

Character Preferences in Competitive Games: A study among League of Legends players

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Abstract

Various multiplayer online games, such as League of Legends, offer players a selection of characters from which they can choose one to play with. In the case of League of Legends, these characters (called champions) differ in terms of game mechanics, appearance, and lore. Understanding the reasons behind players' champion preferences can help designers create more engaging playable characters. Therefore, in this study, we investigated qualitatively how League of Legends players (N=34) justify their champion preferences. Our findings revealed mechanics and gameplay as the most dominant given reasons in almost all contexts for both positive and negative preferences. Champion aesthetics and lore were mentioned in connection to individual champions, but also in relation to the overall representativeness of the game's champion pool. We found evidence that the in-game player cultures were shaping particularly which champions players disliked. Interestingly, female participants rarely mentioned gender as an important characteristic when justifying their champion preferences, but were overwhelmingly choosing female champions as their favorites. These findings warrant further study into, for example, the apparent asymmetry in how players of different genders develop and form their character preferences.

Keywords: multiplayer online games, avatars, champions, League of Legends, preferences

1. Introduction

Video game characters, such as Mario, Pikachu, Teemo and Sonic have become well-known global icons and mascots, and are now spearheading multimedia franchises such as Super Mario and

Pokémon (Kaczmarek et al. (2017) and Villa et al. (2020)). In many multiplayer video games, players are given a set of characters to choose from before each individual match. With these characters, players can take part in, and immerse themselves, in play within virtual game worlds. Video game characters are associated (at least to some degree) with lore and story elements, abilities and a certain type of gameplay. Opposed to avatars which are often highly customizable (Kang and Kim (2020)), and can all have similar gameplay, game characters are understood as pre-fabricated and are given special meanings and purpose within the games they appear in (Bopp et al. (2019)). Statistics on the merchandise sales (Statista (2024)) and popularity polls (BAFTA (2024)) show that there are differences in character popularity within individual games and across games. One of the reasons why understanding video game characters is important is that multiple contemporary live-service games such as Overwatch and Dota 2 are primarily monetized through the sales of skins (new aesthetics) to in-game characters (Jarrett (2021), Le et al. (2022), and Macey and Hamari (2019)) and video game characters have become popular mascots for various games which help drive sales.

Multiplayer online games are particularly interesting digital environments to investigate game character selection preferences. These games provide highly social environments where people can interact, communicate, and compete (Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), Kordyaka, Park, et al. (2023), and Laato et al. (2024)). Unlike single-player games, in multiplayer games, the game characters chosen by players are used to interact with others and thus, the character acts as a social digital representation of the player, and may feel more personal in this regard. League of Legends

(abbreviated as *League*) is one the currently most popular multiplayer games with monthly active players within the range of 150 million (Orvill (2024)). Similar to many other games, in *League*, players choose a game character, called a “*champion*”, prior to the start of individual matches within the game. However, unlike many other games, *League* offers a huge number of unique champions (i.e., 168¹ for players to choose from, each with their own unique visuals, lore / story and game mechanics. Each match in *League* is unique with ten players all filling different roles (i.e., thereby characters), creating highly social and interesting power dynamics. The character selection therefore effects various avenues of the playing experience from gameplay to how the player is viewed by their team and their opponents (Kordyaka, Laato, et al. (2023)), making *League* an ideal study context for players’ character preferences in multiplayer online games.

While previous research has focused on players’ preferences and behaviors in customizing avatars (e.g., Inal et al. (2006) and Rice et al. (2013)), there is a lack of research on players’ preferences regarding established video game characters. The extant scholarship on character preferences has linked character preferences to individual traits such as personality (Delhove and Greitemeyer (2020) and Poeller et al. (2020)) and suggested that identification with one’s character can boost enjoyment of playing (Hefner et al. (2007)). However, we do not know how players themselves justify their character preferences and what factors they focus on when explaining why they like certain characters and dislike others. Studying this topic can help us understand why certain video game characters have become popular while others have not. Consequently, research on video game character preferences help designers create more engaging characters that cater to wider and more diverse player populations. Therefore, our research is driven by the following research question (RQ):

Which factors do players use to justify their champion preferences in League of Legends?

To answer the RQ, we focused on the multiplayer online battle arena game *League* due to its high popularity and broad selection of characters (Orvill (2024)). We approach the research problem qualitatively to get a holistic view of all relevant champion options and aim to gain a deeper understanding of players’ reasons for champion choice. To do so, we developed a survey which we distributed to *League* players ($N=34$) in the summer of 2022. We qualitatively analyzed the answers using a reflexive orientation of

thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021). Our findings revealed 3 themes that highlights how players themselves justify their character preferences when asked which characters they like and dislike. The rest of this work is structured as follows. First we briefly review previous research on this topic followed up by the methods and findings of our empirical work. We then discuss the contributions of the study, limitations and future work.

2. Background

2.1. Characteristics of a video game character

The customization of avatars plays an important role for game experience or engagement. Birk et al. (Birk et al. (2016)) showed that avatar customization contributes to identification with the avatar and that greater identification leads to more time spent in the game. Similarly, Trepte and Reinecke (Trepte and Reinecke (2010)) identified that avatar identification is positively correlated with game enjoyment. However, avatar selection and personalization is a complex issue. Research on avatar preferences in multiplayer online games (Inal et al. (2006) and Rice et al. (2013)) highlights that players consider various factors (e.g., attractiveness) when they do selection or customization. Despite avatar selection and customization having a multitude of dimensions, players find game characters in multiplayer games are valuable in many ways (e.g., for entertainment, relationship representations, and creativity) (Livingston et al. (2014)).

In most multiplayer games, characters have background stories that allow players to immerse themselves in the game. Typically, all characters’ unique stories merge into a larger narrative. For example, in *League*, the character Vi (Violet) represents a champion from Piltover and Zaun in the world of Runeterra. Although she was born and raised in Zaun, she is loyal to and protective of her family and friends. This creates a conflict with the criminal nature of Zaun and at some point she moves to Piltover (“the City of Progress”). Her character is important to the larger narrative and showcases the clear gap between two worlds. Like in this example, such unique stories of game characters can make players more engaged with the game’s narrative and feel more connected to the character.

Multiplayer games feature different characters that often have unique abilities, whereby these abilities affect the gameplay and game strategies of teams (Sourmelis et al. (2017)). For example, game character selection can have an impact on team compositions, as

¹At the time of writing this study: April 17, 2024

MOBA games typically require balanced teams with characters in different roles, such as support and top (Ong et al. (2015)). Similarly, this can lead to a counter-play strategy on the opposing team; players may base their champion selection on the opponent's champion selection. Past work has shown that whenever a champion is buffed and made more powerful, its popularity among players increases (Wang et al. (2020)). Therefore, the in-game balance and power dynamics play a crucial role in players' champion preferences. In summary, it can be stated the selection of champions has a substantial influence on the outcomes of corresponding multiplayer games.

2.2. Study context: League of Legends

League is a popular massively multiplayer online battle arena game developed by Riot Games and first released in 2009 (Ferrari (2013)). Since then, it has become a live service game and one of the most popular online games and eSports titles in the world (Kordyaka, Pumplun, et al. (2023) and Orvill (2024)). The novel combination of real-time cooperation and competition in the game mechanics on the one hand and the free-to-play business model on the other, which makes the entire game available to potential players for free download, can be seen as crucial to the game's success (Mora-Cantalops and Sicilia (2018)). The freemium business models in games such as *League* have also been studied extensively in information systems, and here one of the challenges that developers face is how to motivate players to engage in purchasing content such as cosmetic items (Le et al. (2022)). The constant revision and updating of the game by the game developer (so-called patches) is also critical, and one of the central elements of contemporary live-service games. Also worth mentioning in connection with the game is certainly the influence on contemporary esports culture. Recently *League* has become a multi-media franchise, with the animated steampunk action-adventure TV series *Arcane* telling the story of some of the game's heroes, which is distributed by Netflix and has achieved remarkable success since its release (Liu et al. (2022)).

In *League* ten different players usually compete against each other in two teams (five players per team) in the most widespread game mode, ranked play. Each player takes control of a unique champion with specific abilities and fights on a map called "Summoner's Rift" (Nexø and Kristiansen (2023)). The main objective is to destroy the opposing team's base, known as the Nexus. To do this, players must work together to collect gold and experience by killing minions or enemy champions or destroying towers while strategically

taking control of the map (Ani et al. (2019)). Central to this are the dependencies of the champions on each other. There are a total of five different roles with unique and sometimes complementary abilities, which are divided into four regions on the map: Top-Lane, Jungle, Mid-Lane, AD Carry, and Support (Donaldson (2017)).

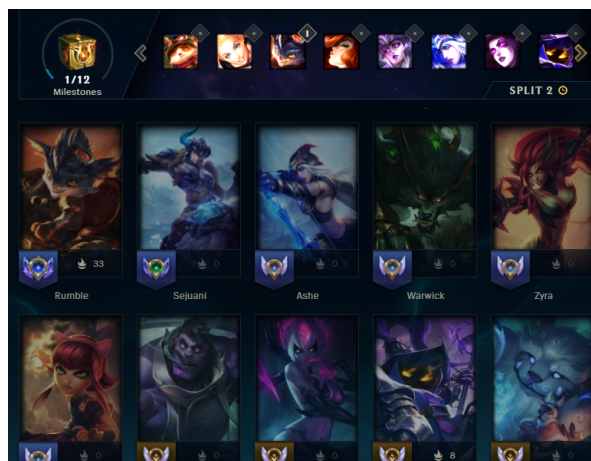


Figure 1. A screenshot taken by the authors of a subset of champions (playable characters) in League of Legends.

The champions in *League* are in a critical and central role. Players choose one champion for each game, in a pre-game event called "Champ select". The champions vary quite substantially from each other in terms of their abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Since there are 168 available champions (as of April, 2024), it is not typical for casual players to have mastery over all of them. Instead, players typically play a select few champions (we display a screenshot from the *League* client in Figure 1). So far there is a lack of knowledge on how players end up selecting the champions they play regularly, and what are the underlying factors that players emphasise in forming preferences over which champions to play. In this study, we addressed these issues through our empirical study which we describe next.

3. Materials & Methods

3.1. Data Collection

We created a survey asking players five open-ended questions (see Table 1). While some questions asked about players' *League* champion preferences, others focused on players' sense of identification with particular champions, since previous research indicated that this contributes to the selection of characters and

avatars in games Li et al., 2013. Additionally, we gathered further background information about our sample, such as their experience with *League* (in years), play mode, and their main role. The survey was implemented in the professional online survey tool Webropol². Overall, we kept the number of questions low and simple to avoid the effects of fatigue. The questions were determined as a result of a discussion between the three of the authors.

We published our survey online in June 2022. We used a convenience sampling method and distributed the survey to *League* players through our extended networks on Twitter and Discord. One of the authors used to play professional League of Legends, and they used their contacts (e.g., friends, colleagues) to distribute the link to League of Legends players on several online platforms. This enabled us to obtain the authentic experiences of *League* players in the communities already familiar to us. The survey was available online for two weeks.

Our survey was opened by 238 participants, out of whom 38 started responding. In our experience such large drops between those checking the survey out and those committing to answering it is normal when distributing surveys through public channels such as Twitter. After dropping out incomplete responses ($n=4$) and ensuring all responses' validness (e.g., written by a human), we ended up with 34 final complete responses. We list the demographic data of our participants in Table 2. The participants were mostly from Germany and Austria, which can be explained through our survey distribution channels. We appeared to have more female participants in comparison to the overall player population of *League* (Orvill (2024)). The participants tended to be within the age ranges of young adults (18–34 years old). Regarding participants' rank in *League*, we had a diverse distribution of casual, advanced, and (semi-)professional players. In terms of players' main roles in *League*, we had a minor tilt towards the bottom lane roles (ADC / Bottom and Support).

3.2. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021)). The reflexive approach does not require the involvement of multiple coders, and puts the analyzing researcher at the center. The reflexive thematic analysis empowers the researchers to interpret the data in a way that fully harnesses their own expertise on the topic (Mees-Buss et al. (2022)). We also chose the approach to enable us

²<https://webropol.com/>

to form a conceptually clear overview of the data that could be useful for follow-up quantitative studies in this domain.

In practice, our approach consisted of the following steps. First, three of the authors familiarized themselves with the responses, formed a general overview of the data and participated in refining the analysis approach. Second, the first author generated the initial set of themes based on open coding (i.e., inductive codes) of the data, five themes altogether, and shared a draft of the work with the rest of the authors for feedback. In this process, we drew from word cloud visualizations of the responses, as well as codes, assigned to the data. We also divided the participants into two groups based on their gender and investigated whether there were any gender-related differences in their views. Three researchers were involved in refining the themes and matching quotes from the data to the themes. At this stage, two themes were combined into existing ones and the boundaries of the themes were redefined and the themes slightly renamed. In the third and final step, the first author returned to the data once again to see if any codes were left over. This process resulted in another round of minor changes to the themes. The final themes and how they were discussed in the manuscript were refined by all the authors in the end.

4. Findings

We arrived at three themes. The first theme relates to the importance of champion mechanics, which appeared in the data most often and were linked to the enjoyability of the gameplay, the in-game balance (e.g., some champions being overpowered or too easy to play) and players' own preferences on playstyle and fit with the rest of the team. The second theme is linked to the role of champion aesthetics and lore, which while mentioned in some responses, appeared less important to players in our data in comparison to the unique mechanics associated with a champion. Related to this was representativeness of the champions as well as their gender and visual characteristics. Our third theme is about the role of the in-game culture in shaping players' likes and dislikes towards playable characters. In our data there was evidence that certain playstyles and negative behaviors were associated with specific champions, causing players to dislike those champions as a consequence. In more competitive play there was also "the meta", with certain champions being stronger and popular and their counter picks also gaining popularity in response. Next we discuss these three themes in more detail.

Table 1. The open questions we asked participants (N=34) about their League champion preferences. We first asked players about their favorite champions and then three specifying questions afterwards.

#	QUESTIONS
1	Name your top five favorite champions (please also add a brief description why you like these champions)
2	Name your five least favorite champions (please also add a brief description why you dislike these champions)
#	NUANCE BRINGING QUESTIONS
3	Do you care what your Champion looks like? Why/why not?
4	Do you care what gender your champion is? Why/why not?
5	Do you sometimes get immersed in League so that you feel you are the champion you are playing? Do you get immersed more easily with certain champions than others?

Table 2. The participants' demographic information.

Country	Sex	Age (in years)	Role	Rank
Germany	47% Male	56% 18-24	47% Top	6% Iron/Bronze 18%
Austria	38% Female	41% 25-34	47% Jungle	15% Silver/Gold 32%
Other	15% Other	3% Over 34	6% Mid	15% Platinum/Emerald 15%
			Bottom	29% Diamond/Master 29%
			Support	35% Grandmaster/Challenger 15%

4.1. Theme 1: Participants, regardless of their background, skill level and playing position, emphasized champion mechanics over other characteristics

The most dominant theme was that game mechanics appeared as paramount for players when justifying which playable characters they preferred, with almost all participants attributing their likes and dislikes of a champion to game mechanics. Based on a connected word cloud analysis, we noticed that game mechanics were mentioned in three areas when asked about the least favorite champions: (1) certain champions being boring to play, (2) some champions being annoying to play against, and (3) certain champions feeling overly strong. The comments relating to game mechanics were ubiquitous, and related mostly to specific champion abilities as follows.

I like them because of their unique design and their different playstyles. (P10)

Janna (easy kit, but you can make a lot of fun and good moves with it) (P15)

Blickcrank (i don't like to get hooked)...Thresh (i don't like to get hooked)... (P31)

Champion mechanics were also explicitly and implicitly mentioned in the form of cool abilities and playstyles. Many of the participants' quotes here related to the champions' abilities (e.g., "Nidalee: I used to

like her more, but I enjoy sniping people with Q. I used to be a Nidalee JG main back in S7." (P25)) and general champion characteristics (e.g., "Ahri - high mobility and cc" (P29). We also found some gender differences among participants in their views on champion mechanics. Female participants tended to prefer utility champions that helped our their team (e.g. "Lulu - shield everybody and help always" (P2)) whereas male participants tended to focus more on mechanical mastery. We also saw these differences in the roles players reported to play, as female players were overwhelmingly more often selecting supportive roles (40% of the female participants mentioned to play support) compared to their male counterparts.

Furthermore, for example, P19 reported they dislike champions such as Malphite and Udyr because these champions are "mechanically too one-dimensional", and that the champion Yuumi had "boring gameplay". Others such as P17 noted about the same champions, but instead, stated that Yuumi is "an unhealthy champion for the game", mostly because of how the champion is easy to control and play, and causes a lot of frustration from low levels all the way to professional play. P24 had similar arguments, but from a more personal perspective. She expressed dislike towards the champion Braum because "you can't do anything on your own; no control over the game course when your teammates are too passive". A few participants were even more abstract than this, and did not name any specific champions, but rather, provided a formula of a champion that she felt was not contributing to the enjoyability of the game as follows:

Equalizers, champions who are still very useful even when losing, due to strong innate mechanics like high waveclear + bulk to stop a split, or anti-carry mechanics like high damage true damage, or crowd control focused kits. (P1)

In summary, while some participants mentioned lore (e.g., *"I like his lore (despite how sad it is)"* (P25)) and aesthetics (e.g., *"Love her Artwork/ Champ design over all"* (P19)), these were overshadowed by the focus on gameplay and champion abilities in both the two main questions on champion preferences. Indicative of the strength of this finding on the importance of champion mechanics is that in our coding of the 34 responses we did not have a single participant who would not have mentioned game mechanics in some capacity.

4.2. Theme 2: Aesthetics, gender representation and narrative elements were important on a more general level than the level of individual champions

While mechanics were most important, players also commented on aesthetics and story elements, although to a lesser extent. A few examples include P23 who dislikes Sion because he looks *"disgusting"* and disliked Twitch because the participant *"does not like rats"*, and P25 who likes Karma also due to *"her lore/appearance"*. Some participants were clear in that while they care about the mechanics, how the champions look is not irrelevant. The following quotes exemplify this:

Do I prefer if my champ looks better? Sure. But it is a very low priority (P1)

I will play the champ even if I don't like their [visual] design, but it's more fun when they they are well designed. Renata, my beloved (P27)

However, when asked about aesthetics specifically, players brought up preferences in appearances as well as representation of certain aesthetic and cultural characteristics within the overall champion pool of *League*. For example, while only 5.8% of the participants (2/34) responded that they care about the gender of the champion they play, the written responses revealed that gender representation in *League* was still important even for those participants who did not care for the gender of their chosen champion specifically. Similarly, players felt the lore and story of *League* were important in general, but for most not to the level that it would have impacted their champion preferences.

The following quotes speaking of the issue of the representation of gender in *League* illustrate these findings:

I do care, but in the context of good/bad design. For example, I don't care about the champ's gender or physical appearance (on a spectrum pretty - ugly), BUT I do care if almost every single femme-presenting champ in League has the same face and body features (large eyes, small nose, 'pretty' face, big b00bas, etc.) whereas masculine-presenting champs are vastly different from one another (you've got muscular; you've got dad bod, you've got Gragas). (P27)

I hate when female champions are sexualized (P31)

Interestingly, and running contrary to the verbal quotes, was the evidence that female participants preferred female champions, while male participants showed no such inclination. Out of the 14 female participants, exactly 50% mentioned only female champions in their list of 5 favorite champs. Out of the total of 70 champions mentioned by the female participants, 54 were female. This suggests that the gender and aesthetics of champions might be more important to players than they admit when asked about the topic in a straightforward fashion.

In summary, we discovered that story/lore and aesthetics in *League* matter to some players, and there appears to be huge individual differences here. However, the overall champion pool and overall game story and lore remain relevant for players, even if they do not necessarily influence players' champion preferences in *League*. This finding is consistent with the understanding of *League* as a competitive game, where players are engaged primarily through attempting to win the match, not through immersing themselves into the aesthetics or story of the game. However, we must also acknowledge that players in *League* have customization options for their champions, which can help players transform a champion they enjoy mechanically into a champion they enjoy aesthetically.

4.3. Theme 3: Player cultures and the in-game culture influenced players' champion preferences through associations

In addition to our findings on (1) game mechanics, and (2) aesthetics and lore, we found evidence of the effects of player cultures shaping the participants' champion

preferences. Players referenced the in-game culture by e.g., expressing dislike towards champions that were mostly played by so-called “one-tricks” who only play the same champion all the time and become extremely proficient with it. Another example was that a few participants associated specific champions with in-game toxicity, suggesting that there is an overrepresentation of toxic behavior among players who pick certain champions, leading to hatred towards that champion by association. The following quotes illustrate these thoughts.

Yasuo - because Players always toxic and he can also have a bg- one good ult and he is back again (P4)

Yasuo (one trick too strong) (P30)

In addition to the above-mentioned Yasuo, there were other champions that were featured in multiple responses. The most often appearing favorite champions were Jarvan IV and Diana and the most often appearing least favorite champions were Yasuo, Yuumi, Teemo and Shaco. While the most preferred champions were often justified through game mechanics (see Theme 1), interestingly, the least favorite champions included a wider range of justification including general annoyance (e.g., P10), associations of the champion with toxicity and toxic play (e.g., P4), annoying gameplay (P17, P29, P34) and being too strong in the hands of players who only play that champion (e.g., P30). Many players also rather succinctly stated they dislike a specific champion, such as Shaco, as illustrated in the quotes below.

Who likes Shaco - honestly (P10)

Shaco - annoying af (P29)

Shaco (Don't like playing against it) (P34)

In summary, particularly when it came to which champions players dislike the most, they tended to provide a more varied argumentation as opposed to the question of which champions they prefer. Here we noticed that mechanics were present, aesthetics and lore were mostly absent, but associations and game culture emerged as a new important dimension for explaining the participants' preferences.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

Our empirical study yields both theoretical and practical contributions. In our empirical study, we showed

that the participants' character preferences in the context of the video game *League* are influenced by a multitude of factors including gameplay / game mechanics, aesthetics, lore, in-game culture and various more personal associations and experiences to varying degrees. This aligns with previous work (Delhove and Greitemeyer (2020)), but we extend the existing research by providing evidence that players' champion preferences are also shaped and influenced by other players' behaviors with specific characters, and by extension, other players' preferences. This is highlighted in our data by e.g., socially shared annoyance towards characters such as Shaco, Teemo and Yasuo. This contribution is connected to recent research that has argued that indeed game characters are related to player behaviors (Şengün et al. (2022)). In our data, the origin of the shared annoyance differed across players, but comments such as “*Who likes Shaco - honestly*” and *Yasuo players are toxic* suggest that there are trends in player behaviors with certain champions that are acknowledged by the player community, creating in-game associations of certain characters to certain behaviors. This finding is interesting, since previous work exploring group polarization in competitive settings has suggested that e.g., associations of specific slang terms to the opposing team can cause dislike towards the slang term itself (Laato et al. (2021)).

Other ways in which we contribute to existing research (Delhove and Greitemeyer (2020) and Hefner et al. (2007)) is by providing elaboration on the role of gender representation in the game as well as the role of gender in champion preferences. While previous work suggests that both the players' (Kordyaka, Pumplun, et al. (2023) and Trepanowski et al. (2024)) and the characters' (Gao et al. (2017) and Ramler et al. (2021)) gender plays a significant role in players' character preferences, our data suggests a two-pronged situation. On one hand female gamers do not emphasise gender almost at all when articulating their champion preferences, but on the other hand, female gamers overwhelmingly were choosing female champions as their favorites. This finding invites more research on this topic.

Our findings also relate to studies on video game developers' strategies to differentiate their character selection and motivate consumers to make micro-transactions. Le et al. (2022) suggested that games such as *League* use three key principles in differentiating their character offering to the players: character (1) competency; (2) variety and (3) appearance. All three dimensions were present in our findings, but in addition, in-game culture emerged as an important guiding force driving participants'

preferences. Based on our findings, we also provide recommendations for game character designers in Table 3. We organise these based on the themes crafted in our empirical study.

Table 3. Considerations for competitive multiplayer online game character designers.

#	Design consideration
1	Participants regardless of background, skill level and playing position, emphasized champion mechanics over the other elements of the characters in <i>League</i> . Designers looking to create appealing characters should focus on creating unique mechanics that stand out and enable players to express themselves both competitively and cooperatively.
2	Aesthetics, lore, gender and visual looks were important, but more on a general level. Players may react negatively to overly stereotypical presentation of particularly humanoid characters, and designers should look into balancing the offered character selection to match the diversity of the player population.
3	As video games are complex live-service environments that are influenced not only by the game system, but also the communities around them, players' champion preferences were influenced by associations formed through the game culture. This requires developers to monitor and react to emergent phenomena arising from within the player communities.

5.2. Limitations and future work

In our empirical study, we had the following limitations. First, we were limited by the number of participants, and while the qualitative analysis of data yielded already promising results, future research should look into broader and more representative samples to draw statistical inferences. Second, we carried the study in the context of *League*. Despite the game being popular, we need to be careful regarding generalizations of the findings into other games. For example, in the context of games where the characters have less emphasis on gameplay, such as *Mario Kart* or *F-Zero*, or games that are more story-driven, participants may value the aesthetics and lore of the characters to a higher degree. Third, *League* is becoming a multimedia franchise with merchandise and a popular Netflix show (*Arcane*) being released recently. It is unclear whether the game characters appearing in meaningful roles outside the context of *League* has an effect on players' long-lasting impressions and preferences. As an example, the

champion Caitlyn was mentioned often in the responses in our data, and she also appears in the Netflix show *Arcane*. Future research should investigate how character preferences may transfer between different media products in the same franchise.

Our work also opens various other future research avenues. In terms of immediate follow-up studies, we intend to collect qualitative data from a representative sample across different games to understand the relative importance of the character characteristics discovered in this work. This type of research would enable us to identify whether certain player sub-populations (such as female players, professional players, low-level players, older players, players with special needs etc.) have significant emphasis on certain character elements. Future research could explore the generalizability of our findings to other contexts beyond *League*. We speculate that in a game that places less emphasis on mechanics, the themes could obtain new meanings and nuances. Future research can explore to what extent the popularity of characters such as Mario, Sonic or Pikachu are shaped by how they are played with and controlled within the games they appear in. We also discovered some evidence of a potential mismatch between participants' verbally expressed preferences and what they actually preferred. For example, the female participants appeared to overwhelmingly play female champions, but only a few noted this preference when asked about it. Finally, an important future research avenue relevant for multimedia franchises is to understand how the different media forms (e.g., games, movies, TV-shows, merchandise) interplay in building players' preferences towards specific characters.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we explored multiplayer online game players' character preferences in the context of *League*. Our findings suggest that game mechanics associated with specific characters were the most important explaining factors for both players' positive and negative preferences. Aesthetics, story, in-game cultures and other miscellaneous factors appeared in some responses, indicating that there are individual differences in what aspects players focus in their character preferences. Interestingly, while only a few participants mentioned the characters' gender in their responses, particularly our female participants overwhelmingly preferred female champions. This invites further research into this topic. In summary, the thematic analysis we conducted revealed various nuances and inter-connections between the studied elements in character preferences, and suggests that in

addition to thinking about the elements in the context of specific characters, players reflect their views against the overall game aesthetics, socially shared game culture and representation.

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