

A Feminist Autoethnography

On Hegemonic Masculinity, Failure, and Subversive Play in League of Legends

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ABSTRACT

League of Legends is one of the most popular video games in the world, and yet it is also infamously known as being filled with harassment and failure. Why do I continue to play? In this project, a critical autoethnography is used to illustrate what it is like to play in this male-dominated space as a woman. Using feminist and queer game studies as my theoretical framework, this project investigates three distinct, but interconnected concepts: hegemonic masculinity, weaponized failure, and subversive play. In chapter one, I use Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to analyze *League of Legends*. I argue that gameplay elements such as champion selection, communication, and role-play make it difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity in *League of Legends*. However, I do acknowledge that it is possible to challenge through playing the role of support *properly* – by concentrating on teamwork and sacrifice. In chapter two, I use queer video game studies, including key texts by Bonnie Ruberg and Jesper Juul, to consider failure in *League of Legends*. While queer failure can be fun in single-player video games, I argue that failure in *League of Legends* can be used as a weapon to intentionally hurt your teammates. Finally, in chapter three I consider my own subversive playstyle. While some academics have argued that woman who play masculine video games using male-coded skills cannot challenge the patriarchy, I argue that embracing my femininity in *League of Legends* allows me to persevere and push against the patriarchy. I argue that my feminine visibility in the form of my gamertag, SJW Queen, my communication style that emphasizes positivity and mediation, and how I play *League of Legends* are all examples of subversive gameplay. I bring my femininity into *League of Legends* uncompromised and I embrace it, rather than try to escape from it.

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CONTENT WARNING

This project contains sexist and homophobic language when referring to specific examples of hate speech in video games.

INTRODUCTION

I sign into League of Legends and I check my rank. Still Iron I. I have 87 League Points, meaning I only need to win one more game to make it to 100, and therefore make it into promotions. I so desperately want to get out of Iron – it is the lowest division in the video game. Last season, I finished in Silver IV, but somehow, I managed to find my way to Iron this season. Moving up the ranks in League of Legends is an uphill battle filled with harassment and seemingly endless failure. Even when you play well, it is always possible that a teammate will quit the game or intentionally get killed, making it almost impossible to win. I queue up for a ranked game by myself, and quickly join a lobby with four strangers. The game begins and it starts out well. Then, one of my teammates starts typing in ‘all chat’, which means that everyone can see it, unless you have them muted. They begin calling the other team names, and it becomes a back and forth with a few of the players on the opposing team. Although I do not remember much of what either team said to each other, one thing stood out – ‘I will rape you’. I instantly froze. As a woman who has worked with survivors of rape and domestic violence, I was stunned. I remember my thought process at that moment – I went to type ‘reported’, which I always do when someone says something that is against Riot Games’ rules.

I am embarrassed to admit, but before I hit send, I considered the repercussions. I was in a ranked game that I needed to win to get to promotions. If I lost this game, I would be one game farther away from being promoted to Bronze. If I told my teammate that I was going to report them, then I might become the target of their harassment, or they might force our team to lose, or both. All these possibilities whirled through my mind. Did I have a responsibility to

inform them that I would report them? Or was the act of reporting after the game ended enough? Although I did pause for a moment, I decided to type 'reported' into the chat, informing my teammate that their behaviour was going to be reviewed by Riot Games. My teammate told me to 'fuck off', and we proceeded to lose the game. A big, red DEFEAT sign appeared on my screen, and then I watched as my Riot Points slowly declined. In the next screen, I reported the player for hate speech and verbal abuse. It was a bittersweet victory – while this player may receive a penalty for their behaviour, we still lost the game. Despite my frustrations, I went back to the lobby and queued up for another ranked game. League of Legends not only normalizes harassment, but incentivizes me to keep quiet, or I might lose League Points. The climb out of Iron continues... Why do I choose to play League of Legends when there are so many other video games to play?

League of Legends is one of the most popular online video games in the world, and yet it is also infamously known as a male-dominated video game that is exceptionally difficult and filled with failure. With over eight million daily players, *League of Legends* is immensely popular (Goslin 2019). I became interested in studying *League of Legends* when I realized that video games are usually meant to be fun, but this video game is often not fun. I began this project wondering why I continue to play *League of Legends*, a video game where harassment and failure are so overwhelmingly present. The amount of frustration and pain that I have felt while playing this video game is unlike any other game I have ever played. This project is divided into three distinct chapters: hegemonic masculinity, failure, and subversive play. The first chapter focuses on the presence of hegemonic masculinity in video games. I consider how specific features in *League of Legends*, including champion selection, communication, and role-play,

make it difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Chapter two uses queer theory to examine ideas of failure in video games. I acknowledge different types of failure and differentiate between single-player failure and online multiplayer failure. I argue that unlike single player video games, multiplayer online battle arena video games create a cycle of failure that is inescapable whether you are playing queerly or not. I consider how failure is often weaponized in *League of Legends* and argue that this particular form of failure in *League of Legends* is far from queer. Finally, I turn my attention to my own experience playing *League of Legends*. I examine the ways that I play *League of Legends* subversively. Through my gamertag, playstyle, and communication, I bring my femininity into the virtual environment of *League of Legends* uncompromised and use it to win.

What is League of Legends?

League of Legends is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) competitive computer video game. It is a free-to-play game, which means that it is accessible to a broad audience of gamers. The main game mode – Summoner's Rift – involves two teams of five fighting to gain resources, destroy objectives such as dragons and minions to gain gold and experience, and ultimately one team destroying the opposing team's base. There are five positions that correspond to positions on the map: top lane, mid lane, jungler, support, and attack damage carry, otherwise known as ADC. A single game can last anywhere from under twenty minutes to over an hour. Players can play with friends but are often playing alongside and against strangers. There are four different ways to play Summoner's Rift – blind pick, draft pick, ranked solo/duo, and ranked flex. Both unranked modes are casual in comparison to ranked solo/duo or flex because there are no skill tiers. Below is an overhead view of Summoner's Rift. There are

two bases – one located in the top right and the other in the bottom left corner of the map. The three lanes are clearly outlined, with the top lane running along the left and top, the middle lane running diagonally between bases, and the bottom lane in the bottom and right side of the map.



Figure 1: An overhead depiction of the Summoner's Rift map in League of Legends. Reprinted from the League of Legends Wiki. 2020, Retrieved from [https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Map_\(League_of_Legends\)](https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Map_(League_of_Legends)).

In ranked solo/duo, you can queue up alone or with one other player and can choose two lane preferences before queuing up. The draft phase is where you can ban champions and choose

who you want to play one by one. When a player begins playing ranked solo/duo, they are placed into a skill level tier. When I first began playing ranked solo/duo, I was placed in the Iron division. As I slowly began to improve in skill, I moved up the ranks by winning ranked games and getting promoted. In this mode, you must win a certain amount of games to be promoted to the next rank. For example, you could be in Bronze III, and be promoted to Bronze II, which moves you a little closer to getting to Silver IV. For this project, I will be focusing on ranked solo/duo gameplay.

League of Legends is a game I play all the time. I often play by myself, but sometimes queue up with friends. It is exceptionally popular and very complicated. It takes a lot of time and effort to become skilled at the game. I have been playing for quite some time now, and I have only been in the Silver skill tier once. I have a difficult relationship with the game. There are times when I love playing *League of Legends*, and I have fun. However, I have also cried due to something that happened in a game, and sometimes I get so angry that it takes hours to let go of a bad game. It is a game filled with harassment, frustration, and failure, and I am interested in investigating the way that these ideas permeate the space. I dream of being a highly skilled *League of Legends* player – I would love to one day make it to a high rank such as Diamond or even Platinum. This project follows my journey during a season of *League of Legends* from Iron all the way to Silver. The sections in italics are real events and gameplay moments that I have experienced. All of them are described from memory. They are in order, beginning with my experience in Iron in the introduction all the way to my achievement of Silver in the conclusion. These anecdotes provide context and an indication of how I feel when I play *League of Legends*.

It is important to paint a picture of what the *League of Legends* culture is like before diving into the analysis. The popularity of *League of Legends* is massive, with professional leagues throughout the world. North America currently has ten *League of Legends* professional eSport teams. Currently, all professional North American *League of Legends* players are men. The history of women attempting to access this professional space is disheartening. In November of 2012, Team Siren formed as the first all-female *League of Legends* team in North America. They released a video introducing their team on May 30 and signaled the lack of female players in professional eSports (Team Siren Gaming 2013). After their introduction, they played against a team who was streaming the game online, and the *League of Legends* community found out their ranks. They officially disbanded 18 days after the release of the video that introduced them as a team due to harassment. In another league, LCL (League of Legends Continental League), an all-female team called Vaevictis eSports experienced five support bans in a single game against team ROX (Kim & Oak 2019). According to Inven Global, an eSport company, team ROX only banned support champions to imply that women only play support roles in *League of Legends* (ibid). Although this is not technically against the rules, Riot Games recognized that it was a sign of disrespect, and team ROX received an official warning (ibid). In another game Vaevictis played against team Vega Squadron, the team of men intentionally stretched out the game, choosing to continue to embarrass them by 'holding them hostage' instead of ending the game (ibid). Warnings were also issued to Vega Squadron from Riot Games (ibid). Professional female *League of Legends* players are extremely rare, and these examples illustrate the rejection of femininity in a literal sense, by attempting to eliminate

these female players through public humiliation. When this is what happens to professional female players, it is no wonder that the community is dominated by men.

Professional players have a massive following, both online and in tournaments, but *League of Legends* streamers are also immensely popular. Tyler1 is an online streamer that plays *League of Legends* and currently has 94 million views on his Twitch channel. However, he is not part of a professional *League of Legends* team. In a Polygon article written by Daniel Friedman, a video game journalist, Friedman explains that Tyler1 is known in the video game community as “the most toxic *League of Legends* player in North America” (2018). Tyler1 popularized intentionally feeding, which resembles standing still or going into the enemy base and allowing the other team to easily kill you. Tyler1 coined this behaviour as ‘running it down mid’, where he repeatedly runs into the enemy base down the mid lane and dies (ibid). Every time he is killed by the opponent’s team, they gain experience, gold, and power, and his own team suffers (ibid). Tyler1 is very skilled at *League of Legends*, but he has had many of his accounts banned due to his player behaviour and verbal abuse (ibid). He often tells other players to kill themselves due to their lack of skill, and Riot Games banned him from playing the game for almost two years (ibid). However, he is now playing again and claiming to be reformed (ibid). Not only is he making money again by streaming himself playing *League of Legends*, Riot Games has invited him to tournaments and even sent him a framed image of himself wearing a shirt that said ‘Reformed’ (Patterson 2019). In the video where he opens the package from Riot Games, he says “Riot, I was not toxic this season, number one... sure, we got an unjust chat restriction for saying my team was fucking dogshit, and then AFK’d the game - but that does not mean I was toxic” (ibid). While this project is not specifically focused on Tyler1, he is the perfect

example to illustrate the amount of harassment and verbal abuse that takes place in *League of Legends*.

Riot Games has a history of sexist practices in the workplace. While this project does not analyze in detail the well-reported controversy of treatment at Riot Games, I would be remiss to not mention this history. An article published in the gaming news website *Kotaku* in August details multiple instances of sexual harassment, the inability for many women to be promoted, and experiences of women watching their ideas be stolen and then praised (D’Anastasio 2018). During an interview in 2015, a woman recalls being continuously questioned about specifics regarding her video game experience. She claims that, “the interviewer had been fact-checking her, looking for holes in the story of her gamer upbringing” (ibid). There is an understanding of what the “ideal Rioter” employee is like, and this idea of a hardcore gamer has led to many women being turned down or not even considered for positions at Riot Games (ibid). On November 5, 2018, “one current and one former employee of Riot Games filed a class action lawsuit... accusing [Riot Games] of endemic gender-based discrimination” (ibid). Since the article was published, Riot Games has added more diversity training, partnered with Girls Who Code and hired more women (D’Anastasio 2019a). On December 2, 2019, Riot Games settled the lawsuit and has paid \$10 million collectively to every woman who worked at the company in the last five years (D’Anastasio 2019b). While this is a workplace victory for women at Riot Games, *League of Legends* and video game communities continue to be viewed by many as a boy’s club. In 2019, one anonymous employee at Riot Games claimed that, “video games are the last bastion of masculinity” (Sullivant 2019). Even in the video game workplace, women are experiencing sexism and made to feel unwelcome in this male-dominated space. While this

project does not focus on the workplace, it is important to provide context for the culture surrounding Riot Games and *League of Legends*. Before diving into chapter one, I will now provide an overview of my methodology and theoretical framework.

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography

Since I want to explore why I play *League of Legends*, I decided that the most appropriate methodology is a critical autoethnography. This allows me to focus on representing and describing my own thoughts and feelings as they occur before, during, and after playing *League of Legends*. A critical autoethnography permits me to recognize my positionality more fully in gamer culture through my own intersecting identities. Stacy Holman Jones and Anne M. Harris, both Australian researchers, are experts in the field of autoethnography. Their book, *Queering Autoethnography*, focuses on moving “away from traditional notions of what counts as ‘valid’ or ‘useful’ in research”, and instead consider a more empathetic approach to research that involves the personal (Jones and Harris 2018:5). An autoethnography demonstrates that the personal is political. Video games do not exist in a void – they are also subject to the influences of political and social systems. As theorized by Carol Hanisch in 1969, personal experiences are shaped by the political and social systems that we live in. An autoethnography illustrates how my own experiences as a woman playing *League of Legends* are influenced by power structures such as hegemonic masculinity.

An autoethnography is the right methodological choice for this project because it allows me to consider and reflect on my own experiences as a woman playing *League of Legends*.

Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner are American communication scholars who specialize in autoethnographies. They argue that the purpose of an autoethnography is to provide a cultural understanding for both insiders and outsiders and illustrate certain patterns in the culture such as “repeated feelings” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011:5). I am both an insider and an outsider in the gaming community. On one hand, I have experience playing many different types of games and I have a strong understanding of gamer culture. However, I am also a researcher and a woman who has not been made to feel welcome in the gaming community. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner argue that an autoethnography allows for research to be both “rigorous, theoretical, and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (ibid:11). An autoethnography provides me with the benefit of depth, complexity, and a longitudinal analysis (ibid). Other methodologies, such as surveys or interviews, would potentially lack the depth required to fully process how playing *League of Legends* impacts a person. In this project, an autoethnography helps me to consider how my personal experience playing *League of Legends* relates to the broader gaming community. An autoethnography allows me to be creative and reflect on and analyze my own, often negative, experiences while playing *League of Legends*.

An essential part of an ethnography is to define my positionality in both gamer culture and in the world. I am a white, cis-female graduate student who is from an upper-middle class family. I am also able-bodied and English-speaking. These identities provide me with a lot of privilege in my everyday interactions in the world. Most of the identities I have are privileged, and yet my experience as a woman has not been easy. I also identify as a gamer, which seems like an obvious statement, given the fact that I play video games. However, the question of who

is and is not a 'real gamer' is a very contested and complicated subject. There are countless online jokes and memes arguing that women cannot be real gamers, or that you are only a real gamer if you can check off a certain list of criteria. In Kotaku, a game industry news site, Keza MacDonald describes her experience as a female gamer experiencing skepticism about her "gamer credentials", including being asked how many gaming consoles she owns, or if she has played specific games (MacDonald 2017). She argues that gender can be a factor in this distinction, and that many believe gamers must put in a specific amount of time and energy into playing games to be considered a real gamer (ibid). I firmly believe that anyone can identify as a gamer if they believe they are a gamer – whether that means playing *Candy Crush Saga* on your phone once a month or playing 14 hours of *League of Legends* every day. When people gatekeep who can and cannot identify as a gamer, they are really saying "you are not welcome" (ibid). My identity as a gamer is one that I am proud of, and nobody can take it away from me just because I do not play certain games, such as first-person shooter games (not for lack of trying – they make me incredibly motion sick).

Since my research question centres on why I play *League of Legends*, my methodological choice of autoethnography allows me to focus on my playstyle. Rather than keep a strict play schedule and detailed journal, I chose to keep my experience playing *League of Legends* as organic as possible. I wanted to play the video game as a gamer first, rather than solely as a researcher. This allowed me to be more immersed in the experience of playing the video game. Between 2019-2020, I played *League of Legends* while simultaneously working on this project. After games where I questioned why I keep playing, or after something particularly exciting happened, I added some brief notes to an online document. Since I played for over a year while

writing, I found many patterns in both my experiences and my own playstyle that helped me decide how to best organize my chapters I kept notes pertaining to certain themes such as failure and communication. Since I had been playing the video game for a few years, I already had some pre-existing ideas of what it was like to play *League of Legends*. For example, the chapter on subversive play came about upon reflecting on my own playstyle and how it is different than the norm. While not every game involved harassment or intentional failure, these experiences are very common in *League of Legends*. Focusing on my experience as a female gamer using a critical autoethnography helps me illustrate what it is really like to play *League of Legends* as a woman.

With any methodology, it is important to determine if there are any ethical considerations. Since “researchers do not exist in isolation” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011:8), many of my stories regarding *League of Legends* involve friends as well as online strangers. While many of my examples focus on my own emotions, there are relational ethics that I must consider for this project. I play *League of Legends* with a specific group of friends, as well as my partner who I live with, and so it is important to consider the ethical implications and potential harms. For example, a group of scholars from the U.S., Canada and Belgium wrote an article describing their experience archiving data from online sources for their study of Gamergate, a video game controversy that will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. Todd Suomela, Florence Chee, Bettina Berendt, and Geoffrey Rockwel write about the usefulness of an “Ethics of Care” model when conducting digital research on Gamergate (Suomela et al. 2019). They used three key features of the Ethics of Care in their research. The first claims that “ethics is more about relationships than rights” (ibid:10). In my project, I often describe playing

League of Legends with my friends. In these scenarios, the ethics of care model helps me consider how to maintain these relationships, both with my friends as well as strangers who I play alongside. My examples and descriptions of fellow players in *League of Legends* are as vague as possible, while preserving details relevant to my analysis. The strangers are both anonymous in this project and anonymous to me. While strangers do not know that they are being included in my research project, I do not include any gamertags or identifying information.

The second feature is what Suomela et al. call “the significance of dialogue” in these relationships. As described in some of my personal experiences, I often chat with strangers during *League of Legends* games. I am also often in a voice chat with multiple friends that I know offline. In both cases, there are moments where things are said or typed that have the potential to inflict harm. Using the ethics of care, this feature helps me recognize how dialogue can have a lasting impact. Researchers need to consider the impact that they could have on their friends as well as anonymous gamers through dialogue. In this project, I analyze dialogue in multiple sections, considering how communication in *League of Legends* impacts gameplay, and so this feature is important. The third feature identified by Suomela et al. is that “caring is a practice, not a heroic gesture, nor a set of rules for behavior; it is the ongoing activity of being sensitive to others (and oneself)” (ibid:10). *League of Legends* is filled with harassment and hate speech that can cause real harm (ibid:14). The researchers argue that it is important to find “a balance between the potential for increasing our understanding of online behaviour versus doing psychological damage to ourselves” (ibid:14). While I play this game often, writing about particularly painful games involving death threats or rape threats is sometimes difficult

and so I continue to take regular breaks to look after myself. An ethics of care model is useful when conducting this research because it provides me with reminders to consider my relationships with others, as well as my relationship with myself, throughout the research process. In this project, considering the privacy of those who have chosen to play the video game is the most valuable care I can provide. Privacy protects both my friends as well as strangers who have not consented to have their gamertags or identifying information presented in this project. A critical autoethnography supports me in researching how my personal experience playing *League of Legends* as a woman is influenced by power structures such as hegemonic masculinity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist and Queer Game Studies

Activists in the video game community such as Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian have been instrumental in shaping the way that we think about video games in recent years. Both Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian were at the forefront of Gamergate, which was an online hate campaign that began in 2012 that illustrated the intensity of harassment towards women in games. Quinn received sexually explicit messages, murder threats, and even a handwritten, threatening note sent to her home (Quinn 2015:96). There was a video game created where you could beat up Sarkeesian's face, as well as a bomb threat at an event where she was going to speak (Sarkeesian and Cross 2015:108). While the intention of this project is not to provide a detailed timeline of Gamergate, it is important to contextualize the intensity of the harassment that occurs in video game culture, specifically towards women and other minority groups. Anita

Sarkeesian has been instrumental in examining gender tropes through a feminist lens, creating multiple seasons of a YouTube series that analyses tropes such as the damsel in distress trope and the trope of women as either background characters or rewards in video games (2019). Zoe Quinn has also been influential, making important video games such as *Depression Quest*, where you play and learn about the experiences of someone who has depression (Sarkeesian 2019; Quinn 2013). Zoe Quinn even wrote a book about her experience throughout Gamergate, titled *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate* (2017). I believe that feminist and queer game studies need to recognize activists in the video game community who continue to push forward to make video game communities better. These women have shaped the way that people think about video game culture, despite their experiences of misogyny and abuse, and I seek to acknowledge and add to their work.

Research in feminist and queer game studies has been tackling the problem of harassment in gaming for years. Mia Consalvo, an American academic in communication studies, has written about how important it is for feminist game studies scholars to confront toxic gamer culture (2012). She analyses sexism and harassment occurring during Gamergate (ibid). Consalvo argues that these events “illustrate a pattern of misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege” (ibid). She believes that feminist media studies can shed light on the intensity of harassment experienced in video game communities and point to “historical solutions for overcoming similar difficulties” (ibid). Adrienne Shaw, an American game studies scholar, argues that feminist theory should be used in media studies to question structures of power and imagine a new form of online world (2014:276). Feminist game studies scholars have

a duty to recognize and fight back against harassment and abuse. Many researchers have studied how difficult it can be for women to access and persist in specific video game spaces due to sexism and harassment (Brehm 2013; Nardi 2010). For example, *World of Warcraft* has been studied by multiple feminist video game academics to determine how women experience this video game that has a large population of male gamers (ibid). Sexism and harassment permeate these spaces, which can be “a strong deterrent for females in an already male dominated medium” (Brehm 2013:10). Much like *World of Warcraft*, *League of Legends* is also a video game that has a large population of male gamers. In this project, I examine my own experiences of harassment while playing *League of Legends* using a critical autoethnography.

Bonnie Ruberg’s book *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* is also a valuable text for analyzing failure in *League of Legends*. According to Ruberg, queer theorizing in academia began roughly 30 years ago (2019a:7). The word queer is a term that is used to describe many different forms of both gender and sexuality (ibid). It is also used in queer theory to move beyond concepts of sexuality and think about queerness “as a way of being, doing, and desiring differently” (ibid). Queer theory is used to help recognize norms that exist in our society, and the deviations that occur. It is a way of “reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world”, and can be used to open our eyes to heterosexual patterns (ibid:7). In game studies, queer theory can be used in many ways. Some game theorists use queer theory to consider representation in video games, looking at whether there is explicit LGBTQ content (ibid:15). However, Ruberg wants to move beyond this and consider queer theory in the context of queer play (ibid). Playing a video game in a queer way often involves playing it in a way it was not intended to be played. It can involve “playing to lose...playing to hurt... playing too fast or too slow” (ibid:17-

18). This form of play is a mode of resistance that fights against the dominant way of playing. In this project, queer theory, and particularly Ruberg's analysis of queer theory in video games, is used to consider the potential of queer ways of playing *League of Legends*. In particular, I consider the queer potential of failure while playing *League of Legends*.

In addition to feminist and queer game studies, hegemonic masculinity is another theoretical framework that runs throughout this project. While I provide a detailed overview of the concept in chapter one, it is used in all three chapters of this project. *League of Legends* is a video game that is made by men, for men. As indicated, the player base is largely male. Hegemonic masculinity, first theorized by Raewyn Connell in 1987, is a concept that emphasizes masculinity as a dominant ideology that continues to be reproduced. According to Connell, the concept emphasizes the power that men have over women (1987:183). For example, she argues that hegemonic masculinity is masculine and heterosexual, and therefore queerness and femininity are in direct opposition (ibid:186). Through cultural consent, hegemonic masculinity is accepted as the dominant power without the need of force (2005b:846). In *League of Legends*, the domination of women, stigmatization of homosexuality, and hierarchy of dominance between men is evident. This theoretical framework helps me to consider how power is reproduced in *League of Legends* through hegemonic masculinity. In a male dominated video game, this theoretical framework supports me in investigating both how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in *League of Legends* and how it is possible to contest and push back against these power structures.

League of Legends is a popular, male-dominated video game. Being a woman in this masculine space has produced some interesting interactions and experiences. The popularity of

League of Legends combined with the amount of men who play this video game make it a fascinating environment to study. My own experience as a female gamer is embedded in each chapter. Teammates often assume I am male, sexism and harassment are rampant, and players will sometimes do whatever it takes to acquire power, including intentionally lose the game for their own team. These experiences are so normalized in *League of Legends* – they happen all the time. Next, I illustrate how these experiences relate to Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity.

CHAPTER 1: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

I begin a game of League of Legends with a few of my male friends. Our team struggles at the beginning of the game with a few early deaths and missed objectives. I am trying to help our team gain some momentum by pressuring the enemy ADC and support alongside my teammate. My friend suddenly gets a double kill and we are back in the game. At this point in the game, one of my male friends' shouts, 'yes boys we got this!'. My heart sinks. My friends know that I am not a boy, and yet it is such a normalized belief in the videogame community that all gamers are male. I consider my options – I can confront him, or I can let it go. Often, I simply add a small, "And girl!" to the chat or verbally when this happens. I am so tired of being made to feel invisible while playing League of Legends. I am certainly not the only woman that plays the video game and yet this happens so often, it is disheartening. I decide to confront him on his use of the word boy to refer to our group of friends. To my surprise, my friend replies by arguing that 'boy' is a gender-neutral term. I feel frustrated. I wonder how my male friends would react if I began to call them girls. I ask them and they respond that I can call them whatever I want to call them. Perhaps I would agree, too... if it was an infrequent thing. But they are not called girl every single day when they play League of Legends. I am an outsider. I do not belong.

Video games have a long history of catering to male gamers (Lien 2013). While there are female gamers, and even women who play video games professionally, the video game community continues to be a boy's club (Johnson 2013). *League of Legends* has eight million daily players (Goslin 2019). It is immensely popular worldwide, and the community is largely male (Ratan et al. 2015). There are 150 playable champions to choose from and players

typically choose their champion based on the position they are playing. Each position requires specific skills and abilities. For example, a player can choose to play a beautiful female musician named Sona whose main purpose is to heal, shield, and protect teammates from danger. Or, they can choose to play Garen, a muscular man with heavy armour that uses his sword to strike, spin, and execute his opponents. Sona is typically played in the support position, while Garen is usually a top lane champion who faces off against the enemy top lane. Beyond champion selection and roles, *League of Legends* also involves a lot of communication due to the team aspect of the video game. While some communication focuses on strategy, much of the communication that takes place in *League of Legends* in my experience involves harassment, hate speech, and verbal abuse. That said, some video games, including *League of Legends*, have gendered elements that can potentially create an environment where players can explore their own identity.

Many researchers have studied the intersection of masculinity and video games. Through the framework of hegemonic masculinity, scholars have debated whether video games provide (1) a virtual environment where boys can challenge hegemonic masculinity (2) a space where boys can lean into hegemonic masculinity or (3) both (Brehm 2013; Charnock 2012; Hammar 2017; Nardi 2010; Sanford & Madill 2006). Some have argued that boys are able to challenge hegemonic masculinity through playing as feminine or racialized characters or playing historical video games where the goal is to fight against oppression (Hammar 2017; Sanford & Madill 2006). Others have argued that video games are a virtual environment where boys can embrace hegemonic masculinity through rejecting the feminine and experiencing hypermasculinity in character selection and play (Brehm 2013; Charnock 2012; Hammar 2017;

Nardi 2010; Sanford & Madill 2006). Some of these researchers have argued that both are possible (Brehm 2013; Charnock 2012; Hammar 2017; Nardi 2010; Sanford & Madill 2006). *League of Legends* first came out in 2009 and yet it continues to be one of the most popular video games in the world (Goslin 2019). This chapter explores some of the ways that hegemonic masculinity is embraced and challenged in *League of Legends*.

In this chapter, I begin by providing an overview of Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Then, I illustrate how it has evolved since it was first theorized in the 1980s. I connect the concept of hegemonic masculinity to the field of video games, expanding on the debate summarized above. Next, I analyze *League of Legends* and consider how it is possible to both challenge and lean into hegemonic masculinity. I argue that it is much more difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity in *League of Legends*. In comparison to other video games that have been studied, choosing to play a female champion in *League of Legends* as a male does not challenge hegemonic masculinity. Types of communication, including harassment and hate speech, create a barrier for challenging hegemonic masculinity. *League of Legends* is also missing elements found in role-play and story-based video games that have been studied, making it difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity through role-play. While these three factors make challenging hegemonic masculinity difficult, I argue that it is possible for boys to challenge hegemonic masculinity through their choice of role in *League of Legends*. By not only playing in the support position, but playing it properly, boys can confront hegemonic masculinity. However, the three factors listed above – champion selection, communication, and role-play – are still at play, creating barriers even while playing the support role properly.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Raewyn Connell, an Australian sociologist, revolutionized the field of masculinity studies in the 1980s. Hegemonic masculinity was conceptualized in *Gender & Power* in 1987 and has played a substantial role in masculinity and feminist studies (Connell:183). The word hegemony comes from Antonio Gramsci's work on class relations (ibid:184). Gramsci defined hegemony as supremacy in the form of "intellectual and moral leadership" (Femia 1981:24). Hegemony is a, "process through which the dominant ideology is reproduced in political and discursive processes" (Hammar 2017:374). Therefore, in the case of hegemonic *masculinity*, masculinity is the dominant ideology that is continuously reproduced and reinforced. Hegemonic masculinity is part of Connell's gender order theory, which analyzes how femininity and masculinity are based on "the global domination of men over women" (1987:183). Hegemonic masculinity is heterosexual and emphasizes the subordination and stigmatization of both homosexuality and femininity (ibid:186). Connell argues that it is important to recognize that depictions in the media are part of what helps sustain hegemonic masculine power (ibid). Connell then published *Masculinities* in 1995 and a second edition in 2005. In this book, her theory of hegemonic masculinity was established further. She expanded on the fluidity of hegemonic masculinity, explaining that it, "is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is... the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations" (Connell 2005a:76). She claims that it flows and can change depending on time and physical location (ibid:77). When the patriarchal conditions in society shift, so does the concept of hegemonic masculinity (ibid). Connell also discusses how inter-male verbal abuse enforces hegemonic masculinity by employing words such as "wimp" and "sissy" (ibid:79). As Connell

suggests that homosexuality functions as the opposite of hegemonic masculinity, using feminine coded words against a man associates them with homosexuality and femininity.

Since the original theorization, Connell has gone on to rethink the concept of hegemonic masculinity. In 2005, Connell published an article with James W. Messerschmidt, a sociologist at the University of Southern Maine, called *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*. In their reformulation of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt preserve the hierarchy of masculinity through hegemony (2005b:846). They argue that hegemonic masculinity is not simply based on force, but through “cultural consent” (ibid). This means that hegemonic masculinity is accepted as the dominant power through which men control without the use of force. Connell and Messerschmidt also reject and reformulate some of the ideas in the original concept, like the emphasis on using traits to describe masculinities (ibid:846-847). They conclude by rejecting research that uses hegemonic masculinity to, “imply a fixed character type, or an assemblage of toxic traits” (ibid:854). *League of Legends* is infamously known as a male dominated environment filled with toxic traits (Paul 2018). However, this chapter moves beyond this argument by illustrating how the domination of women, stigmatization of homosexuality, and hierarchy of dominance between men can be contested in *League of Legends*. Connell’s conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity supports me in investigating these ideas.

There is an ongoing academic debate about boys who play video games and their ability to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Do video games create an environment where hegemonic masculinity can be contested or a place where hegemonic masculinity is embraced? In *Masculinities in Play*, Voorhees and Taylor argue in the introduction that, “gaming is central to

understanding contemporary hegemonic masculinity because gaming itself has historically been an extension of hegemony” (2018:8). They claim that gendered relations in gaming support hegemonic masculinity (ibid). Likewise, in her discussion of *World of Warcraft* and sexism, Audrey Brehm argues that since video games, “are male dominated and generally social games, hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity have the ability to permeate every aspect of these games” (2013:3). Since video games, including *League of Legends*, are male dominated, there can be an overwhelming amount of sexism and homophobia (Nardi 2010:153). And other researchers argue that video games are a virtual environment where hegemonic masculinity can persevere through hypermasculinity, the rejection of the feminine, and a focus on heterosexuality (Charnock and Standen 2012; Brehm 2013; Sanford and Madill 2006). And yet, some researchers claim that video games can provide a safe space where boys and men can challenge these hegemonic power structures through playing as feminine or racialized characters (Sanford and Madill 2006; Charnock and Standen 2012; Hammar 2017). While some of these scholars focus on video games generally, others focus on specific video games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry*. This chapter illustrates how hegemonic masculinity plays out in the immensely popular video game *League of Legends*.

Champion Selection

Multiple researchers have studied how avatars are used to explore gender and identity in video games. Bonnie Nardi, an academic who studied *World of Warcraft*, found that, “from the moment one creates a character and must choose its gender, gender is always present” (2010:152). She found that men often choose to play as female characters, but women do not often play as male characters (ibid:159). Nardi discovered that the men she interviewed who

chose to play female characters did so because they enjoyed looking at the beautiful female characters (ibid). One male *World of Warcraft* player claimed, “If I have to look at someone’s ass for three hours, it’s going to be a girl’s” (ibid). In *League of Legends*, the gender of a specific champion does not have as much in-game significance because it is not a role-playing video game. There are many reasons why a player chooses to play a specific champion in *League of Legends*. They could choose a specific champion based on their designated position on the map, their knowledge of how to play a certain champion, or the desire to counter-pick against the enemy team. With 150 playable champions, there are many women, men, and monsters to choose from. Every champion has a different ‘kit’, meaning that they have completely unique attacks and abilities. Players often play specific champions because of their kit. For example, a male player may choose to play as Miss Fortune because her ultimate ability can do a lot of damage. However, as described in *World of Warcraft*, it is possible that they may also choose to play as her because she is a beautiful woman with flowing red hair, a bare midriff, and large breasts that male players can gaze at while playing. Overall, player selection is different in *League of Legends* – you can play as a different champion every game, in comparison to *World of Warcraft*, where the character you choose is your avatar forever. Regardless of the reason behind choosing a champion during champion selection, in *League of Legends*, male players choosing to play as a female character is not sufficient to create a counter-hegemonic experience.

While champion selection is not a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity, champion selection is often a way to embrace hegemonic masculinity in *League of Legends*. In an article about boys with intellectual disabilities, Charnock and Standen argue that gender identity can

be explored and experienced in video games (2012:337). They argue that, “boys used games as a space for gendered practice” (ibid:339). They claim that by playing as hypermasculine video game characters, boys could experience “second-hand masculinity” (ibid:338). Through playing muscular, heroic characters in video games, boys in this study demonstrated how they could achieve, “beyond what would be expected of them in the real world” (ibid). This embodiment of hypermasculine characters permitted boys to experience heroism and success in a way that they could not experience in real life (ibid). In *League of Legends*, many of the male champions are hypermasculine, with big muscles and huge weapons. For example, choosing to play as Draven, a man with large muscles and two swinging axes, is a way to experience second-hand masculinity. Second-hand masculinity in *League of Legends* is a way to embrace hegemonic masculinity.

Some may argue that women also enjoy playing sexy, barely clothed champions. While this may be true – I enjoy playing as Star Guardian Miss Fortune, who is wearing a short, frilly dress and thigh-high boots – these champions and champion skins are created by men, for men, with the male gaze as the focal point. The *League of Legends* audience is largely male, and so the way that champions look reflects this. While there are outliers, including monsters and animal champions, nonetheless, men choosing to play as hypermasculine characters is an example of embracing hegemonic masculinity in the video game. Some may argue that playing as specific female champions that are not as sexualized is a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity as a male in *League of Legends*. Currently, there are 50 champions that are female, out of a total of 150 champions in the video game. Of these champions, only eight of them are lacking in characteristically sexualized female features, such as large breasts, small waists, and

bare stomachs. While some are not sexualized because they are not human (Anivia, Rekai), others are not because of their young age or short stature such as those in the yordle race (Annie, Poppy, Tristana). Finally, Illaoi and Vi are much more muscular than most female champions and show less skin because of their armour, but their silhouettes are still clearly feminine with small waists and breasts. These champions are outliers in the way that they look, and yet even still, men choosing to play as these champions do not present a particularly convincing challenge to hegemonic masculinity. Evidently, champion selection in *League of Legends* is primarily a way to lean into hegemonic masculinity.

Communication

In multiplayer video games, communication often involves sexualized and homophobic language. In *World of Warcraft*, both Bonnie Nardi and Audrey Brehm found that these behaviours were extremely common. Nardi found that men in *World of Warcraft* often used, “sexualized, homophobic language”, including casually talking about rape and using words like, “pussy, cunt, ... faggot, or homo” (2010:153). She called this virtual *World of Warcraft* the “boys tree house”, a space where men could dominate the discourse (ibid). In some guilds, women were not even allowed to speak on voice chat during raids because the men might be “disrupted by the sound of feminine voices” (ibid:163). In a study that surveyed *World of Warcraft* players, Audrey Brehm found that women were often excluded or isolated from certain aspects of the video game by men, experienced endless harassment in voice chat, and were often ignored or removed from leadership positions in the video game (2013:10). In these multiplayer environments, challenging the dominant, hegemonic masculinity that permeates the space is extremely difficult. While it is possible to challenge this hegemonic masculinity in

specific moments, the severity and frequency of these behaviours create the discursive practices that in turn encourage cultural consent. Harassment and hate speech are so frequent that they feel almost natural in *League of Legends*, making it extremely difficult to contest. For example, a boy who tells a stranger to stop using the word 'pussy' during a game of *League of Legends* is a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity. However, the frequency and normalized use of these words and behaviours make it almost impossible to consistently challenge while continuing to play the video game at the same time.

As accurately as you can, please tell us what happened with this player. Choose up to three reporting categories if you need to.

- NEGATIVE ATTITUDE**
Griefing, Giving Up
- VERBAL ABUSE**
Harassment, Offensive Language
- LEAVING THE GAME / AFK**
- INTENTIONAL FEEDING**
Feeding is griefing, not just having a bad game
- HATE SPEECH**
Racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.
- CHEATING**
Unapproved Third Party Programs
- OFFENSIVE OR INAPPROPRIATE NAME**

Give any additional context on what happened

Figure 2: A screenshot of the post-game report screen in *League of Legends*. Taken by me in the *League of Legends* application. 2020.

In *League of Legends*, forms of communication such as hate speech, verbal abuse, and generally negative attitudes are relentless. So much so that players can report other players for these behaviours at the end of a game of *League of Legends*. When a player clicks the small exclamation mark beside a specific player's username, a new window (pictured above) opens that provides players the ability to report a player for up to three behaviours. When someone is reported using this feature, the report is sent to Riot Games, and the company has the option of deciding on a penalty for that player. While Riot Games provides players with the ability to report other players after the game, it is not possible to determine how often disciplinary action is taken because players are rarely notified when a penalization occurs (Riot Games 2018). There are four levels of discipline: chat restriction for 10 games, chat restriction for 25 games, two-week suspension, and lastly a permanent suspension of the player's account (Itsumo 2018). When you do get feedback for a report that you made about another player, the only information you receive is that a penalty was issued. In this same pop-up, Riot Games claims that "one penalty prevents most players from disrupting any more games". While it is impossible to know if this is true, these forms of communication continue to persist.

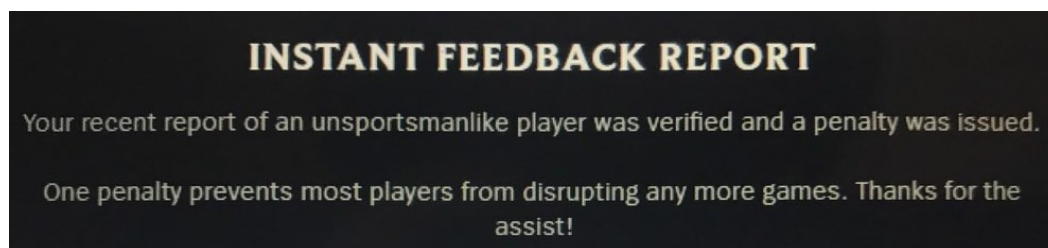


Figure 3: A screenshot of the notification that a player sometimes receives after reporting in League of Legends. Taken by me in the League of Legends application. 2020.

Continuous harassment in the form of verbal abuse and hate speech often involves dominance and a rejection of femininity and homosexuality in *League of Legends*. Sanford and Madill, researchers who study at the intersection of education, masculinity, and gaming, argue that video games provide a space where boys can “demonstrate their heterosexual masculinity and resist connections to the feminine” (2006:297). I have witnessed players calling other players ‘pussies’ and ‘fags’ in multiple games. This language is insulting towards queer people and women and fosters the stigmatization of homosexuality and femininity. Hate speech is often used to create or reinforce hierarchies between identities. As mentioned earlier, Connell recognizes that using this form of language is a way to show your own hierarchical power and domination over queer people and women (2005a). As discussed by Brehm in her study of *World of Warcraft*, “hegemonic masculinity... reproduces itself through interaction” (2013:3). When an overwhelming amount of the communication in a video game is misogynistic and homophobic, these ideas are continuously reproduced and normalized. Brehm suggests that these male norms are so engrained in many virtual environments that women can experience fear of revealing their gender identity (ibid:5). In *League of Legends*, communication is a tool that is used to dominate both women and queer people. The normalization of harassment and hate speech creates a barrier for challenging hegemonic masculinity.

Role-Play

The ability to role-play is a feature of many video games. Bonnie Nardi noticed that role-play was a significant way for players to play with gendered activities (2010:171). She argues that the gameplay in *World of Warcraft* provides gendered activities that are performed by all gamers (ibid). Male players can perform female-coded tasks such as baking or sewing, while

women who play can choose to create new weapons as a blacksmith (ibid). Nardi argues that these activities allow players, “to move back and forth across boundaries of male and female” (ibid). In an article by Emil Hammar, a Norwegian game studies academic, he argues that the video game *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry* creates a space where role-play can actively challenge hegemonic masculinity (2017). In the video game, you play as a black male named Adéwalé living in Haiti during the 18th century transatlantic slave trade (ibid:372). “Adéwalé has to resort to a sort of ‘toughness’ against the oppression and violence of White supremacy, while concurrently this ‘toughness’ is encoded as lethal... in hegemonic media” (ibid:382). Hammar argues that the use of his machete to evoke violence and his anger are characteristic of hegemonic masculinity (ibid:383). However, there is also another aspect in the video game that Hammar defines as “counter-hegemonic commemorative play” (ibid:387). He argues that the storyline in the video game allows players to fight against hegemony (ibid). For example, Hammar illustrates a moment in the video game where the player has the choice of paying or killing a slave trader to free a group of slaves (ibid:386). Hammar demonstrates how someone might argue that the player is complicit in the slave trade if they choose to pay the slave trader to free the slaves (ibid). However, actively choosing to kill the slave trader is a way to challenge hegemony in the video game (ibid). In the case of both story-based and historical video games, role-play is a feature that provides ways to both lean into and challenge hegemonic masculinity.

There is a rich amount of lore about all the *League of Legends* champions and the various maps, or regions, that have been used in the video game. In most story-based games, these pieces of information drive the video game forward. For instance, in games such as *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry* discussed above, the main character is on a journey to free

slaves. The storyline, interactions with non-playable characters, and fairly accurate portrayal of a genuine time in history set this video game apart. In comparison, *League of Legends* is a video game in which there is no continuity between games of Summoner's Rift. When a game ends, all the money, items, and power that a player acquired is lost. In addition, each game of Summoner's Rift has the same goal of defeating the enemy's nexus – the story does not change. To win, players must acquire money, destroy turrets and monsters, and kill their opponents. Choosing to play as a specific champion does not create the same level of role-play as in other games such as *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry* or *World of Warcraft*. You can make your champion taunt, joke, dance, and laugh using specific buttons. Many of these involve sound effects or voice lines, which does indicate the sound of every champion's voice. However, this is hardly comparable to a story-driven video game such as *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry*. Furthermore, as indicated earlier, the selection of specific champions does not create an ability to role-play in the same way that gender can be acted out in games like *World of Warcraft*. Noticeably, *League of Legends* does not provide nearly as much in-game background information or storyline in comparison to other video games that have been studied. Previously, *League of Legends* has not been studied in a way that highlights hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, comparing it to video games that have been studied in this way such as *World of Warcraft* and *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* is valid and useful.

Since *League of Legends* lore largely exists outside of gameplay, it is extremely difficult to role-play in the same way that it is possible in *World of Warcraft* and *Assassins Creed: Freedom Cry*. On the surface, *League of Legends* is an apolitical video game in comparison to *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*. The gender and masculinity that are embedded in *League of*

Legends do not provide the same ability to explore or make choices. As an example, let us consider a player choosing to play Sona in a game of Summoner's Rift. She is a support champion, meaning that she plays in the bottom lane alongside the ADC. Visually, Sona is a woman with long, blue hair that is holding a string instrument. Her abilities involve three aura's – magic damage, healing, and movement speed. Sona's abilities involve the use of her string instrument, which informs players that she is a musician. Every champion in the game has a joke, a taunt, a laugh, and a dance that players can demonstrate by pressing specific buttons. While most champions speak when they joke, taunt, and laugh, Sona remains silent, and all that can be heard is her instrument. These forms of communication are not useful in the video game and are only there for fun. Choosing to play Sona is role-play insofar as you are choosing to play as a champion that uses their instrument as their weapon. However, unless a player searches for Sona's biography online, they will not be aware that she is a mute orphan who lived at an adoption house with her instrument (League of Legends Universe). In addition, they will not know that Sona was eventually adopted by Lestara Buvelle, who helped Sona learn how to harness her instrument, known as an 'etwahl', to both play marvelous songs and also to use as a deadly weapon (ibid). While this lore is interesting, it exists completely outside of the *League of Legends* application. In comparison to other video games that have been studied, *League of Legends* is missing the nuance of being able to make decisions and impact a storyline through role-play. These elements are missing, and so it is almost impossible to challenge hegemonic masculinity through this method.



Figure 4: A screenshot from viewing Sona in my collection of champions in League of Legends. Taken by me in the League of Legends application. 2020.

Role Choice

I queue up for a game of League of Legends, and I notice that my support is thinking about playing a fire mage named Brand. While Brand is a champion that is typically played in the support position, I have found that often, players that choose Brand are extremely aggressive. While this can be great, I often find that it clashes with my own, safer playstyle. Not only that, but his abilities are not as focused on keeping me safe in comparison to other support champions. The game loads, and just as I suspected, this Brand constantly wants to fight the enemy team. He is continuously setting the enemy team on fire with his abilities. I try my best to use my abilities at a distance, as my health bar is already at half-health and Brand does not have any healing abilities. Then, Brand gets a double kill in our lane, and he immediately leaves to go to the middle lane. I continue to farm minions, feeling a little unsafe as I am alone and do

not know where the enemy jungler is. The enemy ADC and support champions are now back in the lane, and Brand is now in the top lane of the map. I sigh, wondering if I am going to be left alone for the rest of the lane period in this game. It is extremely difficult to acquire gold as an ADC when you are by yourself in the bottom lane. This vulnerability is frustrating, and it can make it very difficult to become strong. I ask the Brand in chat, 'are u just gonna let me rot?'. I do not get a response, but sometimes actions really are louder than words. The Brand continues to help other lanes get kills, and he continues to become more powerful. I try to stay relevant in the game, collecting any gold I can in the jungle and eventually joining the team fights. I am behind in level, gold, and kills. I only have one kill, and the Brand support has acquired seven kills. Even though Brand is strong, the enemy team eventually wins the game. After the game, everyone on the team blames me, claiming that I did not do enough damage or get enough kills. I sigh and decide to try to let it go. Sometimes it is better to just move onto the next game.

So far, this chapter has illustrated how difficult it is to challenge hegemonic masculinity in *League of Legends* in comparison to other video games that have been studied. However, there is a way that boys can challenge hegemonic masculinity. As discussed earlier, choosing to play a female champion during champion selection is not enough to challenge hegemonic masculinity. However, when they choose to play a support champion, it is possible. The support position is typically associated with femininity in video games, as demonstrated in the introduction regarding the story of Vaevictis eSports. This is because the role is not aggressive, but rather involves focusing on teamwork, sacrifice, healing, and generally keeping teammates alive. In the above example, Brand was not challenging hegemonic masculinity. His playstyle was self-serving, and he focused on strengthening his own champion. Even though his role is to

support me, the ADC, he chose to roam the map, killing enemies as he went. He was quite powerful, but not powerful enough to win the game. Unfortunately, since I had been left by myself in the bottom lane, I was killed multiple times by the enemy ADC and enemy jungler. This caused the other team to grow stronger, since killing me gave them gold and experience. Brand did not play the support position the way that it is meant to be played, and it could be part of why we lost the game. Instead of focusing on teamwork and keeping me alive, he chose to abandon me. These decisions indicate that Brand was searching for power and wanted to be the one who carried our team to victory. But it did not work out that way.

Choosing to play the support role and playing it properly is a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Since the support role is coded as feminine, playing it accurately is a way for male *League of Legends* players to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Many support champions, including Morgana, Lux, Janna, and Yuumi, have shields that they can place on their teammates to block enemy attacks. Other champions, such as Thresh and Tahm Kench, have an ability to safely remove an ally champion from dangerous situations. These abilities illustrate the overall purpose of the support role – to protect teammates. A male playing a support role properly is a way of challenging hegemonic masculinity because they are focused on helping their teammates succeed. This feminine role is also the least popular in ranked play, which further indicates how playing the support role as a male gamer can be a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Since *League of Legends* is a male-dominated video game, challenging hegemonic masculinity can be quite difficult. However, if played properly, the role of support can be used to push against hegemonic masculinity. In line with multiple studies that have

found it is possible to both challenge and lean into hegemonic masculinity, *League of Legends* also creates an environment where both scenarios are possible.

In this chapter, I illustrated how Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity connects to *League of Legends*. Through champion selection, communication, and role-play, challenging hegemonic masculinity is much more difficult than in other video games that have been studied. In fact, the overall lack of role-play elements, intensity of harassment and hate speech, and sexualization of champions make it much easier to lean into hegemonic masculinity. However, men who choose to play the role of support can confront hegemonic masculinity if they play the role properly. By focusing on keeping your teammates alive, players illustrate their desire to work as part of a team, rather than win the video game on their own. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Sometimes, players intentionally lose the video game for their team.

CHAPTER 2: WEAPONIZED FAILURE

I sit down at my computer and double click on the League of Legends icon. It is another day when I should be working on my thesis, but it feels like the game is calling my name. I queue up for a game of ranked Summoner's Rift. My preference is ADC, and I choose top as my second pick. I need to win this game. I am currently ranked Iron I, which feels so close and yet so far away from Bronze IV. I only need to win this game to get into promotions, which is a set of five games in which you need to win three to advance to the next rank. I get into the lobby, and I instantly have a bad feeling about how this game is going to go. My teammates, who are all strangers to me, start bickering about their assigned positions. The person who was assigned the role of jungler does not want to play this position, and suddenly we do not have a jungler. I consider offering to play jungle, but I have no experience playing in the jungle, and I know it would not go well. I pick Ashe and prepare for the game. Without a jungler, our team will struggle to get objectives such as dragons and the powerful Baron Nasher. I let out a loud sigh as the game begins to load, and I turn to my partner and ask, "Why do I play this awful game?" He laughs, and as you can imagine, the game does not go well for our team. My teammates are flaming each other, continuously claiming their own superior skill over that of other members of my team and myself. I verbally begin to call out their mistakes in the game so far, even though I am not on voice chat with anyone. I choose not to respond via typing but need to get my frustration out somehow. The game ends in an infuriating loss and I watch as my League Point score goes down. Another day in iron. Another day in ELO hell.

League of Legends is a team game in which one team always loses – failure is, in this sense, inevitable. In both single and multiplayer video games, failure can sometimes be a

choice. It is possible to fail in the way that video game developers want you to fail, but it is also possible to *choose* failure. Choosing failure in a single-player video game only impacts your own journey. It can even be fun, such as watching your character in *Super Meat Boy*, who is a small cube of meat, jump into a saw blade and explode. However, in multiplayer video games, failure has negative repercussions for your teammates because it is a team game. *League of Legends* is a multiplayer video game where you are forced to rely on four other players to achieve success. However, some players want to lose the game on purpose. This can be done through intentionally dying, orinting, and being away from keyboard, or AFK. They are often motivated to lose the game because of blame, resentment, and lost power in the game. Through intentionally dying or giving up, the player attempts to re-establish power over their teammates by proving that they can cause the entire team to lose. When failure is intentional in *League of Legends*, it can become a weapon used to upset or frustrate teammates. When a teammate in *League of Legends* fails intentionally, it is a maddening experience that can slowly take a toll on your own desire to play the game. Summoner's Rift games can be over 30 minutes long, and it is unbelievably frustrating to put so much time into a game only to watch your teammate run it down mid and intentionally feed the enemy team kills. It makes me feel powerless and wonder why I continue to tolerate a game that involves so much frustration.

In this chapter, I begin by introducing Jesper Juul and Bonnie Ruberg, two video game theorists who have written about failure. Juul is an academic who has written extensively on video game failure, deliberating why players continue to play video games when failure is unavoidable. Ruberg adds to this conversation by critiquing Juul's conception of failure and considering how queer theory ties into video game failure. Ruberg differentiates between

failing towards and failing against a video game, and I analyze how scenarios in *League of Legends* connect to these concepts. Then, I consider how multiplayer failure is different from failure in single player video games. Juul and Ruberg mainly focus on single player failing, and so I consider how multiplayer failure in *League of Legends* is different. This chapter illustrates some of the queer ways of playing *League of Legends* and the countless ways to fail while playing the video game. The multiplayer component in *League of Legends* creates a layer of complexity that is not found in single player video games. In *League of Legends*, failure is often not queer at all but instead acts as a weapon used against other players.

Failure in Video Games

This chapter focuses specifically on the works of Jesper Juul and Bonnie Ruberg to analyze failure in *League of Legends*. Jesper Juul is a Danish game designer and academic in the field of video games. He has published multiple books on video games, but the focus for this project is his book titled, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. In this book, Juul attempts to discern why people play video games when they know they will experience failure (2016:2). He argues that this is a paradox – while “we generally avoid failure”, we continue to play games with the knowledge that we will experience failure (ibid:2). Juul describes feeling confused when he returns to a video game despite experiencing failure (ibid:1). He asks himself, “why am I doing this?” (ibid:33) which, I must admit, is a question that I have asked myself countless times before, during, and after *League of Legends* games. Juul argues that, “games promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy – an inadequacy that they produce in us” (ibid:7). While failure in video games can illustrate our shortcomings, it also provides us with an opportunity to fix our inadequacies (ibid:7). According to Juul, this ability to

improve may be part of why we seek to play video games that cause us to fail. Improving in *League of Legends* is certainly one of the reasons I play the video game. I want to get better and move up the ranks, but desiring progress is not the only reason I play, and this will be further examined in chapter three. Juul's book is important in this chapter because it analyzes why we continue to play video games that involve so much frustration and anguish through experiences of failure. Juul's work on video game failure provides the necessary context to consider failure in *League of Legends*.

The second key text in this chapter is *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* by Bonnie Ruberg (they/them). They are an American queer game studies academic at the University of California. In their book, they explore how queerness is embedded in video games and how we can bring more queerness to video games. Each chapter focuses on a different theoretical idea – from queer intimacy in chapter one to queer embodiment and passing in chapter three. Chapter five is the most relevant and valuable chapter for this project because it focuses on what they call the “queer art of failing at video games” (Ruberg 2019a:135). This text is essential in this chapter because it adds a more nuanced set of arguments of what queer failure looks like in video game play. Ruberg cites Juul in their chapter, critiquing his arguments and adding to the literature on video game failure through the lens of queer game studies. While Juul focuses on how failure is always upsetting, Ruberg considers how choosing to fail can sometimes be fun. Ruberg's work on queer failure provides a valuable set of arguments that allows me to consider what queer failure looks like in *League of Legends*, and how it may be different.

Queer Failure

Video games, including *League of Legends*, offer the chance for gamers to experience success and failure. Juul recognizes the assumption that, “humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent” (2016:2). Underlying his book is the claim that all video game players desire to win. Ruberg acknowledges that gamers play video games to win (2019a:135-136). However, Ruberg moves beyond this belief and recognizes that there are queer playstyles that resist this narrative. According to Ruberg, queer play is more than just playing video games with LGBTQ+ characters (ibid:15). Queer play allows players to bring queerness to video games that do not have explicitly queer content (ibid:137). There are many forms of queer play, including “playing to lose [and] playing too fast or too slow” (ibid:17-18). Basically, queer play is any form of play that is deviant from the dominant playstyle in a specific game. Playing games “the wrong way” is queer play (ibid:24). Ruberg argues that resisting heteronormativity embedded in video games is essential when playing queerly (ibid:24). In terms of failure, Ruberg claims that it can be used as “a mode of queer resistance” through embracing the experience as an artform (ibid:25). Ruberg, quoting Jack Halberstam, explains that, “queer failing is not just losing... it also involves basking in the loss” (ibid:143). Instead of focusing solely on success, players who play video games in a queer way aim to challenge dominant assumptions, otherwise known as hegemony, about why people play video games. Ruberg argues that “playing to lose” is a form of queer resistance (ibid:137). Queer failure is about more than just losing – it is about enjoying the process of losing and challenging dominant ideas.

I fail in some way every single time I play *League of Legends*. Sometimes I die by accident or finish a game without killing anyone at all. Other times, I farm less minions than the opposing ADC and therefore have less in-game currency to spend on items. There are almost endless ways to compare yourself to your teammates, and the game provides you with an easy way to spot your failures at the end of a game.



Figure 5: A screenshot of the post-game screen in *League of Legends*. Taken by me in the *League of Legends* application. 2020.

As you can see in the figure above, in this specific game, our team won, and I was promoted to Bronze I. I blacked out everyone's gamertags, including my own, for privacy. I am the first player listed on Team 2 at the top, and it is evident that I got 13 kills, 18 assists, and was killed 8 times. I acquired 19,141 in gold. The screenshot above illustrates how easy it is to recognize your areas of success and failure in *League of Legends*. I got an A in the game, which is good but

not the best score you can acquire. I did make the most gold in the game, but I did not do the most damage. In the top right, there is an option to see advanced details, which is where you can look at damage charts and analyze detailed data from the game. I did not collect the most farm on my team, and I died more than the Akali on our team. Even though this screenshot is from a game my team won, I am still unsatisfied with my play and always trying to find ways to improve. Evidently, I am often not playing queerly in my *League of Legends* games. I am not playing to lose or attempting to play the wrong way. Quite the opposite, I am trying my best to be successful and become better at the video game. While playing this video game, I am in line with Juul's logic – I desire success, and I want to prove myself as a skilled player in *League of Legends*. Failure hurts, and yet I continue to play, seeking to practice and learn to one day be highly ranked.

Not only are players able to easily review and replay their own failures, there is also a way to watch video clips of other *League of Legends* players failing. On YouTube, there is an account called Kshaway with over one million subscribers that posts 'wood division' video compilations of "bugs, glitches, fails, [and] escapes" in *League of Legends* replays (2020). These fail videos are very popular. Ruberg argues that players in fail videos such as these "find pleasure, not shame, in the infinite replay of their failure" (Ruberg 2019a:145). There are certainly many games of *League of Legends* in which I could have been featured in a wood division video due to my poor gameplay. I have even at times claimed that I belong in wood division to my friends, if I am having an extremely bad game. I enjoy watching wood division video compilations, and often find myself laughing at these moments of failure. I have never sent gameplay footage to Kshaway and I do not think I will. Although I find immense pleasure in

watching them, the reason I do not want to send any of my own gameplay footage is due to my own shame. I do not want to tirelessly relive some of my worst gameplay moments, nor do I want the world to witness my embarrassing moments. A lot of the footage includes gamertags of those who were in the game. While it is rare that a gamertag contains personal identification such as first or last names, it is visible to all those who potentially do know your gamertag. My personal gamertag does not include any identifying information, but it does clearly indicate that I am a woman. My own feelings of shame come from my feelings of inadequacy because I am a female gamer. I feel immense pressure to succeed, and I know that some of that pressure is due to feeling that I must prove myself in front of the large population of men who play *League of Legends*.

Failing Towards

The goal is to win in *League of Legends* but losing is a common occurrence. When you fail in the way that Riot Games *intends* for you to fail, Ruberg calls this “failing towards” (2019a:146). Juul lists many ways to fail towards, including failure to complete a level in a certain amount of time, failure to survive a fight, and failure to protect your avatar from dangerous terrain (ibid:14). These examples involve the player failing to attain a goal that was determined by the video game developers (ibid:14). Ruberg adds to this list, recognizing that “players can fail with their bodies or fail with their minds... fail through inaction or fail through action... fail by accident or fail on purpose” (ibid:146). There are so many ways to fail during a game of *League of Legends*. Gameplay is fast-paced, and so failing with your mind is a likely possibility. For example, there are countless times that I have miscalculated my own health level and died during a team fight. In these circumstances, there are ways that I could have

chosen to move away from the enemy team, but I really did not think I was in danger of dying. This is a form of failure because dying in *League of Legends* is something that you want to avoid as much as possible. There are also ways to fail through action, such as moving your champion into an enemy trap. If an enemy sets a trap directly under you, then you are likely to fail through inaction because your champion instantly gets stuck. These types of failure, though seemingly insignificant, can lead to death, which in turn leads to the other team gaining objectives while you are waiting to respawn in the base. Many of these forms of failure can be viewed as failing by accident. I did not want to die in that team fight, and I did not choose to walk into an enemy trap on purpose. But what about failing against a game system?

Failing Against

Failing against a game system is something that Ruberg discusses in detail. They argue that it is possible to fail in a way “that a game does not want” (2019a:146). Ruberg considers the pleasure in these types of failure. “Players may forfeit, allow themselves to be beaten, or even to be killed” (ibid:147). They provide an example in a fighting game where they chose to watch their character be “slowly and beautifully” beaten by the digital fighter (ibid:147). They describe this in an extremely pleasurable way, and it is something that you might miss if you are focused on attacking your opponent. Another example they describe is failing against a game through non-action (ibid:147). They use the example of car racing games with open worlds, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series. These games involve missions such as carjacking, violent crimes, and street racing. Ruberg argues that one way to fail against this game is by simply driving according to the rules of the road. When I was younger, I remember playing in this way, focusing on stopping at red lights, driving on the right side of the road, and making sure to keep

my distance from other cars. This is a way of failing against the video game because it is playing in a way that the game developers did not intend for you to play. Since game developers can never prepare for how every individual gamer is going to play their game, there is a possibility of failing toward and against in every game.

In *League of Legends*, failing against is an experience that unfortunately happens often. Intentionally dying in *League of Legends* is a way of failing against the video game. Riot Games did not intend for this possibility – they made a video game where the goal is to win. Therefore, failing against the video game is often demonstrated as intentionally trying to lose. Ruberg’s distinction of failing towards and failing against is interesting because it implies that failing towards is something that is difficult to avoid, while failing against is often an active decision that a player makes. When I lose a game of *League of Legends*, it is often because I failed towards the game – I died too often or failed to secure important objectives. In the same game, it is also possible that I had a teammate who was failing against the video game, either by giving up entirely, walking away from their computer, or intentionally dying. For this reason, it is important to consider the difference between single player failing and multiplayer failing which pertains to *League of Legends*.

Single-Player Failing

In their chapter about failure, Ruberg only focuses on video games that are single player. Open-world games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series or fighting games like the *Street Fighter* series are games in which your actions only impact your own gameplay. By watching your character die or driving according to the law, you are choosing to play the game in this

way for your own personal pleasure. Ignoring the missions that are necessary to progress in *Grand Theft Auto* is one of many ways to play the game, especially since it is an open world game. Ruberg argues that these are examples of failure that are queer, and that “embracing failure, even failure in a video game, queers the fundamental notion of success” (2019a:155). Game developers often make games with specific ways to win or succeed – in fighting games, it is beating your opponent, while in story-based games, it involves progressing the story through completing a series of missions. Ignoring or resisting these forms of success while playing a video game is a queer way of playing because it involves playing in a way that the game developers did not inherently intend. In *Celeste*, a platforming video game, failing is inevitable as you make your way up the mountain through difficult terrain. The game itself is difficult, and I have died hundreds of times throughout the various levels. In this game, there are strawberries that you can collect that do not add to the storyline but are simply there as an additional challenge. In this game, I quickly decided to ignore these strawberries, choosing instead to just have fun going through the levels and getting to the end of the game. In this example, I chose to fail at collecting strawberries so that I could have more fun playing the game without worrying about collecting strawberries. In *Celeste*, my decision to not collect strawberries only affected my own gameplay because it is a single player video game. While Juul does mention some multiplayer games, neither Juul nor Ruberg discuss multiplayer online battle arena video games (MOBAs) such as *League of Legends*. Failure in video games such as *League of Legends* involve distinct repercussions.

Multiplayer Failing

Failure in *League of Legends* is unavoidable, with one team of five players losing in every game. I have lost countless games of Summoner's Rift for a variety of different reasons. It is a complex video game to play, and it takes a long time to learn how to play and be skilled enough to win. Each champion has a different set of four abilities and players need to learn how to succeed in games using a range of champions. It is useful to practice many different types of champions so that you are better prepared to dodge specific abilities and skill shots. As of this writing, I have spent over 36 days playing *League of Legends* (Wasted on LoL 2020). In those 520 hours that I could have spent reading roughly 141 books, I have only become remotely good at playing a few champions. In almost all my games, I play either Jinx, Ashe, or Caitlyn. Learning how to play multiple champions, and multiple positions, is time consuming. Strategies are constantly shifting, and the meta is also always changing. Every time that Riot Games patches the video game, it means that certain champions are now buffed (stronger), while others have been nerfed (weakened). Everything matters in a game of *League of Legends* – which items you buy and in what order, the order in which you level up your abilities, and which summoner spells you choose to use during the game and when you use them. The difficulty of playing *League of Legends* is part of what makes failure so prevalent. Even professional *League of Legends* teams lose games, and so failure is truly inevitable. However, sometimes failure happens in games where you think your team should be winning.

I queue up for a ranked game, and once again choose Ashe. The game loads, and it starts off very well. I get an early kill, and the support champion that I am playing alongside seems to be very skilled. I hit level six, which is when we have access to the most powerful ability

in the game, known as the ultimate ability. Ashe's ultimate is an enchanted crystal arrow, which is an arrow that stuns the enemy champion for a few seconds (depending on how far away they are from you) and deals magic damage. Shortly after leveling up, my support asks why I have not used my ultimate ability yet in the text chat. I do not think it is a good time to use my ultimate, as we are both at half-health. My teammate begins to get more frustrated, telling me that I am useless and that I should delete the video game from my computer. They then proceed to AFK. Our team was doing well at this point, so their decision to leave the game severely impacts the rest of the team. I quickly begin to lose my lane – trying to 1v2 is rather difficult. They continue to sit in the base as I die to the other team's ADC. They remain in base for the next roughly 8-10 minutes. I think the game is over, and that we are going to lose. I have pretty much given up hope when, suddenly, our jungler solo kills the Baron Nasher. Our whole team becomes stronger, and our teammate suddenly rejoins the game. The game quickly turns around at this point, and what I thought was going to be a loss ends up as a win.

Ranked games tend to have a more serious tone, with teammates placing more importance on how the team performs. In the example above, I was in Bronze III and wanted to win to get closer to Bronze II. Since the game is so complex, there are always areas to improve. My teammate was probably right – I was not performing at my best. However, instead of attempting to support me, which is their role in the game, they chose to stop playing. This, in turn, made me very frustrated, because it still counts as a loss even if one of your teammates gives up. There is a small chance that my support could have just had to go to the bathroom or answer the front door. But for me, it felt like a betrayal because they were clearly irritated before they left, and I was left in the bottom lane by myself. Every time you fail, you lose Riot

Points, which pushes you farther away from your goals. While you can report players for going AFK, this does not remove the loss from your record. In the example above, was my teammate playing in a queer way when they failed against the game, but also, against their team?

Attribution theory provides evidence for how we place blame for certain events on specific causes. Jesper Juul focuses on this at length in his book. Harold K. Kelley, an American social psychologist, distinguishes three types of attribution, which can be used to describe three different ways in which we attribute our failure in video games (Juul 2016:15). We can attribute it to a person, and in the case of video games focus on our own lack of skill or the skills of our teammates (ibid:17). We can attribute our failure to an entity, perhaps by arguing that the video game is unfair or unbalanced (ibid). We can also attribute it to circumstances, such as the other team being lucky in certain parts of the game, causing us to lose (ibid). There are so many ways to avoid responsibility for failure, which Juul lists later in the book: “We can blame the game or luck, we can deny any actual intent to win, we can dismiss the event out of hand due to the task being *a game*... we can deny that the game requires any skills worth having” (ibid:43). In the case of *League of Legends*, there are many ways to place blame. In the example above, the support player blamed me for what they believed was a lack of skill. In the same way, I attributed losing my lane and struggling to stay in the game on the support player leaving the game. Since *League of Legends* is such a complex game, it is easy to find ways to attribute a loss to something outside of your own control.

After the support player blamed me and my ability, it is quite possible that this player was watching us lose and deriving pleasure from watching how badly we needed them. They may have been enjoying watching how they negatively impacted the outcome of the game.

They left the game abruptly for quite a long time and it is likely that they were simply sitting at their computer watching our team slowly lose. This is like how Ruberg discusses players watching their character slowly die on screen for queer pleasure. But while my support teammate rejoined the game eventually and helped our team win, those 8-10 minutes were excruciating as we slowly lost control of the game. This example illustrates that multiplayer games have a different set of repercussions. In single player games, failure only impacts your own gameplay. Choosing to watch your character be killed or play in an unconventional way in single player games is a choice that only impacts your own experience in the video game. In multiplayer online battle arena video games, playing to lose – even if it is pleasurable for the player – can cause pain to the player's teammates. In the example above, I was upset when they left the game because I was playing to win. I really want to move up the ranks, but when I have games where players AFK or give up, it makes it more difficult to win the game.

League of Legends is a video game where losing feels bad. It is a very competitive game and so many players get visibly upset when they are losing. I have witnessed teammates give up in the first five minutes of a game based on one seemingly insignificant thing, much like my example above. When a teammate gives up or rage quits the game, this type of failure impacts the other four players in the game. Often, a game can be over 30 minutes long, which is a long time to feel frustrated and defeated. It is common that a team will inform everyone using the /all chat that a player is AFK. If a player on the opposing team is AFK, I realize that there is a much better chance of us winning, which gives me pleasure. However, players on the other team may be experiencing immense frustration, as it may be the game they needed to win to be promoted. Multiplayer failure is different than the single-player queer failure in video games

that Ruberg and Juul focus on. Most significantly, queering failure evidently has the likely possibility of negatively affecting teammates, even if it causes pleasure for the individual. The example above illustrates how one player's actions creates a ripple effect that impacts the entire team. Purposeful failure in the form of giving up or choosing to die makes it more difficult for the rest of the team to succeed. In *League of Legends*, choosing to fail is sometimes used to intentionally upset teammates.

Weaponizing Failure

In *League of Legends*, failure is sometimes used as a weapon to deliberately frustrate other players. When players run it down the mid lane and die or go AFK, they are using their own power to fail to upset their teammates. While Ruberg and Juul provide insightful ways of thinking about failure in single player video games, multiplayer video games produce new and challenging elements. I have experienced many games where a teammate gives up or intentionally dies to help the enemy team win. In these games, it can be extremely upsetting to lose because it makes you feel powerless in the video game. As illustrated earlier, queer failure can be fun and silly, such as driving safely in a game like *Grand Theft Auto*. However, *League of Legends* is not a single player game, and so player actions can have severe consequences on teammates. It is possible that players who intentionally feed are basking in the loss and watching their teammates suffer. Ruberg claims that this form of enjoyment is queer, but in the case of multiplayer *League of Legends*, intentions matter.

"Welcome to Summoner's Rift", I hear as my champion loads into our base. Ashe got banned, so I have chosen to play Jinx in this game. I quickly buy my starting items and head

towards the bottom jungle to help our jungler get their first Red Brambleback. Killing this monster gives our jungler the Crest of Cinders, which provides important health regeneration so that they can continue to farm the jungle without our help. We continue to damage the monster, waiting until it is almost killed before heading to the bottom lane to begin the laning phase of the game. I right click the Red Brambleback one last time, and instantly I see five or six pings of "Enemy Missing" over top of my champion. At first, I am confused and trying to figure out why they are spam pinging. Then, I look in horror and notice that there is a swirling red circle surrounding Jinx's body. My eyes widen as I realize what I have done – I accidentally last-hit the Red Brambleback and acquired the added health regeneration! "Oh no", I whisper to myself. The jungler indicates their anger through text chat, swearing at me and calling me all sorts of names. I type an apology, explaining that it was obviously an accident. Stealing the Brambleback is not useful to an ADC at the beginning of a game. My heart is racing as we head to the bottom lane, and I am worried that we might lose this game because of my mistake. Suddenly, the jungler dies. And then they die again. And again. Each time they die, I lose hope in our ability to win this game. They explain via chat that I am getting what I deserve, and that I do not deserve to win this game because of what I did at the start of the game. I sigh, and try my best to carry on, knowing that their team continues to get stronger each time the jungler dies.

The example above illustrates what I mean by weaponizing failure. While I mistakenly stole the Red Brambleback, this jungler is using their ability to fail in the game to punish me. Even though they will also fail and lose Riot Points, they believe that I deserve to fail more than they desire to win. The game quickly slips away from us, and we end up losing. This leaves me frustrated because I lose Riot Points for losing. I report my teammate for intentionally dying,

but that does not change my loss of points. I know that moving forward I will be more careful when helping the jungler at the beginning of the game, making sure to not be the last person to hit the monster so that I do not accidentally last-hit the objective. However, it is impossible to make sure that this type of experience never happens again. There will always be another mistake, or another way to irritate your teammates into weaponizing failure, even if it is by accident. Either way, this type of experience is upsetting because it illustrates that my teammate who intentionally failed cares more about hurting my record than winning the game themselves. As someone who cares deeply about progressing and improving in the game, it is difficult to reconcile a player who would choose to hurt another player, lose the game, and risk being reported. It was so early in the game when I made that mistake and it probably would not have affected the game that much in terms of our potential of winning. However, my teammate chose to weaponize their own failure to hurt me and my progress in *League of Legends*.

Since intentionally feeding was popularized in the video game by Tyler1, it is important to consider how he weaponizes failure while live streaming. Tyler1 live streams on Twitch, but many of his videos get uploaded to YouTube as well. In a video posted on YouTube titled *Tyler1 runs it down mid*, there are multiple examples of Tyler1 weaponizing failure (LoLGates 2016). The clip begins over two minutes into the game. Tyler1 is playing Corki and gets stunned under the enemy's tower by Nami. He takes three tower hits, which lowers his health bar from 586 to 103. He then gets attacked by Jinx, and his health bar is lowered even more to 52. At this point, he is still alive, but barely, and he verbally says, "gonna be a good game" to the audience watching his stream (ibid). He then gets attacked by the enemy jungler under his tower and

dies a quick death because his health bar was already so low. Below is the text chat between Tyler1 and Janna, the support player who plays in the bottom lane alongside Tyler1:

Janna: I mean you probably shudn't have tank 3 tower hits lol

Tyler1: good point xd

Tyler1: maybe I run it down mid that be better

Tyler1: ?

Tyler1: im down

Tyler1: to open

Janna: stfu

Janna: and play

Tyler1: janna

Janna: gosh I hate players like you

Tyler1: why try tilt me

Tyler1: ?

Janna: shut the fuck up

Tyler1: 1 more word i run it down mid

Tyler1: 😊

Janna: stfu dude

Janna: I don't give a fuck

Tyler1: kk

Tyler1: gg

Janna: /all report Corki

Janna: /all afk or running mid w/e (ibid).

Janna was right – Tyler1 should not have taken three tower hits and lost so much health.

When Tyler1 types that he is down to open, he means that he wants to inform the enemy team that the middle lane is open and that they can come and quickly win the game. Janna clearly becomes frustrated in the text exchange, and when Tyler1 threatens that he will run it down if

Janna says one more word, she does not stay silent (ibid). He types “gg”, which means good game, implying that the game is already over (ibid). Tyler1 then sells all his items and purchases Boots of Mobility, which help him run down the middle lane faster. In the next 20 minutes of gameplay, Tyler1 intentionally dies nine times (ibid). He even lies to the enemy team, claiming that Janna said the n word and that this is the reason why he is intentionally running it down (ibid). At the end of the game, when Tyler1’s team loses, he says out loud to his viewers, “Janna was fucking toxic gotta report” (ibid). He then proceeds to report Janna for unsportsmanlike conduct, verbal abuse, and hate speech (ibid). In addition, he provides more information in the report, copied below:

“called me n word in chat always flamed me told me to "shut my fucking mouth u stupid "n" so dumb man i cant play with players like this they make me play very poorly. words really do hurt man. also i didnt use the mute option because it is not a valid excuse for someone to flame. please punish this low life, scum, unwanted, inbred, orphan. ty” (ibid).

This single game is a clear example of Tyler1 weaponizing failure, and there is so much to unpack.

The example above is one that depicts failure, but it is not the queer failure that Ruberg describes. Tyler1 attempts to silence Janna by threatening to run it down the middle lane if Janna says one more word. Janna does not remain silent, choosing instead to continue to tell Tyler1 to “stfu” (ibid). Tyler1 then chooses to use his power in the game to weaponize failure, forcing Janna to lose the game by continuously, intentionally dying. This type of failure is an example of reinforcing the status quo – his intentions are not queer, and he is using failure to deliberately punish his teammates, whether they deserve to lose or not. Failure, in this case, is

a blatant choice used to exert power over his teammates. This form of dominance relates back to the dominance described in chapter one. *League of Legends* is a game dominated by men where players often weaponize failure against other players by losing ranked games on purpose. This can be extremely frustrating and has happened to me many times. Even when the game is over, Tyler1 continues to cause Janna grief by reporting her. As discussed in chapter one, the reporting feature is subjective, and so Tyler1 being told to shut the fuck up by Janna could be perceived as verbal abuse. However, there are no indications of hate speech in the text chat, and if anything, the unsportsmanlike conduct is performed by Tyler1 through his decision to intentionally lose the game. The words that Tyler1 uses to describe Janna when reporting for verbal abuse in the reporting feature are ironically also verbally abusive words. Tyler1 does not intentionally run it down the middle lane every game, nor does he display these behaviours in every game he plays. However, this example perfectly captures how failure can be used as a weapon in *League of Legends*.

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate failure in *League of Legends* using key texts written by Bonnie Ruberg and Jesper Juul. I began by considering exactly what failure is, and what Ruberg describes as queer failure. I analyzed Juul's concept of the paradox of failure, which helped me to understand why we seek out games when we know we will experience failure. I illustrated the difference between failing towards and failing against a video game, which is something that Ruberg discusses in detail. I used this dichotomy of failure to consider the similarities and differences between single-player and multiplayer failing. While queering failure in single-player video games does not create negative consequences for anyone other than that player, multiplayer failure can become a weapon that reinforces power dynamics and

the hegemony that is embedded in *League of Legends*. Unlike single player video games, multiplayer online battle arena video games create a cycle of failure that is inescapable whether you are playing queerly or not.

CHAPTER 3: SUBVERSIVE PLAY

The game ends, and I feel amazing. Our team just won, and I had nine kills, only one death, and twelve assists. I feel like I am on a roll, so I instantly queue up for another game. I get into the lobby and choose Ashe again, since I just played so well with her in the previous game. I get an early kill on Draven, the opposing ADC player, but then a few minutes later he kills both me and Pyke, our support player. Roughly 20 minutes into the game, the enemy team is ahead in gold by 6500, which is a considerable amount. Even though we have secured a dragon, we have also lost a few team fights. A few minutes later, and our jungler player, Warwick, has already died eight times. Warwick types, "GG" into the chat, meaning good game. He is implying that the game is over, and we are going to lose. I ignore it the first few times he writes it – I know that we can still win this game. However, watching as he repetitively types, "GG" to our team is beginning to wear on me. I know that we can win, and his typing is not productive because we are still in the game. His words inform our team that he has given up. I type in the chat, informing Warwick that the game is far from over, and that we can still win. He once again tells me that the game is over, and we are going to lose. I know that we need Warwick to help us win the game, so I tread carefully. I write, "look im sorry Warwick but im going to have to mute you in chat because you keep typing gg which is not gonna help us win". I do not actually mute the Warwick but hope that my threat of muting will stop him from giving up completely.

Around ten minutes later, the enemy team is in our base, and they have destroyed one of our inhibitors. Not much is left between them and winning the game – only two towers and our nexus. However, we win the team fight and finally get a turret. For the first time in the game,

our team is ahead in gold by 1004 at 34:00. By 39:00, we are ahead by over 5000 gold, and I have acquired ten kills. Warwick has been quiet in the chat since my comment. I am shocked to read the next thing Warwick says to me – “im sorry sjw you were right”. At 43:00, the enemy team is once again in our base, but we win the team fight and rush towards their nexus. We win the game at 44:08, and I end the game with 13 kills, 18 assists, and 8 deaths. I lean back in my chair as the blue VICTORY sign fills my screen. “What a game...” I say, and exhale, realizing that I was holding my breath.

In *League of Legends*, a competitive video game where aggression and masculinity are all too common, femininity can be subversive. Everything about this video game tells me that I do not belong as a woman. Professional female players experiencing harassment and the use of sexist and oppressive language during games is difficult to tolerate. I began this project wondering why a video game that is filled with harassment and failure is one of the most popular video games in the world. The more I reflected on this question, the more I began to consider the way that I play *League of Legends*. The way I play is safe, defensive, careful, and thoughtful. I am endlessly informed by teammates and even friends that I do not do enough damage. However, I also almost always have the least amount of deaths on my team. The position I play, ADC, is supposed to be the player who attacks, does damage, and carries the team to victory. Generally, ADC champions are very squishy characters, which means that they are easy to kill in comparison to tank champions. And yet I almost always have the least deaths on my team. I have figured out a way to play this video game *my way*. My accomplishments in *League of Legends* are precisely because of my subversive, feminine playstyle.

So far, this project has focused on how *League of Legends* is excruciating to play. In chapter one, I argued that challenging hegemonic masculinity is much more difficult in *League of Legends* in comparison to other video games that have been studied because of champion selection, communication, and role-play. In chapter two, I illustrated how failure can be weaponized to intentionally hurt teammates. Despite these negative characteristics, I continue to play *League of Legends*. Scholars suggest that women who play video games that are made by and for men are simply “playing at being like men” (Kennedy 2005:193). Even feminist theorists such as bell hooks have claimed that violent video games, “take people’s minds away from really how much power females are losing in real life” (Marriott 2003). hooks claims that video games, “encourage women not to challenge patriarchy” (ibid). Is playing a masculine video game such as *League of Legends* using male-coded skills subversive, or does it merely serve to support the patriarchy? In this chapter, I argue that it is possible to play masculine video games such as *League of Legends* as a woman using male-coded skills subversively. Playing video games like *League of Legends* involves a constant negotiation around gender. Research has focused on subversive gameplay in the form of women behaving in masculine ways that are different than the way they act in the public sphere (Nardi 2010). However, my argument is that femininity can be brought into the space uncompromised and can in fact be an asset, rather than something to be escaped from.

Before I begin, it is necessary to define what I mean by subversive play. In the last two chapters, I have illustrated that the dominant structure of *League of Legends* is masculine. For this project, I define subversive play as any attempt to overthrow or push against the masculine power that tends to dominate in video games. I particularly focus on how visibility,

communication, and skill can all be forms of subversive play in *League of Legends*. In play, there is opportunity to subvert the dominant power structure (Kennedy 2005). According to Helen W. Kennedy, a digital games scholar in the UK, “popular games culture is made up of a range of heterogeneous players, practices, and pleasures and it is the crucial site where dominant notions of technology, gender and technological competence are both constructed, negotiated and contested” (ibid:199). These assumptions about the gender of a person who is technologically competent are created and reinforced through the dominant structure embedded in video games. In a video game filled with men, it may be subversive simply to exist in the virtual space as a woman. In this chapter, I begin by arguing that my gamertag, SJW Queen, asserts my femininity in the masculinized community of *League of Legends* and that this visibility is subversive. Then, I argue that my safe playstyle is subversive because I use feminine skills and succeed by playing like a girl. Finally, I demonstrate how my communication style in *League of Legends* is subversive because I celebrate achievements, mediate conflict, and forgive teammates. In a video game where masculinity is valued, playing *my way* in *League of Legends*, through embracing femininity, allows me to persevere and push against this masculine power.

Assertion of Femininity

I remember when I first made my League of Legends account in my friend's basement. It was a few years ago now. I was on my MacBook Pro laptop and was convinced by my friends to sign up. I had avoided the game for a while. I recognized how time consuming it was and I was vaguely aware of the community through gaming news articles at the time. In the process of signing up, I was asked to make a gamertag. I did not have a history of playing multiplayer games where gamertags were necessary – mainly because I do not play first person shooters at

all. I did not just want to use my name, but I wanted my gamertag to be personal. I wanted to indicate not only my femininity but also my belief in feminism and social justice. I brainstormed with my two friends for a while, and finally I came up with the perfect name – SJW Queen. SJW stands for social justice warrior, an acronym that is commonly recognized on the internet. It is an acronym that has a lot of baggage – it is often used to make fun of feminists. I decided to use this acronym at the time because I wanted to indicate my political views and reclaim this identity as my own. I chose to add Queen to indicate that I am a woman. Since then, I have had many interesting interactions because of it.

In video game communities that are overflowing with men, female visibility can be subversive. Helen W. Kennedy, a media academic in the UK, studied how women who play *Quake* represent themselves in this online community. *Quake* is a first-person shooter game that was originally released in 1996 (Kennedy 2005:184). Computer games require computer proficiency and an understanding of how to navigate avatars in complex, virtual spaces (ibid:187). Kennedy claims that since *Quake* is a masculinized video game, women who play must be okay with being considered unfeminine (ibid). Women who play *Quake* use their names to indicate an “oppositional female identity” (ibid:194). She argues that they create feminine visibility using their gamertags (ibid). Kennedy lists many examples of individual and clan names, such as “Supergirl, Geekgirl, [and] Clan PMS (Psycho Men Slayers)” (ibid). Women who use names such as these make their femininity visible and counter hegemonic representations of masculinity, femininity, and assumptions about what a gamer looks like (ibid:195). In *Quake*, Kennedy argues that women are countering both hegemonic masculinity

and femininity (ibid). These names prove that not all gamers are white, cis, men, and they indicate the presence and power of women in this online community.

Video games are often used to escape reality. However, it is impossible to fully disentangle the politics embedded in our daily life from the virtual world. Kennedy argues that some of the examples of individual and clan names are, “evocative of the kinds of radical feminist re/mis-appropriation of previously pejorative terms” (ibid: 195). Her study of female *Quake* players indicates that they had no specific desire to follow a feminist agenda (ibid:197). And yet, many of their names evoke both femininity and aggression. “Clan PMS (Psycho Men Slayers)” is particularly political – they clearly identify themselves as women by including PMS (premenstrual syndrome) in their name (ibid:194). In addition, they identify themselves as psychos who slay men. This illustrates not only their desire to be successful in *Quake*, but also their desire to defeat men with their skills (ibid:190). These gamertags create new images of what a gamer looks like and indicate that women are also technologically competent gamers. In the same way that names in *Quake* are used to make femininity visible, my own name in *League of Legends* is also used to identify myself as a feminist woman. Putting my gamertag in this project is a little nerve-wracking – there are so many ways to analyze my profile and match history, which could be embarrassing. However, my gamertag is infamous in our group of friends, and has sparked many unique experiences while playing *League of Legends*. By using an acronym that is politically linked to feminism and women who game such as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, I am firmly indicating my presence in this masculine space where I am not welcome. The dominant structure in *League of Legends* is masculine, and so existing in the space as a woman is a subversive act.

Representation alone is not enough to be subversive. In an article by Bonnie Ruberg, the same academic discussed in chapter two, they argue that the mere existence of sex workers in video games is not enough (2019b:313). Ruberg argues that the way sex workers are portrayed in video games devalues their work (ibid:320). In many video games, sex workers give their services for free, and often players can choose to, “take their money back from sex workers afterwards” (ibid:315). In these exchanges, sex work is not represented in a way that values their labour. Of course, I agree that representation alone is not enough. These non-playable characters (NPCs) are used to push forward a narrative that video games are made for cis, white, men to play a fantasy role of virtual power over women. It would be a breath of fresh air for sex workers in video games to be portrayed as women with agency. Ruberg’s article speaks to the importance of an agentic and nuanced representation of women in video game spaces. In the same way that it is important to have richer representations of NPC female characters, it is also significant to signal that there are real women in these online environments where everyone is assumed to be male. Women who play *Quake* with clearly feminine names are asserting their femininity in the masculine video game community. Similarly, my use of SJW Queen as a gamertag in *League of Legends* indicates to other gamers that I am not only a woman, but a feminist woman.

Representation and visibility of women in gaming matters, especially in games like *League of Legends* that were created by and for men. My identity as SJW Queen has created many moments of connection between myself and other women. Often, strangers who I play with ask me if I am a woman, presumably because of the ‘Queen’ in my gamertag. When I respond and say that I am, there is occasionally another woman on our team who indicates

their own identity as female. This moment of connection is important, and I often write, 'GIRL POWER!' in solidarity, delighted in finding another female *League of Legends* player. This ability to connect is made easier because of my gamertag. According to Kennedy, "by bringing their [women's] own bodies or their fantasized bodies to the play arena, they disrupt the assumption of a white male heterosexual player and avatar" (2005:195). Through the visibility of my gamertag, I bring my identity into *League of Legends* and disrupt the idea of what a gamer looks like. Not only is this visibility subversive in and of itself, but there is pleasure in demonstrating this transgressive set of skills that are marked as masculine in front of a largely masculine audience of players (ibid:190). Even though I am currently only ranked Bronze I, I have many games where I show off my technological competence and *League of Legends* skills. The visibility of my gamertag, SJW Queen, is subversive because it asserts my femininity along with my politics in this overwhelmingly male community.

Play Like a Girl

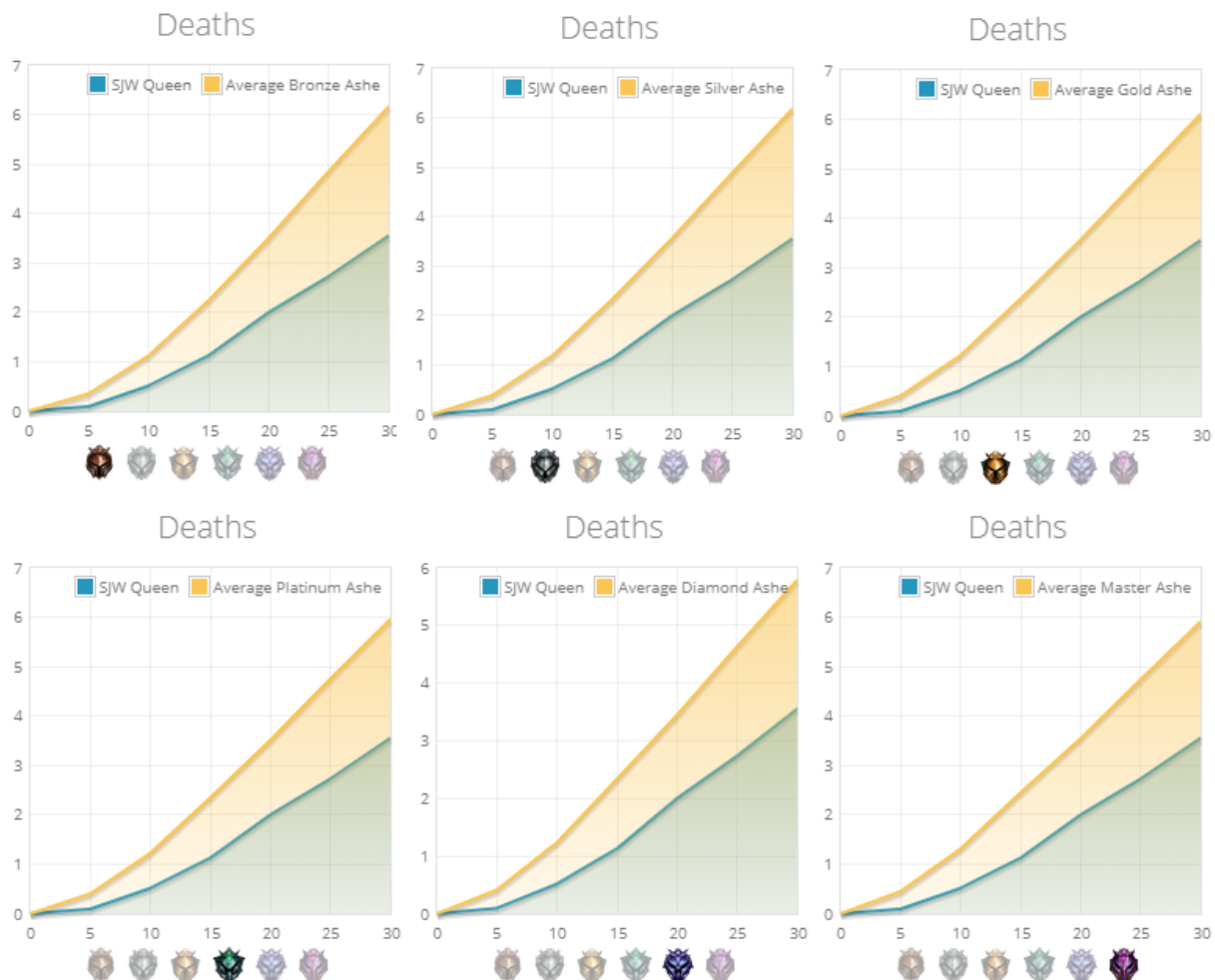
"Just click the bad guys!!!", my partner yells at me. "I can't! I'm gonna die!", I yell back. I try to use my abilities from a distance, but I am not able to do much damage when I am so far back. In comparison to my teammates, my health bar is almost full. I use my ultimate ability on one of the enemy players, and while they are stunned, I get a little closer to use my auto-attacks on them. Lasers and smoke and bright flashing lights fill my screen, almost looking like fireworks. I manage to stay alive alongside one of my teammates, but the rest of our team does not make it out alive. That fight was pure chaos. My teammates indicate that they are not impressed with how I played during the team fight. They ask where I was, and I inform them that I was there and trying my best. Clicking the bad guys is harder than it looks. We end up

*losing the game. I go to the detailed statistics page and look at how much damage I dealt in comparison to my teammates. I certainly could have done more. But I never want my champion to die... so much so that I often do not even enter the battle to deal my share of the damage. This is frustrating to my friends and strangers because it frequently causes them to die. Even though I am better at clicking the bad guys now, I still have a fear of letting my champion die. This fear keeps me alive because I often am at the outskirts of team fights. This is **my way** of playing League of Legends – safely, thoughtfully.*

Since video games are a site of production for masculinity, playing games as a woman using characteristics recognized as feminine is subversive. Valerie Walkerdine, an Australian academic who researches psychology and girlhood, studied how children between 8 and 11 years old navigate video games (2007:519). Her central claim is that, “contemporary femininity demands practices and performances which bring together heroics, rationality, etc. with the need to maintain a femininity which displays care... [and] concern” (ibid:520). Walkerdine argues that women who play games must juggle masculinity with their own femininity, managing “co-operation *and* competition, caring *and* winning” (ibid:522). In *League of Legends*, I often find myself juggling my desire to win with my desire to play safe. Even still, there are moments when opponents frighten me, and I struggle to maintain my composure. For example, when Twitch, a champion who can disappear for a certain amount of time, suddenly appears in front of me, it is difficult not to feel fear. In these situations, my instinct is not to fight, but to find safety. My desire to keep my champion alive outweighs my desire to be aggressive. There are many champions that I despise playing against, specifically because I find it difficult to stay alive against them. Assassins, such as Fizz or Akali, can quickly dash towards me, which still fills

me with panic. Their job is to kill me, and so I find myself playing particularly safe when I know that there is a frightening assassin on the enemy team. In *League of Legends*, I am constantly negotiating my feminine identity with masculine characteristics in this video game that celebrates masculinity.

In Walkerdine's study, she further explores this idea of juggling identities using a case study of two young Australian girls named Rosie and Bella (ibid:525). Rosie is quite knowledgeable about video games and yet she is a player who never takes risks and is always cautious (ibid:527). Bella, on the other hand, plays aggressively and takes risks, despite having less game knowledge (ibid). Rosie is often scared of being killed and sometimes even begs her friends not to kill her (ibid:528). Her fear masks her desire to win (ibid). In the case study, Bella is happy to help Rosie by killing the monsters for her, showing a desire to co-operate and succeed as a team (ibid). When Rosie wins, it is often because of her cautious gameplay (ibid:531). Similarly, my success in *League of Legends* often stems from my cautious gameplay. I do not die a lot, which stops the enemy ADC from getting strong. Young girls are constantly renegotiating their masculinity and femininity, wanting power but also trying to appear as if they do not (ibid:532). Even though I am cautious, I also really want to win. Walkerdine finds that girls enjoy winning and recognizing their own mastery (ibid:533). There is an assumption that the only way to be good at video games is to play the way men play. Of course, masculine qualities such as aggression and risk-taking can be useful in achieving success. However, as illustrated in the study, it is possible to win using both feminine and masculine playstyles.



*Figure 6: A screenshot of the death chart of SJW Queen (me) in *League of Legends* as Ashe in each rank in comparison to the average in each rank. Taken from *League of Graphs*. 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.leagueofgraphs.com/summoner/champions/ashe/na/SJW+Queen>.*

In *League of Legends*, I demonstrate a nuanced way of playing using my femininity such as playing safe and illustrate how this way of playing like a girl can bring success. I am not claiming that I am *never* aggressive, or that I *never* take risks when I play *League of Legends*. I am arguing that my feminine characteristics help me succeed. Sometimes aggression is not the best strategy in *League of Legends*, and it is better to wait for the enemy team to make a

mistake. When I play, I am always thinking about my escape routes and whether I have my healing ability ready. These considerations are essential to my playstyle and help me maintain my low rate of death in the game. On the previous page is a chart taken from *League of Graphs*, which displays my death rate in comparison to the average player in each rank. As illustrated, I die far less than the average Ashe player in not only my own Bronze rank, but in all ranks including Master. My male friends who I play *League of Legends* with are much more aggressive in their playstyle, always looking to make a play or catch an opponent off-guard. In comparison, I want to acquire gold and only look to kill opponents when it is safe. Playing like a girl has historically been a phrase that is meant to be demeaning towards girls, implying that girls are not skilled at athletics in comparison to men. Using feminine attributes such as caution in video games like *League of Legends* are extremely useful when looking to succeed. This playstyle does not hinder my performance – instead, it supports my development as a player and demonstrates to team members that feminine attributes are powerful in their own way.

Communication

Since *League of Legends* is a team game, communication can make or break a game. As illustrated in previous chapters, verbal abuse, harassment, hate speech, and threats are frequent. In fact, in my experience, these often outweigh the number of positive teammates I come across while playing *League of Legends*. In this section, I argue that my communication style is subversive by using my femininity to mediate disagreements between teammates and by being a positive team member. Bonnie Nardi, an academic in the department of informatics at the University of California, spent three years playing and studying *World of Warcraft* (2010). In her book, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*, she

uses personal experiences playing the video game and connects them to larger ideas that often permeate game studies (ibid). For this section, I am focusing on her chapter on gender, which examines how gender is constructed in *World of Warcraft*. She argues that this construction occurs through discourse practices and game design (ibid:152). Discourse in video games involves the way that people communicate and interact, both through language as well as through game design. This section specifically focuses on how Nardi's analysis of gendered discourse practices in *World of Warcraft* relate to and differ from those in *League of Legends*.

Much like *League of Legends*, *World of Warcraft* is largely male dominated with a minority of female players (ibid:153). Nardi acknowledges that in her experience, discourse was always led by males and women were much more careful in their interactions (ibid). She witnessed countless instances of men using words such as fag, gay, homo, pussy, and rape (ibid). Nardi claims that men, "maintained control through the use of aggressive language" (ibid). In the real world, there is also male dominance, but it is often much less visible (ibid). In the world of video games, this dominance can be exaggerated, often with hardly any repercussions (ibid:156). She experienced players assuming that she was a male and was often addressed with male pronouns and words like "bro" (ibid:160). This is like my own experience, where I am often referred to as a boy while playing with both friends and strangers. As mentioned in chapter one, Nardi interviewed a young female player named Serena who was in a guild where, "women were not allowed to speak on voice chat during raids" because it was argued that it would distract the male players (ibid:163). This example in *World of Warcraft* indicates just how much power men can have over women in online video games. Since *League of Legends* is such a masculine video game, communication can be used to play subversively.

Subversive communication in *League of Legends* looks different than in *World of Warcraft*. In *World of Warcraft*, women can create private chatrooms where they can exist as a majority (ibid:158). “Having a gender majority and a silenced male population seemed to provide a space in which women took the lead in subversive talk because they could control the terms of the conversation” (ibid). Nardi argues that women in these spaces can lead conversation (ibid). In *League of Legends*, it is often difficult to know that you are playing alongside any women, unless their gamertag suggests femininity. In instances where I am playing with another woman, I feel a sense of solidarity for playing alongside someone who understands how difficult it can be to exist in the *League of Legends* community. Since negative forms of communication are so common, subversive discourse in *League of Legends* is positivity and mediating conflict. Positive communication pushes against the masculine power that exists in *League of Legends*. When I play ranked, I always try to create an atmosphere that is positive by celebrating my teammates and recognizing their achievements. When my teammates are fighting, I often try to mediate the argument by forgiving teammates for mistakes and trying to help everyone move on together as a team. This is sometimes more difficult than it sounds, but when it is successful, it often leads to a better game, where teammates can continue to play together. In *League of Legends*, my style of communication is distinctly feminine and often helps our team stay on track.

Due to the rarity of a feminine communication style in *League of Legends*, my visibility as a woman becomes even more clear and subversive. Of course, I am not the only gamer who plays *League of Legends* with a positive attitude. Nor am I arguing that men who play *League of Legends* are never positive or never mediate conflict during games. However, my experience

guides my argument and it is rare that I come across an overwhelmingly positive teammate. My communication style is subversive because it pushes back against the normalized, masculine discourse in *League of Legends*. When our team is losing, I have never intentionally chosen to let my champion die and I have never deserted my team. It can be a frustrating video game, but I try my best to solve my own feelings of frustration through positivity. If this does not work, I use the mute function to maintain my own composure. I have never received a penalty in *League of Legends*, and I believe that this speaks to my communication style in the video game. Even though I am a positive team member, I am also very competitive and have an intense desire to win. My positive attitude is sometimes lost in particularly difficult games, and in these moments, I sometimes find myself embarrassed. For example, there are times when a teammate makes a mistake in a very important moment in the video game, and I will ping 'enemy missing' over their dead body in frustration. I know that it is not nice to be on the receiving end of spam pinging, and yet there are moments where my desire to win outweighs my ability to maintain my composure. Nardi argues that in play, we can be "more than one thing", meaning that we can be both masculine and feminine (ibid:173). In the case of communication, I use both my feminine attributes of positivity and mediation alongside my more aggressive, masculine attributes to succeed in *League of Legends*.

Women Who Game

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there are some critics who dismiss women who play video games. In 2003, bell hooks was interviewed for the New York Times and indicated that video games can encourage women "not to challenge patriarchy" (Marriott 2003). It was in an article about the increase in heroines in television, movies, and video games,

and about how women are playing more first-person shooter video games (ibid). She claims that people are not recognizing, “how much power females are losing in real life” (ibid). Of course, this article is close to twenty years old, and it is possible that bell hooks has changed her position on this. However, it is worth discussing here because this chapter demonstrates that it is possible to play masculine video games subversively and challenge the patriarchy. My username in *League of Legends* indicates my own positionality in this masculine space. I identify as someone who believes in social justice and as a woman who games. These identities are often subversive in and of themselves, and so my very existence in *League of Legends* is challenging the masculine patriarchy that exists in this space. Often, my username is discussed during games and I sometimes challenge strangers to consider their beliefs about social justice. I have had conversations about the black lives matter movement and the feminist movement during *League of Legends* games. These conversations often stem from my username, and I argue that my gamertag aids me in challenging patriarchy from inside of this masculine space. I infiltrate the *League of Legends* community as a woman and demonstrate how women can not only exist, but thrive.

Unfortunately, bell hooks is not the only critic of women playing masculine video games. In the article about *Quake*, Kennedy indicates that she has noticed a general anxiety when discussing female *Quake* players at academic gatherings (2005:193). She claims that people wonder if, “these women are merely playing at being like men” (ibid). I argue that I bring femininity into my communication style and playstyle in *League of Legends*. In my communication, I am often the positive teammate who is cheering everyone on. I celebrate achievements, often typing words of encouragement in the chat. I also mediate fighting

between teammates, using my feminist counselling skills to resolve the situation. Of course, this does not always work, but I believe that communicating *my way* illustrates that I am playing like a woman. I do not just act the way that men act in this space – I find my own path forward. My playstyle also indicates how I play like a girl, with thoughtfulness and care. Even when my friends want to start a fight, I am the player who is not sure if that is the best idea. As indicated in my low rate of death, I play safe and this helps my team. When I do not die, the enemy team does not get stronger through killing. This chapter reveals how I am not playing at being like men who play *League of Legends*. I play subversively, *my way*, as a woman.

There are some who believe that women who play male-coded video games just want to feel accepted by male gaming communities (Flanagan 2003). Mary Flanagan, a video game academic, studies women who are artists and make non-commercial video games (ibid:360). In a book about digital media, she indicates her interest in women making political video games (ibid:380). She recognizes that, “gaming culture has historically been defined by men”, and so believes that women who make video games can counter this system (ibid:370). Flanagan argues that the, “women’s gaming movement... [is] not seeking to create new gaming paradigms. Rather, they work to get women ‘accepted’ by male gaming communities playing male games” (ibid:380). While I agree that analyzing women who make political video games that counter the male-centric video game community is important, I do not think that this merits her distaste for women who play in the dominant video game community. Not all women have the time, desire, or skill necessary to create video games. However, women do have the ability to counter hegemonic masculinity from inside of these communities. This

chapter has demonstrated that it is possible to exist as a woman in a masculine video game community and use subversive play as a means of countering hegemony.

As a woman, playing a masculine video game such as *League of Legends*, which involves using male-coded skills, is subversive. *League of Legends* is a challenging video game that involves plenty of hate speech, harassment, and verbal abuse. It also involves endless failure, and sometimes that failure can even become a weapon meant to harm teammates. Despite all the negatives discussed in the first two chapters, I continue to play the video game. My constant negotiation between recognizing the value of masculinity and my desire of femininity illustrates how this is possible. Through asserting my femininity with my gamertag, using a feminine communication style, and playing like a girl, I play *League of Legends* subversively. In this competitive, masculine video game, I continue to play because I have found a way to play *my way*.

CONCLUSION

I queue up for a game of League of Legends on July 30, 2020. If I win this game, I will finally be back in Silver. I choose to play Ashe – she is extremely strong right now because Riot Games upped her stats in the most recent patch, which is in my favour. I am laning against a Caitlyn and Senna – a terrifying enemy duo. Less than four minutes into the game, three of my teammates are killed. I try to stay calm and focus on my own lane. The other team then secures the first dragon. I really cannot lose this game. Caitlyn kills our Zyra in the bottom lane around 13 minutes into the game, and I am worried. However, Caitlyn’s aggression and my patience create an opening – she overstays, and I kill her. In the same minute, we secure a dragon, and our Renekton destroys the first tower in the game. Suddenly, things are looking hopeful. From there, our team begins to dominate, destroying towers and eventually slaying the required four dragons to receive the coveted ‘infernal dragon soul buff’. Our team is unstoppable. I can taste the victory, but I know that anything can happen, so I continue to focus on winning. Around 20 minutes into the game, I have seven kills, and have not died. My playstyle that focuses on safety and caution is working. I destroy another tower and the inhibitor inside of their base. We are so close to ending the game. We quickly destroy the Baron Nasher and head towards their base as a team. In a flash, we have killed four of them. At 32 minutes into the game, with our whole team in their base, we hit the Nexus and win the game. A huge, blue VICTORY sign appears on my screen. I stand up from my chair and yell, ‘I DID IT!!!’. My heart is racing, and I watch as my gamertag appears on the screen, along with, ‘Promoted to Silver IV’ in large, bold letters. I let out a sigh of relief and realize that I had been holding my breath. I revel in my victory and begin to reflect on all of the frustration and failure that I have endured to get here. I was placed into

the Iron division when I first started working on this project. It has taken me almost a year to get here. I smile, recognizing my achievement. Not only am I finally in Silver, but I am also almost finished an even larger undertaking – this project.

I began this project wondering why I play *League of Legends*. While it is a popular video game, it is also a game filled with harassment and failure, and yet I continue to play. *League of Legends* was created by men, for men. It was not created for me. As illustrated in chapter one, hegemonic masculinity permeates the space. The rejection of femininity and homosexuality is normalized. Failure can come from not only losing to your enemy, but from your own teammate deliberately killing their own champion. However, I have managed to find my own way of existing in the virtual environment through subversive play. By bringing my femininity into the space, I can play in a way that works for me. I play with caution, positivity, and a visibly feminist gamertag. I exist in the space unapologetically. Achieving success by playing like a girl is one of the main reasons I continue to play *League of Legends*.

Using a critical autoethnography as my methodology was extremely valuable. It allowed me to reflect on my own experiences and recognize areas of interest in *League of Legends*. Through describing my own experience playing *League of Legends*, I hoped to be able to bring the reader into what it feels like to play the video game. This methodology allowed me to be creative and use my own experience to push my analysis even further. As theorized by Carol Hanisch in 1969, the personal is political, and this methodology helped me illustrate that my own experience as a woman who plays *League of Legends* is linked to power structures such as hegemonic masculinity. Not only did a critical autoethnography strengthen my analysis, but it was also very therapeutic. Reflecting on real experiences that I have had playing *League of*

Legends was an outlet that I did not know I needed. I was able to reflect on my own positionality in this online community and consider how my intersecting identities compare to other *League of Legends* players. The outline of these chapters was partly formed due to the use of the critical autoethnography. I was able to reflect on failure in *League of Legends* which brought me to the idea of weaponized failure. I also noticed my subversive playstyle through my reflections, which helped me write the third and final chapter of this project. I was able to use the Ethics of Care model discussed in the introduction to consider my relationships with my online gaming friends, as well as the importance of caring for myself as I write about particularly difficult experiences while playing *League of Legends*. Overall, this methodology provided a way for me to be creative, reflective, and analytical about my own experiences, which in turn created a stronger, more well-rounded project.

In this project, the theoretical framework of feminist and queer game studies was a beneficial lens to study *League of Legends* through. Current academics in the field of feminist and queer game studies inspired me throughout this project. Audrey Brehm's 2013 study of women who play *World of Warcraft* as well as Bonnie Nardi's 2010 anthropological account of playing *World of Warcraft* were valuable works that I was able to compare to my own experience playing *League of Legends*. Bonnie Ruberg's *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (2019a) was the inspiration for my second chapter on weaponized failure. Both Mia Consalvo and Adrienne Shaw have written about the importance of using feminism to study the amount of harassment and misogyny that exists in these virtual spaces (2012; 2014). In addition, it was important for me to acknowledge the work of activists in the video game community such as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn. Despite all of the harassment they have faced during

Gamergate, they continue to fight for equality in the video game community. Helen W.

Kennedy's 2005 work on the video game *Quake* was also valuable in this project. Since *Quake* is also a masculinized video game, it was useful to compare it to *League of Legends* and consider the similarities and differences. Her findings regarding the women who play *Quake* were interesting to compare to my own experiences using a feminist and feminine gamertag. Overall, this theoretical framework ran throughout my project and helped me to distill key features in my own experience playing *League of Legends*.

In addition to feminist and queer game studies, Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity was also a thread that ran throughout this project. When studying male-dominated video games such as *League of Legends*, this concept is valuable because it emphasizes straight male power and the subordination of femininity and homosexuality (Connell 1987:186). Not only that, but it also specifically focused on inter-male verbal abuse and how using these feminized, queer words such as "gay", "wimp", or "sissy" reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005a:79). These elements are relentless while playing *League of Legends*, and so this concept was beneficial to use to analyze these elements. Through cultural consent, hegemonic masculinity is accepted as the dominant power. In *League of Legends*, this power is visible through communication between players and overall behaviours. As demonstrated in chapter two, many of these behaviours such as running it down mid or leaving your teammates to lose are focused on power. Choosing to intentionally kill your avatar or intentionally give up on the video game are ways to acquire power over your teammates. This can cause teammates to feel powerless. In addition, as illustrated in my narrative sections, communication is another way that hegemonic masculinity becomes visible. Through verbal threats such as, 'I will rape you', to

insults that use feminized language such as ‘pussy’, these experiences indicate the severity and power that hegemonic masculinity has in *League of Legends*. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was also beneficial because it allowed me to consider if it is possible to challenge hegemonic masculinity while playing *League of Legends*.

Chapter one focused on ideas of challenging and leaning into hegemonic masculinity in video games. Using multiple studies that focused on hegemonic masculinity in video games, I considered how these studies related to the same concept in *League of Legends*. After examining Raewyn Connell’s conception of hegemonic masculinity, I considered whether hegemonic masculinity can be challenged in *League of Legends* through champion selection, communication, and role-play. In comparison to other video games that have been studied, it is much more difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity through champion selection. Communication in *League of Legends*, which often involves harassment and hate speech, create a barrier for challenging hegemonic masculinity. The lack of in-game role-play elements make it difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity through role-play in the same way that other studies found it possible. While it is difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity using any of these three factors, I argue that it is possible to challenge hegemonic masculinity through role-choice. By choosing to play the feminine support role, and playing it properly, boys can confront hegemonic masculinity. Focusing on protecting teammates and working as a team, players can challenge hegemonic masculinity. Overall, in comparison to other studies, it is much more difficult to challenge hegemonic masculinity in *League of Legends*.

Since failure is such a common occurrence in *League of Legends*, I dedicated chapter two to analyzing the phenomenon using queer theory. Using research by Bonnie Ruberg and

Jesper Juul, I considered how failure in *League of Legends* is different because it is a multiplayer video game. While queer failure in single-player games can be fun and does not create any negative consequences for anyone other than that player, it is possible to negatively impact teammates in multiplayer failure. In *League of Legends*, the act of abandoning teammates or intentionally letting the enemy team kill your avatar are both used to negatively impact your teammates. Unlike single-player video games, failure in *League of Legends* is weaponized. In the chapter, I used an example from a stream of Tyler1 to indicate how failure is weaponized in *League of Legends*. Intentional failure is often used to exert power over teammates, which in turn reinforces hegemonic masculinity. In the case of Tyler1, his intentions were not queer, but rather were done to punish his teammates. While failure can be fun in single-player video games, in multiplayer video games such as *League of Legends*, it can be used as a weapon to inflict harm.

In the final chapter of this project, I considered the concept of subversive play. As a woman who plays this male-dominated video game, I wanted to think about how femininity can be subversive. While everything tells me that I do not belong in the space, I continue to play. My playstyle, communication, and assertion of femininity in *League of Legends* are all subversive. By playing safe, keeping my death count low, and not taking risks, I am able to play in a way that is subversive. My feminine communication style, including celebrating achievements, mediating conflict, and being quick to forgive teammates, is also subversive because it pushes against the dominant structure in *League of Legends* that includes harassment and hate speech. Finally, my gamertag, SJW Queen, asserts my femininity for everyone to see in the masculinized virtual space of *League of Legends*. I have found a way to

play this video game subversively and counter hegemonic masculinity. I bring my femininity into *League of Legends* uncompromised, and in fact use these features as strengths, rather than something to be escaped from. It is crucial to recognize that women can not only play male-dominated video games but can thrive in these spaces. Women who infiltrate these online spaces have found ways of countering hegemonic masculinity from the inside through subversive play.

At the beginning of this project, I wondered why I continue to play *League of Legends* if I simultaneously feel like I do not belong. Recognizing the amount of harassment that professional female *League of Legends* players face, and my own experiences with hate speech directed towards my femininity, I wondered why I stay. However, after countless months thinking about my existence in this male-dominated space, I have come to the conclusion that I do belong. Regardless of the intended audience of video games, which is almost always males, video games are also *for* me. Riot Games and other video game companies do not decide that – I do. I enjoy playing *League of Legends*. I love the element of competition, the moments of success, and the ability to play with friends who are physically far away. I play *League of Legends* because as much as there are plenty of frustrating and upsetting experiences, the moments of joy are worth it for me. I am true to myself through my subversive playstyle, and I do not compromise it, even when teammates say that I did not do enough damage or tell me to ‘shut the fuck up’ when I try to mediate conflict. There is not one single explanation for why I play *League of Legends*, but rather a multitude of reasons, many of which are described throughout this project. I will unapologetically continue to play.

This project spurred from my interest in the relationship between ‘toxicity’ that exists in *League of Legends* and the concept of toxic masculinity. Many gamers, including me, use the word ‘toxic’ to describe certain behaviours. I wanted to compare these behaviours to the academic definition of toxic masculinity. However, in my research, finding academic sources on the idea of toxic masculinity was extremely difficult. There is currently not one, clear definition of toxic masculinity. There are certain traits and behaviours that academics and journalists use when discussing toxic masculinity, but it is not consistent. There does not seem to be a heavily sourced academic article that describes the concept of toxic masculinity. Future research could include creating a definition that summarizes academic and non-academic sources on the topic. Another option is to create an understanding of toxic masculinity in the video game community that could be used by future researchers for the purposes of studying particularly ‘toxic’ video games. While the original aims of my project did not make it into the final draft, the concept of hegemonic masculinity proved to be valuable.

This project is a small contribution to the field of feminist and queer game studies. From the beginning, I wanted to make this project as accessible as possible. While it is still academic in nature, I think that academic writing should be accessible to a broad audience that goes beyond fellow academics. I feel honoured that my work exists alongside other feminist and queer game studies scholars, such as those referenced throughout this project. As argued by Aubrey Anable, “‘gamers’ often reject feminist critique on the grounds that games should be evaluated not as representations but rather as playful and apolitical computational systems” (2018:xvii). However, video games *are* political, and Anable agrees, arguing “against the possibility of even making such a distinction” (ibid). As discussed in the introduction, *League of*

Legends does not exist in a vacuum. People who play are real people with real identities. This project illustrates how my own identity as a woman is challenged in this virtual space. And yet, I bring my femininity and my politics into this masculine video game unapologetically.

Not even one minute after finally making it into Silver, my partner turns to me and says, “Now you need to get to Gold”. I turn to look at him, and he is completely serious. Although I have never made it to Gold before, it is the next skill tier in the video game. All this time, I was so focused on getting to Silver, I did not have a plan for what to do after I had accomplished my goal. I sat back down in my chair and went to view my profile. I wanted to make sure that it had really happened – that I had really made it to Silver. On my profile, under my rank, it read ‘Silver IV’. I had recently informed my parents that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was also ranked Silver IV in League of Legends. She had tweeted about it a few months ago. I called them and told them the big news, informing them that I was now in the same rank as AOC. Even though they have no idea what any of it means, they congratulated me. When I hung up, I habitually queued up for another ranked game without even thinking about it. My partner was right – Gold, here I come.

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