League of Legends: The Convergence of Transmedia Storytelling and IP Evolution

Mucun Cai

School of International Liberal Studies, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract: This paper explores the intellectual property (IP) development and narrative evolution of the videogame "League of Legends." Since 2014, Riot Games has enriched the game's lore by abandoning the Warfarecollege setting and introducing a more intricate Runeterra worldview. The paper examines how "League of Legends" has expanded its storytelling through transmedia narratives such as the digital card game "Legends of Runeterra" and the animated series "Arcane," enhancing player immersion and understanding of the game's universe. The paper also addresses challenges in narrative consistency and player engagement. Riot Games aims to resolve these issues by adopting a unified worldview and diversifying narrative media, thereby advancing the commercial potential of the IP and fostering horizontal growth.

Keywords: Narrative Structure; Transmedia Narratives; IP Development; Player Engagement; Game Worldview

1. Runeterra -- The Beginning of the League of Legends IP (2014-2017)

1.1 Exploring Runeterra

As League of Legends rolled out and more and more new "champions" emerged with their own stories, players began to wonder in-game: where did this character come from? The player community has developed a corresponding need for a deeper world view and backstory. Problems with the setting of Warfarecollege began to emerge. In a March 2015 blog post, Yannick LeJacq, citing a video by youtuber Gnarsies, stated that there were many problems with the early League of Legends backstory. The core of Gnarsies' criticism is embodied in the argument that "all of the newer champions suffer from the same problem,", their in-game lore is either extremely short or inconsequential.". There was no shortage of similar discussions in the player community at the time. When the game launched with 40 Champions in 2009, by the end of 2013 that number had grown to more than 100.

The designers were quick to spot the problem, and in a September 5, 2014 developer blog post entitled EXPLORING RUNETERRA [1], the reasons for scrapping the Warfarecollege and setting out the direction of the League of Legends universe were explained. Such early and casual Settings led to a repetition of the Champion's story, and with the growth of League of Legends and the rise of e-sports, Warfarecollege was no longer deemed appropriate for the new world view. When designing Champions, the framework requires all Champions to meet this limit, if a new Champion's design does not fit well with the framework, then they must abandon. Instead of just limited to the Warfare college, New Champions need to be freer and more independent. Should all Champions join the battle, this would result in homogeneity in terms of character motivation design. This not only limits the design and development of new Champions, but also makes players lose interest in reading the game text and understanding the motivations of a particular Champion.

Developers not only want a Champion's gameplay to be highly consistent with the character's image, but they also want to keep the backstory updated and matched and on maintain consistency with the impression they give people.

As the developers have mentioned, major updates to the game since the developer announcement titled EXPLORING RUNETERRA will be regionally themed. The backstories of most of the Champions in the region were changed to make the backstories of these Champions more mature and meaningful, while building Champions'

personalities and connecting them to each other.

The most representative of regional themed updates may be July 2015, when the Riot changed the area of Bilgewater, known as the Burning Tides. The event reworked the backstories of Gangplank and Miss Fortune. Previously, Gangplank was a feared pirate king whose father was killed by a rival, and Miss Fortune was a bounty hunter seeking revenge after Gangplank killed her mother. The Burning Tides event altered Gangplank's life drastically; Miss Fortune betrayed him, destroyed his ship, and left him seriously injured, causing him to lose an arm and his dominance. During the update, as shown in Figure 1 players were unable to play as Gangplank as he was considered "dead" [2].
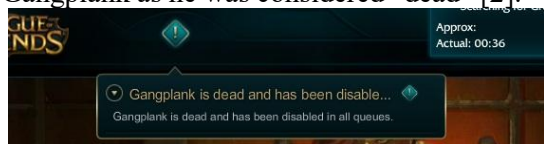

Figure 1. "Gangplank is Dead"
https://www.surrenderat20.net/2015/07/red-post-collection-gangplank-is-dead.html

Gangplank is then saved by his first love, Illaoi, who was introduced later, although he has been reduced to the brink of survival from having been at the peak of his powers. However, instead of losing morale, Gangplank becomes tougher and more decisive, reflecting on his past actions and seeking new ways to regain his influence in Bilgewater. He evolves from a simple tyrant to a vengeful, strategic leader.

Burning Tides presents the player with a story full of power struggles and themes of revenge and innovation in the form of a game-like event, changing the backstories of many other Champions originally set in the Bilgewater region (such as Trester and Graves) to make it more diverse, vivid and complex. Prior to the events of Burning Tides, Gangplank was portrayed as a typical pirate ruler, and his image and backstory were infused with elements of violence, power and terror. But he becomes more multi-dimensional and complex after the Burning Tides event. His transformation lies not only in the physical disability, but also in the change of his inner world and behavior strategy. This event gave Gangplank a deeper storyline and character development, transforming him from a traditional villain to a more three-dimensional

and compelling complex character. Character development in games is a crucial method for building the game's worldview. Bateman and Boon (2006) state in their book that 21st-century game design requires deep character development and storylines to attract and retain players [3]. Region-based changes like Burning Tides have continued to be made in subsequent updates. The changes gradually cover the entire Runeterra, and Riot Games continues to improve the regional backstory by adding new Champions, reworking old Champions, and adding more details to the existing framework. As a result, average League of Legends activity increased from 67 million in 2014 to 90 million in 2015 38% thereby reversing downward trend. The updated narrative system was a response to the needs of players at the time and satisfied the design requirements of the game to continue to grow. A more complete narrative structure not only provided designers with a better source of inspiration and operability, but also increased players' interest in reading the story behind it, thereby increasing user engagement.

1.2 League of Legends Universe and Official Website (2017)

Finally, in January 2017, the League of Legends Universe officially went live. Riot set up a dedicated portal on its official website, bringing together all the stories, legends and artistic creations related to the League of Legends world, and officially released a map of Runeterra. From here, players were able to search by Champion or region, through texts and short stories to understand the background story and various settings. They were also introduced to the region and its history and to associated Champions, as well as original paintings, music and other related art content. The Champion section listed all Champions in the game, updated with the release of new Champions. Each Champion has its own introduction page, including a biography and history, role positioning, camp, related Champions, related CG film, art design information and other world experience content.

The system can be understood from the perspective of Gangplank as Champion. In the League of Legends own client, when the player wants to buy a Gangplank in the mall or check out Gangplank in stock, there is only a

summary of the backstory. The League of Legends client has relatively little to say about the Champion's backstory or the League's worldview. In addition to the brief introduction that can be viewed in the Champions interface, the rest of the game only occasionally triggers a special voice when two Champions with linked backstories meet, and the content is usually to discuss some content according to the plot. However, in the latter case there is often no way to figure out what is going on until the player has a good understanding of the backstory.
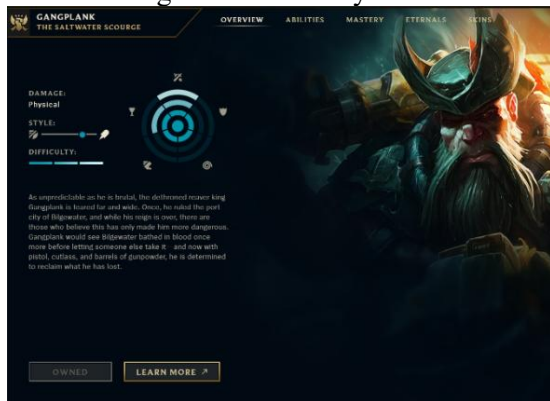

Figure 2. Gangplank Introduction Page

As Figure 2 shows, the user interface and feature design on the client side is more about showing the player the Champion's gameplay and features than the backstory. Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games are at their core about gameplay and competition, and when you meet a new champion, the player should be most interested in the champion's gameplay and various features rather than his backstory or other narrative content.

When the player clicks "Learn More" in the bottom left corner, the link to the League of Legends universe will open, and the player will be taken to the Gangplank backstory page, as the one shown in Figure 3. The player will be able to see the relevant backstory content, including the events of the Burning Tide. The creation of the League of Legends universe provides an official channel for players interested in the worldview to better understand it.

This is a very effective narrative model that prioritizes starting at the lower levels of the abstract ladder and gradually working upwards. The Ladder of Abstraction was a concept developed by American linguist Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa in his 1939 book, "Language in Thought and Action. " [4].

In simpler terms, the lowest level of the abstract ladder in League of Legends is a specific Champion, like Gangplank. As you move up the ladder, it includes the forces, regions, and finally the entire League of Legends world or Runeterra. Players are usually attracted to a Champion first because of gameplay or design. For example, a player interested in Gangplank will start by enjoying his gameplay and design. As they play more, they learn about his character and backstory through in-game voice lines. Naturally, they want to know more, so they can click "Learn More" to dive deeper into Gangplank's lore, other Bilgewater Champions, and the Bilgewater setting. This layered learning keeps players engaged because each level of information connects to the next.

Figure 3. Gangplank on The League of Legends Universe Page

https://universe.leagueoflegends.com/en_AU/champion/gangplank/

If the story starts by saying Gangplank is a cruel pirate leader of Bilgewater, it will not resonate as much and may be ignored. The Last of Us uses a similar approach at the beginning of the game, which begins with a scene in which a daughter and her father encounter an unexpected situation --their neighbor suddenly goes mad and attacks them, forcing the father to shoot and kill him. The father, Joel, and the family then flee in a car, with similar rioting already taking place along the way. In the end, the daughter is injured, and the father and daughter are chased by the zombies. As Figure 4 shows the conflict scene, a soldier removes the danger, but will not allow the father and daughter to advance, because the soldier suspects that they are also infected by the zombies, after communicating with his supervisors, the soldier chooses to shoot, and the daughter is shot dead.

Throughout the game's prologue, the game's narrative barely mentions the background setting of zombie infection, which players come to appreciate. Instead, it is shown in the overall background that an ordinary father and daughter meets soldiers during night, only for them to be suspected of being infected, resulting in the daughter being killed. The actions of the soldiers themselves are entirely defensible, and the conflict leads players to think about things from a higher level of the ladder of abstraction -- humanity in the wake of the zombie virus outbreak, and the grim state of the world at large. This is a longer narrative, much more effective and profound than if starting with the outbreak of the zombie virus in the first place.

Figure 4. The Father, Daughter and a Soldier

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DidjobKweCs

The League of Legends Universe integrates almost every text related to the world view, providing players with a channel from point to point. The player is connected and motivated by a single Champion in the entire world view and learns more about the text in the larger narrative through the text and network within the website, thereby, gaining more understanding of and interest in the entire world view. It can be said that the establishment of the universe website of the League of Legends allows world view of the League of Legends to take shape and take up a more complex narrative.

2. The Next Step after Successful IP Establishment -- Commercialization Potential and Horizontal Development (2019)

2.1 Legends of Runeterra (LoR)

Legends of Runeterra is an electronic trading card game developed by Riot Games, and similarly falls under the League of Legends universe. Players can not only use their own familiar Champions in the game, but also meet more new characters in the game. The early development of LoR began in 2014, with the mission of expanding and adding to the worldview of League of Legends. As a card game, LoR has a unique ability to tell a story, provide text descriptions, and display artwork in a way that MOBA games like League of Legends do not.

If you think of the League of Legends worldview as a tree, the base setting and the various regions and regions are the main branches that hold up the general picture of the world. And the various Champions are the fruit of the tree, dotted with dazzling places. Other parts, such as tiny branches and leaves, are narrated in runic earth legends. LoR adds a new dimension to the narrative structure - the so-called "the others" in the League of Legends universe. Characters associated with the Champions, small achievers, and other aspects of the entire Runeterra can be supplemented by landmarks, spells, minions in the card game. Most of the text narratives of League of Legends before LoR were entirely centered around the Champions. These texts were essentially personal biographies with a single Champion as the protagonist, and the description of the forces and regions to which the Champion belonged remained completely confined to the text and some conceptual art.

2.2 Arcane

Arcane is an animated series from Riot Games based in the League of Legends universe, produced by Riot Games Development and animated by Fortiche Production in France, and premiered on Netflix on November 6, 2021.

Before "Arcane," the twin cities of Piltover and Zaun had already been reimagined once. Initially, they were geographically parallel, but Riot later changed this so Piltover was built entirely on top of Zaun. The original story depicted Zaun and Piltover as leading technological cities in healthy competition, with Zaun less concerned with scientific ethics. Zaun was known as the City of Privileges, supported and ruined by unchecked industry and mercantilism. However, later updates reshaped their relationship into a more complex and contradictory one. Piltover and Zaun controlled the East-West Sea route,

bringing great wealth, industrial capacity, and technological know-how. The rapid industrial development caused severe environmental problems for Zaun, which influenced its attitude towards technology. The old narrative portrayed them as two cities with a similar obsession with science but different attitudes. In the new narrative, their relationship became more irreconcilable due to geographical conditions, yet they still needed each other for their common pursuit of technology and economic interests. This setting sets up a very interesting stage for more compelling drama, and Arcane makes perfect use of these advantages.

Riot's strategy of expanding its IP content with regions and Champion stories has proved successful when the content quality is sufficient. From the underlying logic, this revamp of the worldview is somewhat similar to Burning Tides but using a totally different medium for storytelling and with a completely different volume and quality of work. As Jenkins points out, "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" [5]. Through a series of long and rich narrative, Arcane uses the narrative mode of drama to show the complex contradictory relationship between Zaun and Piltwolf due to geography and class contradictions from a macro perspective and narrates events from a micro perspective based on the sister stories of Jinx and Vi. New content to several other famous Champions of the region, such as Catherine and Jace. In the past, it was impossible to define the characters' expressions through the game, or the time span was too long, but this became feasible during the series. So, while the thinking is like Burning Tides, which are narratives set against the backdrop of individual regions, the richness that Arcane can bring to the characters under those regions is unparalleled. In contrast to Riot Games' previous attempts at cross-game storytelling within the games industry, Arcane is significant for the cross-media storytelling flow of the League of Legends universe. It is in line with what Jenkins mentions, storytelling across multiple media platforms allows different audiences to engage with and understand the story in ways they prefer, thus improving the overall user experience [6]. The release of Arcane presents the rich history of League of Legends in an animated format, making the story more accessible and engaging.

3. Problems

3.1 Developer Announcements and Consistency

On October 13, 2023, the official League of Legends account released a brand new developer announcement entitled Champs, Lore & More | Dev Update-League of Legends [7]. Among the announcements regarding the League of Legends worldview, as well as the game's narrative, is Riot Games' statement that they are working to address inconsistencies in the game's story. Starting with this update, all new storytelling will be part of a unified worldview. This means that previous stories and character backgrounds will be pulled together more coherently. They will be narrated through a wider variety of media, such as through films and in-game events. The films mentioned in this update for the start of the 2024 season will be part of this new storytelling approach. According to the designers, Arcane's story will also be incorporated into the official storyline.

These developments have proved controversial, there has been a growing voice in the player discussion community questioning the serious inconsistencies and inconsistencies in the game's narrative. The problem is that League of Legends has been in operation for almost 15 years, and there are 167 different Champions. When the development team introduces new Champions, there are too many other Champions, various power factions and regions, and different motivations, making it challenging to continue to stimulate players. It is also almost impossible to give each Champion the attention and narrative he or she deserves. It is also difficult to maintain consistency in this complex process, without completely changing the previous narrative.

Every time the Riot company modifies its world view content, it will modify and organize the previous content. Wolf (2012) notes in The Video Game Encyclopedia that the construction and consistency of game worlds are crucial for player immersion [8]. Looking back at the entire story, from the

abolition of the Warfarecollege in 2014, to 2023, the Riot has changed the narrative in almost every region and the backstory of most of the Champions. As a result, these revised versions are indeed more complex and informative than their predecessors, and the characters are more three-dimensional. However, frequent revisions can cause a lot of confusion for players.

3.2 Players' Role

As discussed previously, most players understand the League of Legends world view as a starting point for a Champion they are interested in or continue to play. However, frequent changes to the Champion's core narrative can challenge players' love and loyalty. Sometimes a Champion is forgotten for too long, which can also hurt the feelings of players who love the "less popular Champion". More and more content and titles based on the League of Legends world view are emerging from Riot Games, with a variety of story lines and character Settings with consistency and depth are critical to maintaining a high-quality narrative experience.

Players' inability to participate in the narrative is currently a big issue with the League of Legends Universe narrative as there is almost no way for players to find their role or place in the world view. A player's role has always been as "summoner," whose purpose seems to be summoning Champions and casting a few spells. Meanwhile, the official has always controlled the narrative flow and direction. For this reason, fan-created content about League of Legends narratives has mostly focused on exploring and interpreting existing texts, rather than creating each player's own unique narrative. The success of Arcane, on the other hand, is because the medium is a continuous series, and viewers come to watch a thrilling story, thanks to the superb production and excellent storytelling. In a medium such as games, it is not necessarily good for players to create their own stories, but under the current narrative system of League of Legends, player participation is too low to sustain a long-term interest or deeper involvement in the narrative itself. In games such as World of Warcraft and The Elder Scrolls V, the player has an avatar of their own creation, uses the avatar in another world, makes choices that reflect the player's own sense of good and evil or values, etc., and thus comes to understand the settings of the world system.

4. Conclusion

This article set out to explore the motivations behind Riot Games' decision to invest in an elaborate lore for League of Legends, a game originally centered around MOBA mechanics, and to assess the implications of this narrative evolution. Through a comprehensive analysis, it is evident that the development of a detailed lore was not merely an artistic endeavor but a strategic move to deepen the game's appeal and enhance player immersion. This narrative expansion transformed League of Legends from a straightforward MOBA into a rich, multi-dimensional universe, attracting a diverse audience and fostering a deeper emotional connection with its characters and world.

However, this evolution has not been without its challenges. A significant issue identified is the struggle faced by players in finding their personal connection or role within this expansive lore. As the narrative grew in complexity and depth, it inadvertently created barriers for player inclusion in the world-building process. This disconnect raises important questions about the balance between narrative richness and player engagement in video games. While the lore has undoubtedly added layers of depth and intrigue, it also necessitates a framework where players can meaningfully interact with and influence the narrative.

The case of League of Legends illustrates a broader phenomenon in the gaming industry – the tension between developing an intricate, lore-rich environment and ensuring that it remains accessible and inclusive for all players. This paper argues that while narrative development can significantly enhance a game's appeal and longevity, developers must consider strategies carefully to integrate players more organically into the narrative fabric, perhaps through interactive storytelling elements or more personalized narrative pathways that allow players to see their actions reflected in the evolving game world. The lessons drawn from League of Legends' journey are invaluable for future game development, suggesting a paradigm where rich storytelling coexists with dynamic player

engagement, creating not just a game, but a living, evolving narrative experience.

References

[1] Jovy. (2014, September 5). Dev Blog: Exploring runeterra. Mobafire.

[2] Mora-Cantallops, Marçal & Sicilia, Miguel-Angel. (2016). Motivations to read and learn in videogame lore: the case of league of legends. 585-591. 10.1145/3012430.3012578.

[3] Bateman, C., & Boon, R. (2006). 21st Century Game Design (p. 210). Charles River Media.

[4] Hayakawa, S. I. (Samuel Ichiyé), 1906-1992. (1964). Language in thought and action. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

[5] Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (p. 95-96). New York University Press.

[6] Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (p. 213-215). New York University Press.

[7] League of Legends. (2023, October 12). Champs, Lore & More | Dev Update - League of Legends [Video]. YouTube.

[8] Wolf, M. J. P. (2012). The Video Game Encyclopedia (Vol. 1). ABC-CLIO.