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A Tale of Two Rat-Men: Game Character Backstories as Anamnestic Narratives.

The vocabulary of the narrative scholar is full of nonce and borrowed words to elucidate the meaning and workings of stories: analepsis, ergodicism, mimesis, fabula. Unfamiliar, sometimes cumbersome words which seek to capture complex ideas for application to a wide range of narrative, from epic poems to hundred-word drabbles. Many of these terms have found their way into the field of game studies, much as they previously did to the scholarly examination of films; however these are generally applied to video games which are to some extent story-driven. Even so-called sandbox games, marked by a playworld in which players can largely choose to ignore or pursue story elements in balance with freeform chaos and experience, contain enough mandated or implied narrative moments to be so studied. Contemporary gaming culture, however, shows a great deal of favor towards competitive online gaming; in these games story is all but completely absent, with players focused less on unfolding a series of events than they are in "merely" defeating an opponent. For these games, narrative elements may be entirely paratextual, providing background and context details which are essentially irrelevant to the play experience - or so they may appear. When viewed as narratives qua narratives, they may seem incidental; however it is my position that when viewed instead as being akin to medical case histories, their function as ludic informers becomes apparent: just as a skilled analyst uses a patient's history to gain insight into their

current woes, so too can an attentive player gain valuable insight into character-specific strategy by closely reading the minimal backstories provided.

Physicians have long made use of case histories as a tool to diagnose medical problems, collating information not only on the patient's own past medical encounters, but on the general health of their relations and ancestors, as well as environmental information. This technique, historically referred to as anamnesis from the Greek for reminiscence (Pioreschi 489), has been particularly valuable to disciplines in which diagnosis via more technological analysis such as blood testing is not a valid option; Sigmund Freud, for example, collected extensive anamneses from his patients not only as a precursor, but as a vital and ongoing part of his psychoanalytical process:

The next day I made [the patient] pledge himself to submit to the one and only condition of the treatment - namely, to say everything that came into his head, even if it was *unpleasant* to him, or seemed *unimportant* or *irrelevant* or *senseless*. I then gave him leave to start his communications with any subject he pleased. (loc.170)

Important here is that details which may seem irrelevant to the patient may in fact be of great use to the practitioner. This holds particularly true, it seems, for details of the patient's youth. After hearing an extensive (and we presume candid) narration of the patient's proto-sexual experiences as a child, Freud remarks to the reader that the key factors to diagnosis are not found in the patient's current life, but rather "in the patients infantile sexual life" (loc.233). Childhood events, recalled and articulated by the patient, form anamnetic narratives which the trained listener can analyze for the root of "current" problems, and provide a base from which to devise a treatment path.

Similarly, the anamnetic narratives under examination here provide not only narrative information, but ludic instruction. By ludic, I mean the gameplay elements as distinct from story

elements. Games critic Jesper Juul credits the first usage of ludology in this sense (the study of games) to a 1951 work by Per Maigaard, and the term has been widely used to describe one camp in an ongoing (if largely cold) conflict between scholars who believe games can be studied as narratives (narratologists), and those who believe that games must be studied as distinct systems (ludology). This paper takes the common contemporary perspective that games must be studied as artifacts of both story and system, particularly in the case of anamnetic narratives which can be mined for ludic elements, in particular those backstory narratives created for player-controlled characters in the popular and complex game *League of Legends*.

In the decades since video game cabinets and consoles began appearing, both hardware and software have evolved rapidly. Boxy single-purpose consoles gave way to systems which could play a range of games stored on interchangeable cartridges, and continue to evolve into sleeker, multipurpose entertainment devices. Early games were limited by the hardware of their times, forced to make use of pixelated representations of characters moving in straight paths through vague terrain; today's games feature 3D environments, film-quality sound, and enemies capable of learning, adapting, and surprising even seasoned players. These improvements have created a medium in which complex and epic stories can be told, from the multiple-game plot arcs of the *Assassin's Creed* series to the open-world experience of the *Saint's Row* franchise. Far from simply looking better, modern video games seek to provide rich and immersive experiences that will draw a player in.

Of course, more complex games necessarily have more complex instructions. Where a game of Pong required "only" the turning of a knob and the pressing of a button (admittedly a massive leap forward in its time), the XBOX 360 controller boasts (in addition to the Menu,

Start, and Back buttons which are not generally part of gameplay): two joysticks, a four-way directional pad, four color-coded buttons, two "triggers" placed under the index fingers, and two "shoulder" buttons just above these. Video game players must not only learn the layout of this controller (which differs from competitor layouts), but must learn and remember what each button does in any given game. Early games taught players via the instruction booklet, a small pamphlet included with the cartridge, CD, DVD, etc, which gave both narrative information about the game to be played, and the system for doing so. Though narrative and play are all but universally inseparable in video games, they were presented in instruction booklets as two separate pieces. A player could read the narrative summary, then dive right into playing and hope they figured it out. Conversely, a player could study and memorize the button mapping, and engage with the game without ever reading the story behind the game.

In order to reconnect the narrative and gameplay information, most modern games have taken to including in-game tutorials which teach players the basics of gameplay while also expounding on the game's narrative. For example, in the game *Saint's Row 2*, players begin in media res, with their bandaged avatar lying in a prison hospital (this ties back to the finale of the first game in the series, but it is not necessary to have played that game to engage with the sequel). An opportunity for escape arises, and the player is urged to take advantage of it, directing their injured, stumbling character on a route to freedom that takes them past various obstacles which are surmounted using the controller; in these moments, the player is coached by on-screen text as to what buttons and combinations of buttons must be used to, for example, jump over a gap. By creating an in-game instructional level, the player gains both ludic (how to PLAY) and narrative (what is HAPPENING) information in one engaging package. Similar

tutorial structures exist in multiplayer games, coaching players to choose an avatar and guiding them through the basics of gameplay. An excellent case study for these purposes is the game League of Legends (LoL) currently one of, if not the most popular games in the world today, boasting over 30 million active players in an average day, racking up an impressive average of 1.3 billion hours of play monthly (Twurdy.com). LoL provides

LoL is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game, in which two teams compete for dominance of a limited map consisting of one or more lanes in which most of the game's action takes` place. Every map includes two spawn points (one for each team) where characters begin, and return to upon death. These spawn points are adjacent to a shop where players may purchase increasingly potent items, armor, and weaponry to improve their play. Groups of small computer-controlled creatures called minions trek dutifully out from each base in waves, attacking any enemy unit or structure they encounter. In addition, maps may include both turrets (automated defensive structures) and inhibitors (which prevent the spawning of more powerful minions). The goal of each team is to overrun the enemy's defenses and destroy their nexus, a crystal structure representing the power source of the team. As of now, there are four maps available for play, each providing a distinctive experience: Twisted Treeline, Crystal Scar, Howling Abyss, and Summoner's Rift. I will focus almost exclusively on the last of these, but the others bear mention here as evidence of the wide variety of strategy that players must account for.

The Twisted Treeline (see fig. 1) is a map consisting of two lanes running parallel to each other from left to right. A series of snaking paths connects these lanes to each other via a common area in the center, which contains "altars" which provide buffs (temporary bonuses) to

teams which control them. Unlike the other maps, teams in the Twisted Treeline are made up of three players rather than five. Team bases are protected by turrets and inhibitors.



Figure 1|Twisted Treeline Map. "Twisted Treeline." League of Legends Wiki. np, nd. 03 Mar. 2014.

The Crystal Scar (see fig. 2) is a circular map containing five control points which teams fight to claim and hold. By holding more of these than the enemy, a team inflicts damage to the enemy nexus indirectly, rather than storming the base to attack it. Minions spawn from various points to assist, and a multitude of paths through the center of the circle allow players to move outside the primary lane. While control points do attack enemies once claimed, they are not nearly as powerful as the turrets found in other maps. As minions never attempt to move into the enemy base, no inhibitors are used in this map.



Figure 2|Crystal Scar Map. "Crystal Scar." League of Legends Wiki. np, nd. 03 Mar. 2014.

The Howling Abyss (see fig. 3) consists of a single lane which runs directly from one nexus to the other. Unique to this map, characters are randomly assigned to players from their owned champions and the weekly rotation of free-to-play champions. To reach the enemy

nexus, players must destroy two turrets, and inhibitor, and a final two turrets. Also unique to this map, once players leave the spawn area they are not able to purchase any items until they next die and respawn.



Figure 3 | Howling Abyss Screenshot. "Howling Abyss." League of Legends Wiki. np, nd. 03 Mar. 2014.

Summoner's Rift (see fig. 4) is generally considered to be the default map for LoL play, especially for competitive tournaments. Three lanes run from base to base, with a large "river" lane delineating the middle of the map and allowing quick movement between lanes. Extensive "jungle" areas between lanes house neutral monster which can be killed for gold, experience, and buffs. Teams control half of each lane at the beginning of play, assisted by two automated turrets. Preventing easy access to team bases is a wall with openings at the mouth of each lane, protected by both a turret and an inhibitor. After these, the team's nexus is protected by a final two turrets.

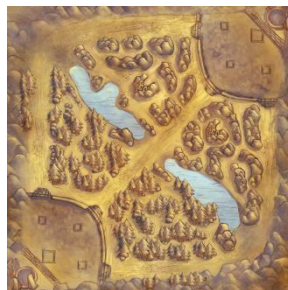


Figure 4 | Summoner's Rift Map. "Summoner's Rift." League of Legends Wiki. np, nd. 03 Mar. 2014.

Map selection is the only the first step to playing a match in League of Legends; the game software creates teams on the fly, drawing from all available players and attempting to build teams with roughly the same skill level. As of the most recent update, players can specify in advance what character and role they wish to play, as a means to address the sometimes acrimonious disputes that would previously arise when several players favored the same position. Currently, the full roster of available player avatars (termed "champions" in the game) consists of 118 different characters, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as four unique abilities used during play; these abilities are usually triggered by the player in-game, although some are "passive" abilities that provide some buff or improvement over time. Champion selection is partly a matter of aesthetic preference, but predominantly rests on what position the player intends to take on the team. In the Summoner's Rift map, there are generally five recognized positions, referred to by their position at the start of play. Top is usually held by a champion capable of absorbing a great deal of damage, while Mid is more commonly occupied by a Champion whose Abilities allow them to inflict a great deal of damage at a distance, while sacrificing defense. The bottom lane is held by a pair of champions; one, the Attack Damage Carry (ADC), relies on automated attacks, often at a distance. The other, called a Support, assists the ADC by providing buffs and bonuses, as well as by providing a distraction to the enemy. Finally, the Jungler roams between lanes, assisting all of the positions in combat.

It is important to note that in standard (non-tournament) play, teams are constructed in isolation from their enemy, and so players must make their choices based on what they perceive to be their own personal strengths, rather than to directly counter an opponent's choices. At the start of the match, players are provided a small amount of gold with which to



purchase items from the shop; there are a wide variety of items to choose from, providing different bonuses to damage, speed, defense, and many other traits. The selection of starting items is a highly strategic process; many items can be developed and improved with further time and gold, so purchase choices can dictate what future choices the player makes. In addition, players choose which of their champion's abilities they will purchase first. While they will eventually unlock and level up all of these abilities, the choice of which to start with has major implications for initial lane control and positioning.

The League champions do not exist in a complete vacuum of narrative context; for each, a backstory has been written that can be read by players within the champion selection process. These stories provide thematic context for the appearance and abilities of champions, as well as their reason for joining the League in the first place. Some are written from a third-person perspective, while some are written in the voice of the champion in question, however they do not provide any explicit strategic or gameplay information. Take for example the story of Twitch, a humanoid rat:

The city-state of Zaun is a twisted realm of science, mercantilism, and magic run amok. While the young science of techmaturgy does much to advance civilization, its research and use in Zaun pushes the boundaries of morality on a daily basis. Zaun, choked with pollution from the countless factories and laboratories that spew waste into the environment, suffers greatly. As polluted as Zaun is above-ground, its subterranean levels are far worse. All of Zaun's runoff waste pooled together in its sewers, mixing into a toxic and mysterious concoction. A single plague rat rose from this alchemical nightmare - Twitch. Unlike his lesser evolved cousins, Twitch became as sentient as anyone else... provided they were as insane as he. A seeming byproduct of the evolutionary brew that spawned him was maniacal insanity, albeit in a functional form.

Twitch came to the League of Legends to represent himself "as the only one of his kind" on the Fields of Justice. Since then, he has found a generous benefactor in the city that gave him his evolutionary sentience - Zaun. Twitch is one of Zaun's premier champions in the League, and as such he fights for Zaun when political disputes between Valoran's

city-states arise. Twitch has publicly stated that his goal is to gain enough influence and material from his work in the League to try to recreate the process by which he gained his sentience. While many challenges lie ahead in his quest - one of the largest being his own insanity - were he to succeed, it would mean a bold and brazen step forward in the evolution of all of Runeterra. Zaun has pledged its support for Twitch in his quest, though it remains to be seen what Zaun's ulterior motives are in the matter. (Twitch/Background)

As can be seen, there is no specific articulated gameplay information contained in Twitch's story. However, there is a subtle hint at his inbuilt passive ability, which poisons any enemy he successfully attacks; Twitch's origins in the "toxic and mysterious" sewers of Zaun makes perfect sense in this context, and it is this contextual information that attentive players can use to increase their understanding of, and playing with, specific champions.

Twitch's example is fairly straightforward, and players who fail to account for it would be unlikely to suffer, as this passive ability functions regardless. But there are other, more potent hints to be found in other background stories. An interesting example can be found in the backstories of two champions: Caitlyn the Sheriff of Piltover, and Vi the Piltover Enforcer. While their superlatives mark them as hailing from the same place, one must read their backstories to understand the relationship; in particular, Vi's story makes explicit her history as a criminal and her later recruitment by Caitlyn to serve as her partner in law enforcement (Vi/Background). Of itself, this narrative tidbit is interesting, but it also contains a hidden strategic piece of information: Vi and Caitlyn are more powerful when they play together.

When a team has both Caitlyn and Vi on it, they each receive a special buff called "On The Case," which is represented visually (as all buffs are) by an icon that appears just above the player's interface at the bottom of the screen. Though this buff provides no immediate and obvious benefit, when the two champions are both involved in killing an enemy champion they

receive bonus gold in addition to the standard kill bounty. The later introduction of Piltover-native criminal champion Jinx added nuance to this relationship. Jinx's history places her as a force for chaos, who has clashed with both Vi and Caitlyn on numerous occasions, and this narrative connection has strategic implications within the game. When Jinx is on a team opposite Vi, Caitlyn, or both, all involved receive the buff "Catch Me If You Can," which appears on their screens as above; bonus gold is again be earned in this situation, by killing these specific enemies (that is, Jinx gets the bonus for killing Vi or Caitlyn, and vice versa). While these bonuses may seem negligible, in a game which relies so heavily on in-match strategy and improvement, a little bonus gold goes a long way.

Not all of these strategic narratives provide such passive, game-long buffs. The rivalry between champions Rengar, a massive cat-like humanoid, and Kha'Zix, an insectoid monstrosity from another reality, is outlined briefly in both of their backstories: in short, Kha'Zix is the only creature Rengar was unable to outright destroy in combat. In a match which sees these two on opposing teams, an event called "The Hunt Is On" can be triggered (a few other unrelated conditions must be met for it to begin). When it does, each champion is challenged to seek out and destroy the other, with the victor in that fight gaining an impressive bonus; for Rengar, a trophy item and for Kha'Zix, an additional point to be spent in his signature evolution ability. This event can only occur once per match, making it a highly desirable bonus to earn and putting players who have read the stories at an advantage.

Anamnetic narratives are nothing new; for centuries physicians and other medical professionals have used brief accounts of a patient's history to gain insight into their diagnoses. However, I argue that the concept anamnesis embodies can be productively applied to the

study of paratextual micronarratives surrounding video games, especially those which stress ludic skill over uncovering narrative elements. Clever game developers are able encode specific gameplay details into brief stories which seek to flesh out a game world, rather than to explicitly define it. Just as insight into childhood can reveal clues to the complex world of the adult human, backstories can give discerning gamers not just story details, but tactical information to improve their understanding of, and engagement with, the increasing depth and complexity of video games.

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