Gaming the Gift: The Affective Economy of *League of Legends* 'Fair' Free-To-Play Model

Abstract

With its release in late 2009, *League of Legends* (Riot Games) has influenced the games industry in several profound ways. Known for its vast popularity and its pivotal role in pioneering live streaming and electronic sports, *League of Legends* is also noteworthy for its model of 'fair' free-to-play. Described by Riot Games and many industry professionals as 'fair' due to its lack of any 'pay-to-win' content (Graft, 2013; Nutt, 2014), this model of free-to-play has gone on to influence a paradigmatic shift towards 'games as a service'. In this paper, the model of 'fair' free-to-play is critically framed as a lucrative affective economy involving reciprocal gift exchanges between players and commercial games developers. Drawing on 49 qualitative *Reddit* responses from players who buy in-game skins, this paper positions the microtransactions of *League of Legends* as a notable example of affective economics that is bound up in reciprocal forms of commercial exchange. Framing this hybrid model of co-creative relations alongside examples from game, fan and Internet studies, it is the critical aim of this paper to frame the microtransactions of *League of Legends'* as an instance of affective valorisation. Paralleling the affective economics of various digital platforms, it is the view of this paper that microtransactions in games should be considered as part of the same political economy of the Internet.

Keywords

Introduction

Conceptions of gift economies have undergone many revisions since Marcel Mauss (1950) famously described the reciprocal relations of non-capitalist social structures. With the advent of the Internet in particular, the idea of gift economies being, as Lewis Hyde (1983: 91) put it, 'an economy of small groups [whereby] emotional ties are the glue that holds a community together', has become disrupted. Richard Barbrook (1998), for example, termed online sharing economies a 'hi-tech gift economy' where the size of a group is unlimited due to the almost infinitely replicable bits people now reciprocate for one another. However, as the online landscape has developed into the platformed economy we now know, gift economies have increasingly converged with commercial actors (Scott, 2009; Jenkins et al, 2013: 62). At the forefront of these new hybrid relations is the games industry and in models of microtransactional free-to-play, such as the one developed by Riot Games' *League of Legends* (2009 – present), a vital site of playful yet unequal relations have emerged.

Since its release in late 2009, Riot Games' *League of Legends* (*LoL*) has grown from an obscure title developed by an independent studio into one of the most popular, influential and lucrative games in the world (Crecente, 2019). *LoL* is a foundational title in the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre, which is a genre of game derived from a participatory modding community that involves a highly competitive player versus player experience. In a typical MOBA such as *LoL*, two teams of five players each control their own unique avatar with distinctive abilities and must work with their team to defeat enemy avatars, gain map control and destroy the opposing team's base structure. Part of the appeal of playing a MOBA is the

freedom it allows players to negotiate their own play style with the game, lending to the genre's popularity as a participatory culture, a live streamed activity and as an electronic sports (esports) industry (Egliston, 2015; Jarrett, 2016). However, what has gone underexplored in academic literature on games such as *LoL* is the underpinning model of monetisation that has enabled these cultural activities to thrive.

In 2017, *LoL* generated $2.1 billion worldwide, a figure that has grown steadily year on year since its release in 2009 (Murray, 2018). What makes *LoL* noteworthy in comparison to many commercial games that came before it, however, is that Riot Games do not ask players to spend any money to play their game. Upon release in 2009, Riot Games popularised the term 'pay-to-win' (P2W) as a way of differentiating their monetisation model from established models of F2P that were at the time, underpinned by microtransactions of in-game goods with competitive use-value. Monetised by what Riot Games call a 'fair' model of free-to-play, *LoL* is available for anyone with a computer to play and crucially, there are no competitive in-game advantages available to those who pay (Nutt, 2014). Riot Games monetise *LoL* almost entirely through the sale of cosmetic avatar adjustments named 'skins' that can change the appearance of player-controlled avatars but importantly, not their in-game abilities. Although cosmetic purchases had existed in F2P models prior to *LoL*, particularly in South Korea (Luton, 2013: vii), *LoL* represented one of the first titles to go fully cosmetic in its monetisation. It is the relations that underpin this ambiguous yet lucrative economy of skin sales that is the focus of this paper.

Drawing on 49 qualitative responses gathered from players during an online research project surrounding *LoL* in 2015/2016, this paper describes the reciprocal relationship Riot Games have established with players through their 'fair' free-to-play model. Although the sample of qualitative responses provided here is limited in its scope, the responses offer an insight into the underpinning sentiments of players spending money at a moment prior to the introduction

of loot boxes (that were introduced to *LoL* in early 2016). As the responses in this paper exemplify, players do not view Riot Games as a strictly commercial producer but as an organisation concerned with the overall well-being of the game's 'ecosystem' (a term Riot Games often deploy). Similar to Mauss' (1955: 74) emphasis on gift exchanges being enabled by a 'total social phenomenon' of religious, moral, legal, economic and aesthetic traditions; *LoL*'s economy is enabled by the economic, social and playful norms Riot Games have carefully cultivated. For example, Riot Games employees frequently position themselves as non-professional 'Rioters' when addressing players in popular paratextual spaces such as *Reddit*; Riot Games actively support the largest esports industry in the world for their game; Riot Games rely on the constant affective labour of streamers playing their game in live-streamed spaces such as *Twitch.tv* (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019)*;* and as mentioned above, they release their game for free. Symbolically, *LoL* is perceived as a gift and it invites players into a system of relations that obscures commercialisation.

In this paper, the significance of this hybrid gift economy to the games industry, the Internet and wider society is critically assessed. The aim is to represent what kind of affect players feel in this hybrid system of relations and moreover, to critically frame this affective economy in a political economic context. The feelings players express towards *LoL* and Riot Games are reciprocal and from a political economic perspective, these sentiments provide a noteworthy example of affective platformed relations. Paralleling recent descriptions of affective economies in Internet and fan studies (Andrejevic, 2011; Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Hills, 2015; Jarrett, 2016b), the aim here is to describe a microtransactional mechanism by which affect is converted into economic value for commercial games publishers. The mechanism at play here is the sale of skins in Riot Games' 'fair' model of F2P, however it represents what Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012: 147) would call an 'affect-based law of value' common to platformed relations. As Arvidsson and Colleoni stress, identifying instances of affective

economics is crucial to critically measuring the political economic activity of Internet platforms and in the microtransactions of games such as *LoL*, a crucial site of affective valorisation has developed. It is the affective feelings underpinning this monetisation mechanism, along with the enabling forms of affective labour sustaining its continuation, that is the focus of this paper.

A further theme present throughout this account of *LoL*'s hybrid gift economy, is to describe an alternative model of monetisation to the now commonplace gambling themed loot boxes, which were added to *LoL* in March 2016. As the research underpinning this paper took place just prior to loot boxes introduction, the account of *LoL's* hybrid relations provided here makes an important critical intervention into understanding where the now commonplace loot box model of microtransactions arose. How far the affective perceptions of players could be ruptured by moments of controversy such as the introduction of loot boxes is a theme that underpins this analysis.

My use of the word 'fair' throughout this article is intended to refer to Riot Games and other game developers own use of the word to describe their model of monetisation. Moreover, though, the apostrophes I use around 'fair' are intended to emphasise that other forms of capital other than money always flow through any online game and these capitals (gaming, social, cultural) are the result of sociological conditions a player is exposed to. In this sense, no game is ever truly 'fair' due to the inequalities of the real world that are impossible to fully separate from the digital. As various game studies scholars have noted, similarly egalitarian game design terms such as 'balance' (Taylor, 2006: 158) and 'meritocracy' (Paul, 2018) problematically pervade the games industry. Throughout this paper, the sociological tensions underpinning the egalitarian evoking term of 'fair' F2P are never far removed and it is my intention to draw out the ironies underpinning the word. To begin delving into the

affective economics of *LoL*, it is important to first frame the significance of this 'fair' F2P

model in the games industry.

The Gift of a Free and 'Fair' Game

On 3rd June 2013, 'Wargaming', the online games developer of the free-to-play title *World of*

Tanks (Wargaming, 2011 - present) announced a new initiative to remove all pay-to-win

options from their games (Graft, 2013). Pay-to-win takes many forms, but fundamentally it

refers to a model of monetisation that allows players to purchase competitive in-game

advantages through microtransactions. When Wargaming made the announcement in 2013

that they were switching their monetisation model away from P2W, it followed a trend of

'fairer' F2P in the games industry that was first started by *LoL* with its release in late 2009. In

this 'fairer' model of F2P, the game is given to players for free as a download and payment to

the game developer is, in theory at least, non-essential due to the sale of in-game virtual

commodities being purely cosmetic. In games such as *World of Tanks* or *LoL*, these cosmetic

goods often equate to new skins for playable in-game tanks or avatars.

In *LoL* there are 145 different playable characters (at the time of writing in October 2019) and

each of these characters have many different customisable skins available to buy (see Figure

1.). These skins range from making large reptilian avatar's such as 'Cho'Gath' more comical

through giving the reptile a top hat and monocle to making more humanoid avatars (often

female) such as 'Vayne' look sexualised through revealing clothing. As diverse as the generic

boundaries of skins in *LoL* are, what unites each of them is that they do not change the in-

game properties of the avatar in any way to give a player an in-game competitive advantage.

As the commercial success of *LoL* demonstrates, 'fair' F2P can be a sustainable model of

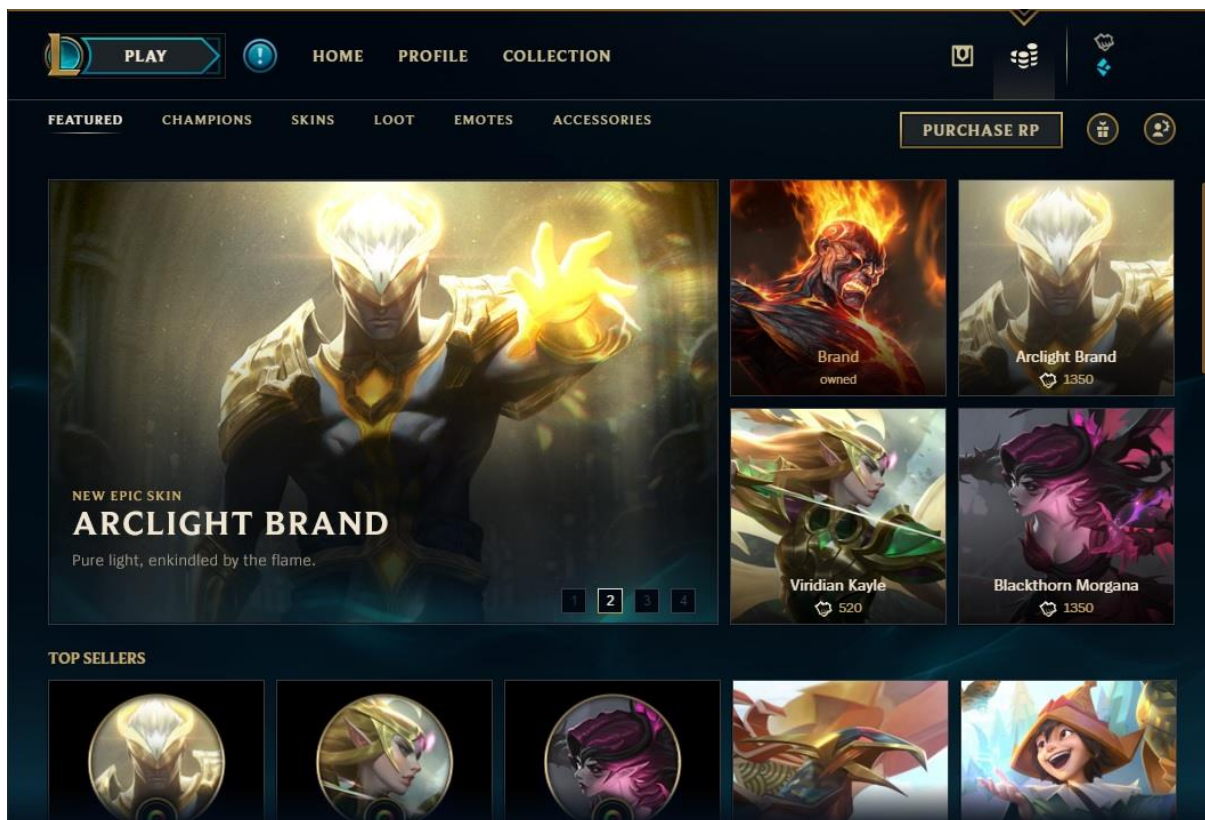revenue and for developers such as Wargaming, it was this sustainability they were eager to switch to.

Figure 1. A screenshot of the *League of Legends* in-game skin store, taken March 2019.

The success of this model in the games industry is now difficult to ignore, as popular titles such as *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013 – present), *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012 – present) and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017 – present) all exemplify a 'fair' state of F2P. Even in games that are sold with a traditional cover price, such as *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016 – present) or *Rocket League* (Psyonix, 2015 – present), or in games with subscription payments, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2006 – present)*,* options to spend further money on cosmetic skins are prevalent. These ongoing methods of microtransactional monetisation blur models of production in the games industry as previously contained production cycles become increasingly open to ongoing servicing

costs (Kerr, 2017: 39-40). For many of these games the 'fair' model of F2P they employ has mutated to include random reward mechanisms such as loot boxes, but the design principle of excluding pay-to-win goods remains integral.

The prevalence of this continuously monetised turn has become known to industry professionals as the 'Games as a service' model and it represents a longer lifespan for individual games as they are viably monetised over longer periods of time. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the historical implications of this paradigmatic shift in the ways people play, but it is worth noting that many of these games are inherently social or multiplayer and resist the filmic model of cover price monetisation (Pearce, 2006: 7-8). Through continuous updates such as new skins, there is always new content for players to buy. More profoundly though, through updates such as new character releases or game balance changes (often called 'patches') that are extremely common in *LoL,* there is consistent new content for co-creative actors such as live streamers, user-generated content producers and esports professionals to utilise. Although the release of patches can cause controversy for players (Švelch, 2019), this constant development is integral to maintaining a games co-creative network and by extension, its affective monetisation.

In game studies, co-creative perspectives have become increasingly crucial when analysing the hybridity of player / producer relations that now exist (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Prax, 2012; Jarrett, 2019). Describing the co-creativity of online games, Banks and Humphreys describe a co-creative approach as the 'intersection' and 'co-evolution' of two economies, 'the social/affective and business'. As these economies come together in the hybrid relations of an online game, the question of exactly what is being produced and who is deriving capital (social, economic, gaming) becomes critical. As Banks and Humphrey's emphasise, the power relations of online games are 'quite different from those of industrial era production' due to both social and commercial actors inflecting values onto each other.

The model of 'fair' F2P described here is one such example of co-creative relations as it defies simplistic categorisation. On one hand, the model could be viewed favourably as a innovative reaction to the widespread piracy or 'napsterisation' (Strangelove, 2005: 56) of traditional means of commodification. Rather than downloading games illegally, players now have access to a game for free and in full which is viewed as a positive development by many players.

On the other hand, commercial developers such as Riot Games extract vast economic surplus value out of *LoL*. Indeed, as this paper describes it is exactly the reciprocal sentiments from players towards games developers that enable the vast levels of affective monetisation to take place in *LoL*. From this critical perspective, 'fair' F2P monetisation closely resembles the affective valorisation represented by brands as capturing, what Adam Arvidsson (2005: 237) called, an 'ethical surplus' of socially enacted labour on the part of everyday consumers. Arvidsson's account of branding draws on autonomist Marxist traditions and is important to mention here as it describes a similar mechanism for economically exploiting the everyday affective or immaterial forms of labour given by consumers. Socially experiencing a brand sustains shared meanings and emotional involvement just as playing, watching or discussing a game maintains affective ties. Both forms of activity carry a level of autonomy or co-creativity, however they are both captured into webs of economic exploitation. The tendency towards unequal underpinning power relations between consumer and producer is noted by Banks and Humphreys who stress that 'the power derived from the social economies is not necessarily consonant with that derived from financial economies' (2008: 413). For *LoL,* it is this profoundly co-creative yet economically unequal state of relations that prevails.

The $2.1 billion generated by *LoL* in 2017 is not a sum of money distributed among players and co-creators, it is accumulated by Riot Games and their holding company Tencent Holdings

Limited (who owned a 93% stake in Riot Games as of 2011 and 100% stake as of 2015).

Tencent Holdings Limited are a large Chinese multinational conglomerate specialising in the

technology sector, although their tax registry belongs in the Cayman Islands (Kerr, 2017: 61).

Founded in 1998, Tencent Holdings Limited are now worth an estimated $500 billion and

rival Google, Amazon and Facebook in size (Hannam, 2017). The extreme size of Tencent

Holdings Limited as one of the largest games and Internet conglomerates in the world is

significant here as it is this political economic formation that is continuously seeking to control

and extract exchange value from *LoL's* affective network of co-creative relations. Paralleling the

exchange value generated by social media platforms across the Internet (Arvidsson and

Colleoni, 2012; van Dijck, 2013; Greene and Joseph, 2015; Nieborg, 2015), the

microtransactions of online games offer another rich example of what many Internet scholars

have described as affective economies. The critical frame of affective economies provides a

useful way to analyse the gift like status of 'fair' F2P as it positions digital games alongside

related examples of monetisation from Internet and fan studies. Turning to literature from

these fields, it is necessary to explore notions of affective economics here as they apply to the

gift like status evoked by *LoL's* 'fair' F2P model.

Affective economies

Writing from a fan studies perspective in 2006, Henry Jenkins (2006: 61 – 62) utilised the

term 'affective economics' as a way of describing 'a new configuration of marketing theory,

still somewhat on the fringes but gaining ground within the media industry, which seeks to

understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force

behind viewing and purchasing decisions.' For Jenkins, the newly convergent relations of

participatory cultures represented a more dynamic interplay between bottom-up and top-

down actors. As bottom-up participants such as fan communities exerted a more productive role in the creation of the media, so too, were top-down media professionals becoming more like fans through participating in fan communities. This overlap between the top-down and bottom-up or the professional and non-professional also represented an overlap of fans affective sensibilities with commercial motivations. Or in other words, a collapse of the distinction between what is commercial and non-commercial as opaque new forms of affective monetisation entered media production.

Jenkins used affective economics to describe the way television producers of *American Idol* (Fox, 2002 – 2016) anticipated the sentiments of their audience to help shape their programme accordingly. Only briefly does Jenkins consider the wider significance of affect as a larger critical paradigm in cultural and Internet studies (Andrejevic, 2011). However, as Matt Hills (2015) notes in a more recent account of affective economics in relation to fan crowdfunding, Jenkins observations surrounding the blurred boundaries of online affect between commercial and non-commercial were prescient. Hills account of affective economics follows the same fan orientated perspective as Jenkins and describes the affective status of convergent relations that exist in crowdfunding campaigns on platforms such as *Kickstarter.*

Detailing a *Kickstarter* campaign that successfully crowdfunded a film adaptation for a cancelled television show, *Veronica Mars* (Warner Bros, 2004 - 2007), Hills emphasises the transformative potential of fan crowdfunding to the practices of media professionals. In a successful fan crowdfunding campaign, such as the one Hills describes, the money given by fans is entirely voluntary and an important reason why fans give any money towards a project is due to its perceived 'authenticity' as an extension of fans affective sensibilities. Or as Hills (184) puts it, a decommoditised affective economy sustained through the emotional labour of professional producers performing 'a coherent 'social front' where fan-like identities and

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decommoditising discourses are mobilised.' Through interacting on platforms fans themselves use, and through 'critiquing commercial processes in highly visible yet coded ways' (186), Hills demonstrates how organisers of crowdfunding campaigns occupy a liminal role between fan and professional that is essential to the functionality of crowdfunding campaigns.

The affective economics of these fan orientated case studies closely resemble the hybrid gift economy of 'fair' free-to-play in *LoL*, as this paper explores in ensuing sections. However, the influence of affective economics also extends beyond the convergent context of fan relations Jenkins originally considered it in and it is worth briefly considering these wider theoretical developments here as they also inform an understanding of the affect at play in *LoL*.

Affective value

One useful term that combines theoretical developments from feminist writing on unpaid domestic work with that of immaterial labour is Kylie Jarrett's (2016b) notion of 'The Digital Housewife'. For Jarrett, the term 'digital housewife' refers to any kind of digital work regardless of gender that creates surplus value online. For example, through managing 'community forums, uploading new data to the Wikipedia commons, commenting on a friend's Facebook status or coordinating a guild run in a massively multiplayer online game' (2016b: 2). Jarrett's intention in making the term explicitly gendered is to make parallels between new emergent online activities and their related discussions of labour and affect with that of earlier feminist discussions on unpaid domestic work. Following Leopoldina Fortunati's (1995) influential account of the way women's unpaid reproductive work is productively captured by capitalist societies, Jarrett notes that similar 'forms of immaterial

and affective labour [..] are exploited in the economic circuits of the commercial web'
(Jarrett, 2016b: 3). This connection is a crucial one as it allows online activities and their
affective relations to be framed in a well-established line of Marxist feminist critical inquiry
that examines the way affective value is captured.

As Jarrett's perspective is underpinned by Fortunati's Marxist feminist critique of affect, she
understands online affective interaction as a form of non-commercial use-value. As Jarrett
states,

> Affect is an autonomous energy, a state of potential that cannot be captured or
> confined within a body, perception or cognition without undergoing a fundamental
> transformation. It is inherently inalienable and so, to return to the language of Marx,
> can only be consumed (experienced) as use-value. (Jarrett, 2016b: 121)

What is noteworthy about Jarrett's understanding of this form of affective use-value, is that
she understands it as possessing a duel function, in both use and exchange. Paralleling the
political economic perspective regarding a hybridised set of co-creative relations outlined in
relation to *LoL*, Jarrett views modes of affective interaction as always holding intense
meaning to the people creating and sharing in them. However, the same affective interaction
also possesses exchange value for the commercial platforms economically valuating these
interactions. Liking someone status on *Facebook*, for example, is always representative of a
personable, socially meaningful and affective use-value. What Jarrett stresses is that the same
socially imbued use-value also creates exchange value for the platform holders. Similar forms
of affective valorisation exist across the digital landscape, with live streaming platforms such
as *Twitch.tv* providing a powerful example of playful affective economies (Taylor, 2018;
Guarriello, 2019; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). However, just as social media platforms
exist in what van Dijck (2013) calls a 'connective ecosystem' of interrelating microsystems,
so too are games and their respective models of monetisation implicated in the same
circulations of affective labour that *Twitch.tv* is.

To begin delving into the affective sentiments of players who make purchases in *LoL*, it is useful to briefly explore the relation between affective and gift economies. As a traditionally non-commercial system of social relations, notions of gift economies provide a fundamental tool for conceptualising the affective sentiments of people. As Jarrett (2016b, 123) describes: 'Affective intensities, as an inalienable product of socially embedded, reciprocal exchange, are clearly aligned with moral economies of gifting rather than the dominant political economy of today.' Through delving into the relation between affective and gift economies it is my aim to provide a more socially focused view of the playful relations in *LoL*. Moreover though, as noted throughout this paper, *LoL* resembles a gift in its status as a 'fair' and freely available game. Detailing how far notions of a gift economy have been hybridised into affective economies of economic valorisation is therefore a highly relevant critical frame to explore here.

Gift Economy as Affective Economy

In Mauss' account of non-capitalist gift economies, he described reciprocal relations as existing in what he described as a 'total social phenomenon' (1954: 76). For Mauss, who was writing in the 1920s as an early adopter of ethnographic technique, it was not enough to view reciprocal gift exchanges as discrete interactions between people or even between social groups. What was essential to understanding how people formed and sustained reciprocal relationships was not only the act of giving itself, but the totality of the social structure these reciprocal relationships were situated in. As Mauss put it:

> 'We are dealing then with something more than a set of themes, more than
> institutional elements, more than institutions, more even than systems of institutions
> divisible into legal, economic, religious and other parts. We are concerned with
> 'wholes', with systems in their entirety. (…) It is only by considering them as wholes
> that we have been able to see their essence, their operation and their living aspect, and

to catch the fleeting moment when the society and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards to others.' (Mauss, 1954: 76)

Mauss's description of how gift economies are reflected by the totality of their 'social phenomenon' is a perspective that can also be applied, as Hyde would later note, to any economic model. For Hyde (1983: 86), gifts are best described as 'an anarchist property. The connections, the 'contracts', established by their circulation differ in kind from the ties that bind in groups organised through centralised power and top-down authority.' Hyde contrasts the top-down systems of 'legal contracts' constitutive of capitalism with the bottom-up 'contracts of the heart' constitutive of gift economies. Evoking Mauss, Hyde emphasises the totality of a societal structure as essential to enabling certain modes of economic exchange, be they gift, capitalist or hybrid. It is beyond the scope or aims of this paper to fully consider the totality of social structures that co-constitute various economic models. However, in descriptions of gift economies as bottom-up, imprecise, non-capitalist and profoundly social, there is a discernible overlap with the affective economies of social media users, fans and players of a game. Similar to affective economies of fandom reliant upon 'decommoditising discourses' of affective address (Hills, 2015: 195), gift economies are equally dependent upon what Mauss and Hyde noted as the totality of their social relations.

The aim that occupies the remainder of this paper is to understand how the affective economy of gift giving between players and commercial developers in *LoL* functions. Through asking what affective sentiments players feel when making in-game purchases and how developers or related professionals have decommoditised the experience of *LoL*, I delve into critical issues that are fundamental to understanding the political economy of microtransactions in F2P games.

Methodology

The following responses from players of *LoL* come from a June 2015 participatory open
discussion I initiated on the popular '/r/leagueoflegends' sub*reddit*. This participatory open
discussion was part of a wider online ethnographic research project examining the co-
creativity of MOBAs that spanned 2014 - 2017. This research utilised a multi-sited
methodology influenced by George Marcus's (1995) and Boellstorff et al's (2012)
description of the approach as not limited to any single digital space (or platform). As part of
this research, one site I focused on was *Reddit* where I asked a series of questions to *LoL*'s
culture of players in the form of *Reddit* threads. These threads were approved by a university
ethics committee and each thread was very open about my status as an academic researcher
as well as the potential of responses being published. The responses comprising this section
derive from one of these threads.

Although the sample of responses presented in this paper pose next to no risk to users, I have
decided to anonymise the pseudonyms of *Reddit* users primarily for the purposes of clarity
and as a measure to protect privacy. The subject of privacy in online research that utilises
quotes from participants is a fraught one due to the ease of search engine use (Markham and
Buchanan, 2012: 6; Sugiura et al, 2016). As Sugiura et al (2016) have noted, even
paraphrasing quotes will only reduce their discoverability if they are openly accessible
online. The methodology of this paper cannot escape that context, but through ensuring
consent and representing the overall discussion as clearly as possible, the integrity of the
responses is upheld.

As part of my approach in these threads, I did not attempt to formalise these discussions
through introducing questions regarding demographics or surveys. In contrast, my aim was to
respond dynamically to the directions these discussions took and allow for any interested user

to contribute a response. Like most qualitative or ethnographic methodologies, the scope for presenting this open discussion is limited to a selective (direct) representation. However, it has been my aim to convey the overall sentiments of the discussion in this paper and select representative responses.

In 2015 I posed a simple question to the *League of Legends* sub*reddit* of why, exactly, do you spend money on an essentially free game? I received 49 direct responses to this question, followed up by 37 subsequent comments. In this section, I will draw upon these responses and detail the various reasons, sentiments and opposing views that were expressed by *Reddit* users in the thread. Although many views will be omitted from directly quoting here, it is my aim to convey the responses and ensuing discussion as accurately as possible to identify the affective sentiments involved when players spend money in *LoL*. As a discussion that took place on *Reddit*, there is a set of metadata in the form of 'upvotes' and 'downvotes' that I also included as 'points' besides each user's comment.

The ambiguous functionality of a skin

The two most visible comments in the discussion thread were as follows:

> I feel like skins are an upgrade to a champion (aesthetically), and whenever I start playing a champion a lot, and start enjoying them and getting better at them, I feel like for me to keep playing and enjoying them I should get a skin to keep me interested. I often feel like I'm having more fun when I'm playing a champion with a skin that makes me feel 'unique' even though many other people have that same skin. I think the fact that it makes you feel unique, and almost like you are the 'only' player using this champion with this skin makes it more fun and rewarding, because a lot of people want to feel different, and I think skins give people a way to feel different inside League [of Legends].
>
> - Reddit user 1, 25 points

> I spend money on F2P games that I have fun with
> I don't know, I feel obliged to "donate"
> I have fun with *LoL*, so I buy RP ['Riot Points', the in-game currency bought with money that is used to unlock 'champions' or skins]
>
> \-   Reddit user 2, 15 points

These two comments were some of the earliest comments in the thread and consequently gained traction quickly as their high points scores indicate. In their own way, both of these comments reflect views that were repeated throughout the discussion as two common themes regarding exchange and reciprocity can be identified. Following Helmuth Berking's (1999: 37) distinction between 'reciprocation' and 'exchange', reciprocating an object can be read as a constitutively social act whereas exchanging an object is more concerned with its use value. Throughout the discussion, players variously emphasised the reciprocal and exchange value of purchasing skins, however there were many ambiguities regarding exactly what function skins serve.

For 'Reddit user 1', the value of skins derives from their function as a cosmetic customisation. The sentiment for spending money on the game here is a desire for use value from the monetary exchange, whereby in-game skins directly contribute towards making the game more 'fun' and 'enjoyable'. A salient point in this comment is the use of the word 'unique' to describe the value of skins with a concurrent acknowledgement that the skins themselves are not at all unique, due to many players owning the exact same skins. The ambiguous status of skins as an exchange commodity that is implicit in 'Reddit user 1's' comment was present in several comments throughout the discussion as many players noted that skins serve no clear purpose, but felt that the money was nonetheless well spent**.** The justification for spending money on skins for these players often followed the 'fun' reasoning outlined by 'Reddit user 1', but players often pointed out other affects that influence their spending. As 'Reddit User 2's' blunt comment also illustrates, players often mentioned either

implicitly or explicitly, that the free-to-play model represents good economic value and there

exists a profound obligation to spend or 'donate'. For example, in the following comments,

players emphasised the ambiguous use value of skins as digital commodities that make the

game more enjoyable. What is particularly insightful though, is how this ambiguous

exchange orientated sentiment was often justified in relation to the monetisation of other

games or hobbies.

> Skins make the game funner. Having them makes you feel empowered on the
> champion, like you have enough mastery over them that you are willing to get
> cosmetics. Or something like that.
>
> Everybody loves skins. They look great, and while they don't have any -real- value,
> they bring happiness and there's nothing wrong with spending money on things you
> enjoy. It's the same reason you buy games that are not free to play - to have fun.
>
> - Reddit user 3, 1 point

> I have no problem spending the money [on skins] because I consider it a hobby like
> any other. Football also costs me (membership fee, boots, ...) and that's way more
> than the 50€/year I spend on LoL. Also, as a working adult, those 50€ are not much.
>
> - Reddit user 4, 1 point

> I don't know exactly WHY I do it. I think it's my way of paying Riot back whilst also
> trying my best to look as badass as possible. But even then some of the classic skins
> accomplish that just fine.
>
> Game is free for a reason. Because for the majority of players, it isn't REALLY free.
>
> - Reddit user 5, 1 point

In each of these comments a functional reason based on the use value of skins is given to

justify spending money. For some players, this use value is derived from the skin itself as a

symbolic form of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007); a way to look 'badass', 'cool' or

'empowered'. In 'Reddit user 3's' comment, for example, it is stated that a skin can be

connotative with mastery over a champion and that this can increase the games 'fun'.

However, many of these same players also gave a reason that is variously described above, that the experience of *LoL* represents good economic value. In comparison to other monetisation models in digital games, or even as 'Reddit user 4' describes, in comparison to other hobbies, the money spent playing *LoL* is perceived as comparatively little. The paradox here is that *LoL* requires no money to be paid at all. Yet, even if it is not always stated explicitly, there is an obligating affect at play here that goes beyond any reasons for buying skins related merely to their functional use value. The question that immediately arises then, is exactly what is obligating players to spend beyond merely the (often ambiguous) use value of skins?

In the comments above, three sentiments surrounding *LoL's* affective status can be identified in its perceived good economic value, its deeply social status and its decommoditised form. Although I describe these sentiments as distinct, it is worth noting that these feelings overlap to co-constitute *LoL's* affective status. Similar to the affective economies of crowdfunding campaigns or the 'total social phenomenon' that underpins gift economies, the affective underpinnings of these sentiments enable the economic model of *LoL* to operate. It is beyond the scope of this paper to represent each of these sentiments in detail, but it is worth discussing some representative comments.

Decommoditised affect

One of the most frequently expressed sentiments evident in the comments above and throughout the thread, was the feeling that spending money on *LoL* is a reciprocating act between player and commercial developer. As 'reddit user 2' put it when asked why they spend money on *LoL*, the reply was 'I don't know, I feel obliged to "donate"', but exactly

what does this obligation entail? In many of the comments throughout the discussion this

obliging sentiment was variously expressed, sometimes as an implicit suggestion that the

game represents good economic value and at other times, as an explicitly stated obligation to

reciprocate money towards Riot Games. In the following comments, for example, an explicit

sentiment of reciprocation is exemplified.

I buy skins simply to support Riot. I play the game quite a bit and want to give back. Plus, the skins allow for a level of customisation. It's win-win.

- Reddit user 6, 4 points

The biggest reason I keep on convincing myself to buy skins, is to support riot devs that keep on making this game unique and fresh. Without them we won't have a fun game to play and they might just ignore league as a whole. I do hope my money reaches their wallets.

- Reddit user 7, 2 points

I have been playing for a long time and have enough disposable income that I don't mind giving £30 to Riot per month to help them improve the game. League is also pretty much the only game I play, so I spend less on league than I would do buying new game releases. Also skins are cool.

- Reddit user 8, 1 point

It is good to see how much work Riot puts into the entire experience, with updates, new skins and game modes, LCS [League of Legends Championship Series, the Riot Games governed esports league], etc. and feel really justified in spending money on it. It makes me feel nice to think that I am providing the opportunity to pay someone to work on something they love, rather than get a boring job at some software company.

- Reddit user 9, 5 points

In each of these comments as well as others mentioned throughout this paper, the feeling of a

reciprocal relationship shared between players and Riot Games is evident. In fundamental

ways, this relationship differs from reciprocity as it is commonly understood in anthropology

due to the differences of scale, motivation and power that exist between a player and a large commercial developer. Nevertheless, as a discernible feeling that was frequently expressed throughout this discussion and is notable as an affective set of relations spread across the connective ecology of *LoL*, this hybrid notion of reciprocity is essential to understanding the political economy of *LoL* and many other 'fair' F2P games. Curiously, players did not view the substantial differences of scale, motivation and power as a barrier to engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the developers Riot Games.

For some players, a simple obligation to support Riot Games was expressed that follows the status of the game as a freely given gift and therefore something that should be reciprocated. As 'reddit user 5' put it, 'I think it's my way of paying Riot back'. However, for many other players such as 'reddit user 10', the bond with Riot Games was described as a much more ongoing and totalising relationship of reciprocity as players expressed their gratitude towards Riot Games for in-game updates, for their close relationship with players (for example, through *Reddit* interactions) and for their active involvement in esports leagues. The specific ways F2P developers and associated professionals sustain and negotiate these connective ecologies of hybrid power dynamics is a subject that requires further investigation. What is noteworthy for identifying the affective texture of *LoL* here however, are the parallels between the sentiments expressed by players and the affective economics of fan and gift economies explored in previous sections.

Hyde (1983: 58) noted that the initial act of giving a gift is one that begins a social bond distinct from a commodity exchange and often, these bonds can become ongoing relationships. A meal that is freely given and socially shared between strangers for example, inevitably leads to conversations and a shared communal experience that initiates potentially lasting social ties. The decommoditised identity of the shared experience is crucial to the

sociality of these bonds as Hyde (68) emphasises, 'we do not deal in commodities when we wish to initiate or preserve ties of affection.' In the initial gift of a 'fair' and free game through *LoL*, a similar set of decommoditised social bonds is necessitated. Like a shared meal, the gift of a free and 'fair' game is one that carries the potential to develop into an ongoing relationship with the game, its players, its connective ecology and by extension, its developers. From the moment the game is downloaded and available to play for free, players are invited into a much wider connective ecology of play and participation that continues to blur professional and commercial boundaries. These webs of co-creativity continue to preserve and intensify the 'ties of affection' associated with *LoL* through functioning as what Hills (2015: 184) would call, the performed 'social fronts' that are essential to decommoditising and thus enabling affective monetisation models.

A performed 'social front' can take many liminal forms between professional and non-professional. For Hills, who is occupied with exploring the affective economies of *Kickstarter* campaigns, the fan like performance of professionals running these campaigns is described as the 'ongoing emotional labour of a coherent 'social front''. It is only by positioning themselves as authentic fans through performed 'social fronts' that professionals can embed themselves into the affective economies of fans. In 'fair' F2P games such as *LoL* however, where affective monetisation takes place over increasingly longer periods of time due to the enduring monetisation of a game, the performed 'social fronts' that permeate the game arise continually across its connective ecology.

Conclusion: The mechanism of 'fair' F2P as affective monetisation

What is evident from the sample of player responses that inform this paper is that *LoL* is experienced across multiple spaces beyond the game itself, including *Reddit* threads, *Twitch.tv* live streams, *Youtube* videos, esports broadcasts, live events and other socially enacted spaces. Each of these communicative spaces affirms affective ties and reciprocal modes of social exchange separate from *LoL*, however like a brand identity or social media platform, surplus value is generated that is valorised by the game itself. For the important body of growing literature surrounding the affective labour of users in live streaming spaces such as *Twitch* or *Youtube* (Taylor, 2018; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Guarriello, 2019) this further political economic context of the game itself and its respective mechanism of affective valorisation is difficult to ignore.

Paralleling David Nieborg's (2015: 2) framing of social media games as 'mutually constituted by a connective logic of social media platforms', 'fair' F2P games such as *LoL* are implicated in the same connective logics across their various social spaces. Live streaming spaces are implicated in the rules, aesthetics and play of *LoL* while *LoL* is implicated in the circulations of affect generated by its paratextual social spaces. From a critical political economic perspective, the centrality of the game in this co-creative model of affective economics is noteworthy as the developers/publishers occupy a lucrative position of vast monetisation in addition to a position of unrivalled cross-platform governance (often leading to moments of controversy, see Karhulahti, 2017). It has been beyond the scope of this paper to explore these socially enacted paratextual spaces in any depth, but the totality of a 'fair' F2P gift economy suggests that the relations between these affective spaces is essential to critiquing the political economic arrangement of games as a service.

Through aligning themselves with the decommoditising social fronts of various co-creative actors, Riot Games have managed to monetise and sustain their games affective status as something that transcends a more formally commoditised game. As the varied responses of this paper exemplify, this affect is not equivalent to a wholly decommoditised gift economy in the same way that the 'total social phenomenon' of non-monetary gift giving described by Mauss and Hyde was. In contrast, *LoL* is a microcosm of decommoditising affects operating within the commercial logics of the online games industry; a hybrid economy of co-creativity with all of the political economic paradoxes that entails. Players are aware of the voluntarily role they serve in spending money, but nonetheless feel justified in making purchases due to the games distinctive longevity, its connective social relations and the hybrid power dynamics Riot Games as a commercial developer has come to represent. Each of these rationales overlaps to co-constitute the affective texture of *LoL* and as the sentiments of players expressed in this paper highlight, it is this diffusive affect that underpins player purchases.

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