories centered around the League itself, as they want to “focus on telling stories where champions have agency and fight for what they believe in, over stories where champions are influenced by summoners and fight for moral causes they do not believe in [5].” The question that arises, then, is where the space for narrative exists in a game that isn't centered around story.

One such space lies within champion dialogue. As with most real-time strategy games, *League's* champions have an array of vocal acknowledgments for different commands, such as 'move' or 'attack'. When utilized correctly, these lines can help characterize a champion quite effectively, without requiring that the player break from the core game loop. Take, for example, Varus, one of the game's Marksmen. A few of his 'Movement' lines are: “I'm on borrowed time,” “There is no salvation,” and “My work is not done.” From these three sentences, the player is able to gather that Varus has unfinished business, and his quest to finish said business has taken him down a dark path. This is just a taste of Varus' background, but it has enough substance to give an impression of character to the player, and possibly incite their curiosity enough to lead them to read about his past.

Another more recent addition to the dialogue space is inter-champion interactions; Riot has been

working not only to give its characters context within the world itself, but also to help characters contextualize one another. One such example rests with Vi and Jayce, two characters from Piltover. One of Jayce's 'attack' voice clips is "Power slam!"; when Vi uses her ultimate ability on Jayce, she teases, "Hey, Jayce. Power slam!" This interaction informs the player that these two characters have a relationship and hints at what that relationship is like, while simultaneously communicating information about the champions as individuals. Jayce obviously takes himself seriously, which Vi mocks in a non-derisive fashion. This expresses that Vi doesn't take things as seriously as Jayce, and perhaps that she feels like Jayce holds himself in inappropriately high regard. By ulting Jayce, then, she is 'putting him in his place' – but not in a way intended to seriously wound him. This interaction most closely resembles the kind of playful banter that occurs between two friends engaged in a competitive activity, which is exactly the situation that Jayce and Vi find themselves in if she has occasion to ult him.

As is the case with most game developers, Riot hasn't always been so masterful in its command of its dialogue space. In addition to 'attack' and 'move', all champions also have a taunt and a joke. Some champions have clever jokes that add to their character – Diana, for instance, tells a joke that lacks humor due to its brutality (the punchline being that the subjects of the joke are burned alive). There is additional background to the joke in that it casts the sun in unfavorable light, and Diana is literally the moon to another character's sun, but the basic gist is that Diana is brutal and somewhat socially inept.

In contrast, another champion (Janna) whispers airily, "Yes, it's true. For only \$2.95 a minute, I will leave you breathless." One might consider this an advertisement of the character's profession, except that she isn't a sex worker; rather, she is described as "a voice for the regulation of magical experimentation and a supporter of the development of techmaturgy [2]." The implied sexuality in her joke is not echoed in any of her other lore or dialogue clips. In fact, her sexuality doesn't seem to be a large part of her character at all, aside from the fact that she is very scantily clad. Rather than helping to characterize, Janna's joke is very out of line with who the character actually is.

Another method of characterization that Riot has employed involves the game's login screen. For quite a long time, this screen displayed the same image of two of the game's champions, and played the same default theme song. After a while, Riot branched out, and began changing the login screen for special events, such as 'The Harrowing' (Halloween), or 'Snowdown Showdown' (Winter Holidays). Recently, Riot took the next step forward, and has started to use the login screen to characterize individual champions. Each time Riot would release a new champion, that champion would get their own personal login screen, complete with a theme song custom-made for the character. These songs are yet another method of communicating information about a champion without breaking the player out of the game's core experience. Instrumental pieces can convey a certain tone and inform the player of a character's mood without the use of words; in other cases, clever lyrics can express an aspect of the character. One prime example is Draven, a character with a massive ego (when clicked on in Champion Select, he crows, "Welcome to the League of Draven!"); the only word in his theme is his name, which is chanted over and over again, as though a crowd of adoring fans is shouting it. Vi, a "police officer" with a penchant for punching things, got her very own rock anthem, complete with characterizing lyrics ("Was there ever any certain time when you thought brute force and style combine well?").

Finally, Riot characterizes their champions through the use of character archetypes, as embodied within Runeterra's various factions. Each faction serves as a basic template for a character, and is subsequently modified to produce interesting variations of that archetype. Take, for example, Singed and Viktor, two

champions associated with Zaun. Singed is a chemist whose one true love is mixing horrifying concoctions of chemicals, with little care for the human consequences of his inventions. Viktor is a man who augmented himself with hextech machinery to the point that he has become more synthetic than organic. While Singed remorselessly develops terrible poisons that are weaponized against other humans, Viktor views himself as the bringer of a new age, in which man evolves into a more superior, hextech-augmented being. In contrast to Singed's indifference, Viktor has a somewhat benevolent attitude towards other humans, seeking to open their eyes to “the glorious evolution”, and ultimately 'improve' the human race. Both Viktor and Singed are from the same 'Zaunite' template; they have both taken full advantage of Zaun's lack of legal restrictions and technological background, but for very different purposes. Both characters still fit into the 'Zaun' archetype, but remain very different from one another.

In addition to these methods of communicating narrative, Riot is always exploring new ways to deliver story. For instance, the announcement of one of the newer champions, Jinx, was preceded by the vandalism of Vi's page on the League of Legends website, speaking to Jinx's antagonistic relationship with Vi, as well as her disregard for the law. In another case, Riot heralded the release of a Legendary skin for one of its characters with a short, interactive comic.

In its narrative design, Riot takes easily understandable archetypes ('justice', 'power', and so on) and manipulates them to produce a variety of characters. These characters are then further developed, not through the course of cutscenes and dialogue trees as in most narrative-driven games, but in an RTS game space. Although champions still come equipped with brief backstories in the form of a few paragraphs of text, Riot's narrative design shines in its less conventional methods. Riot manipulates the space between the lines, using login screens and succinct character dialogue to engage the player without removing them from *League's* core game loop. This engagement is what prompts players to take the next step and continue to learn about the game's world and characters, even beyond the narrative that they experience in the context of a match.

League also boasts a less traditional form of narrative: that is, the narrative structure of the matches themselves. Just as traditional narratives have patterns – beginning, middle, and end, the Hero's Journey, and so on – each match of *League* follows its own conventional narrative. Most matches are roughly divisible between the following phases: the Pre-Game Phase, the Laning Phase, the Roaming Phase, and the Late-Game Phase. These phases roughly coincide with various stages of Joseph Campbell's monomyth: First Threshold (forming a team, sometimes with strangers, and entering the realm of a match against opponents with unknown individual skills), The Road of Trials (team-wide gains and losses before they come together as a single unit), Approach (in which the teams attempt to adapt to each other's strategies and best one another), and Ordeal (in which the team encounters become increasingly decisive, until the scale finally, permanently tips in one direction).

Although most matches follow this basic formula, there are a number of variables that make nearly every match distinct from the last. Given the volume of players (twelve million daily as of October 2012 [6]) and the massive roster of Champions, each match's individual narrative promises to be different from the last, whether the deviation occurs within the conventional match structure, or outside of it.

While *League's* gameplay and narrative are still separate entities, they intersect in quite a few different ways, and Riot is working to push those intersections even further, playing to *League's* inherent

strengths as a MOBA game. The beauty of *League* is that it is iterative, and therefore allows both its narrative and gameplay designers to hone their craft, devising more and more ways to deliver a meaningful experience to its players.

Strongest Element

League's greatest strength lies in its iterative potential. While most games are essentially barred from further development once they ship (with the exception of downloadable content), *League* has the unique ability to grow and improve for as long as it is being updated. A prime example rests with Riot's treatment of Sejuani, the leader of the Winter's Claw tribe. When Sejuani was first released, she was literally clad in nothing more than a fur bikini and a helmet, despite being from the coldest region in Runeterra. Due to both player feedback and internal review, Riot concluded that they hadn't done the character justice, and later released a visual rework that dressed her in armor appropriate for both her occupation and Freljord's climate. Riot has the unique freedom of continually updating its narrative, both forging ahead with new methods of delivery, and revising old content that doesn't mesh with their creative vision.

Unsuccessful Element

In terms of narrative, *League* suffers from breaks in its narrative immersion. Instances such as Janna's aforementioned joke, or Sejuani's questionable battle attire, are regrettably common occurrences within the game space. It can be difficult to buy into the world of Runeterra when its landscape is peppered with small details that don't quite fit together into a cohesive larger picture. Why does Lucian look like a character from *The Matrix* or *Blade* when all of the other gun-wielding champions seem like they belong to an earlier age? Why isn't there more consistency between the game's Yordle characters, if they're all supposed to be of the same race? Why are most of the game's non-human characters singular instances of that species (there is only one instance of an Ursine character, only one instance of Rengar's bipedal cat-inspired race, and so on)? These and other details cripple Runeterra, preventing it from feeling like a rich, well-developed game world, and Riot will need to address these issues if they want to improve *League's* narrative believability.

Highlight

League's narrative is most effective when Riot utilizes its ability to involve its players. Given the nature of the game, Riot has far more opportunities than most game companies to get its players involved in their narrative. Riot once hosted an event that allowed its players to affect the game's lore, referred to as "Ionia versus Noxus: Rematch." Ten players were selected to play a match to determine the fate of the Noxian conquest of Ionia; when the Ionian team won, Riot wrote the victory into the lore, allowing Ionia to be free from Noxus' clutches at last, and further commemorated the event with a special item in the in-game item shop. Events such as these are a spectacularly interactive way of engaging the player with the game's narrative. Riot hasn't held any lore-affecting events since the Ionia versus Noxus match, but doing so would encourage players to become even more personally invested in the game, therefore engaging with *League's* narrative to an even greater extent.

Critical Reception

Due to the nature of the game, there are no reviews of *League's* conventional narrative; however, a few reviewers have commented on the overall narrative experience of a match of *League*. Tyler Hicks, a Gamespot reviewer, rated *League* with a 9 (superb on their scale), delving into some of the more specific narrative points of interest present within a match: “The dragon is a powder keg of early game team fights... [and] late in the game, the powerful Baron Nashor serves as a cold war catalyst.” He adds, “The stalemates over Baron are some of the most intense moments *League of Legends* has to offer, making the catharsis of overcoming a mighty challenge even greater [1].”

Quintin Smith of Eurogamer.net rated the game an 8 out of 10, likened playing *League* to “riding a toboggan down a hill covered in not snow, but numbers. It is joy.” Although he criticized the game's rough level of completion (he reviewed the game in November 2009, so his review doesn't take game's improvements over the years into account), he concluded by noting that “More time, heart and money has gone into this than any other free game I can remember playing... [8].”

League averages at a 78 on Metacritic, with 28 positive and 9 mixed reviews, though it is worth noting that most of these reviews were written in 2009, when the game was first released. [3]

Lessons

- There is room for narrative, even in non-narrative driven games.
 - Riot has been especially creative in its exploration of available narrative space, developing their characters through in-game dialogue, login screens, and more, all because they recognize that players form emotional bonds with their characters.
- Players can be valuable assets in shaping a game's narrative, and inviting them to do so helps increase their investment in the game.
 - Riot's self-proclaimed goal is to be the “most player-focused game company in the world [7],” and it shows. By listening to players, analyzing their input, and adjusting the game accordingly, Riot has been able to cultivate *League* for four years – and they're still going strong.
- Narrative involves much more than just story.
 - As evidenced when listening to a player recount the events of a match, and in Hicks' review, each match has its own compelling narrative. The framework of a match is a designed, thoughtful narrative experience, just as a character's lore and dialogue are narrative experiences.
- There is always room for improvement.
 - Riot has shown time and again that it is not only willing, but interested in evolving and improving the *League of Legends* experience. By going back into the game and redoing some of the weaker or unsuccessful elements (like Sejuani's visual update), Riot continues to strengthen *League's* overall experience.

Summation

League of Legends is not a narrative-driven game, but it still manages to deliver narrative in unconventional ways. Narrative is an element of design that reaches beyond games that follow a more traditional narrative structure, as evidenced in Riot's attempts to add flavor and characterization to the Champions in its game. By giving more attention to narrative despite its genre, *League* has prompted other developers to start considering how to deliver more meaningful experiences to their players. *League* is not without its flaws, but it is a promising step forward in the journey to craft more meaningful narrative experiences throughout the entire video game industry, rather than solely in specific subsets of the industry.

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