CHAPTER 8.

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

AN ADVANCEMENT OF LAVIAN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice have been described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a group of individuals working together to achieve a common goal through engaging and learning from each other. Lave and Wenger discuss that Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is crucial for people involved on the outside of a community. In 1991, Lave and Wenger did not have access to the internet (as it is today) and the interconnectedness that can be achieved through it. With the ability to access so many different levels of mastery through varying media (Teles, 1993), Lave and Wenger's original description of communities of practice and LPP seem lacking. This paper proposes that while League of Legends is an excellent example of Lave and Wenger's communities of practice, there is potential for League of Legends and most gaming communities to represent something more complex and interconnected than a traditional view of communities of practice.

Introduction to Communities of Practice and League of Legends

League of Legends is a perfect example of Lave and Wenger's proper communities of practice, akin to the quartermasters, tailors, and midwives (for more on this see Lave and Wenger, 1991 chapter 3). Communities of practice as described by Lave

and Wenger (1991) discuss how individuals who are relative novices to an activity can be Legitimate Peripheral Participants (LPPs) who work with more experienced others in order to work their way through various levels of a community to reach centrality to that particular community. For example, Lave and Wenger discuss the Vai and Gola tailors. These tailors follow an apprenticeship model that has new tailors start with finishing work (final sewing, final measurements, fine details, etc.). As they continue to master each stage of tailoring, they finally become ready to cut their own fabric to begin to make a suit (being able to cut fabric correctly is crucial to providing a customer with a correctly fitted suit). This community of tailors needed to be observed in Liberia in order to understand how they functioned and how their apprenticeship model was different from how many others learn in a work environment.

With the advancement of technology and the internet, and new accessibility into the details of various communities can be observed and studied without a need for physical travel. There are several differences between gaming communities and the traditional communities as described by Lave and Wenger. For the purposes of this paper the game League of Legends will be discussed as a different type of community of practice. One difference League of Legends has compared to Via Gola tailors is that novices are introduced to the full game and need to learn very quickly how to play and cooperate with a team. The game and the objective stay the same throughout, but the strategy, teamwork, meta-game knowledge, and understanding of matchups between champions and team compositions is what is fostered and enhanced throughout the players' experience with the game and community. In this type of online community, the cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989) is a global one that involves many apprentices and many mentors working together at every level of expertise to increase each other's understanding and ability (Teles, 1993).

Lave and Wenger (1991) also discussed in their book cases where apprenticeships and communities of practice do not always work out. Butchers were an example of this given by Lave and Wenger. The structure was the same, where they start by doing finishing work and then worked their way back to eventually cutting different parts of the animal. But the novice did not have a clear view or understanding of the entire process. Because of the nature of esports and people who play League of Legends as a career (i.e., full time youtubers, twitch streamers, and competitive team players) broadcasting online for free, there are many opportunities for people who are relative novices to the game to witness what playing at a professional level is like. Just like any other apprenticeship or community of practice, the same amount of dedication needs to be established for the individual. As a person progresses (either by forming and finding a team to grow with early or touting their prowess as a solo player) they begin to understand the inner workings and higher order functions of the game and how to win more effectively and more often.

League of Legends as a Model Community of Practice

There is a community in League of Legends that does not exist in any other major sport (or traditional community of practice) among novices, professionals, and everyone in-between. At any given point, there are several dozen professional players streaming League of Legends through twitch.tv. Twitch.tv is a platform that allows anyone to watch and talk to (via chat) the people who are streaming and is usually how professional players make most of their income, so they stream every day. For example, League of Legends streamer doublelift regularly streams several hours a day many days a week for an average of 12,000-15,000 constant viewers with peaks up to 35,000 (twitch.tv/doublelift). These viewers can interact with the streamer and anyone else in the chat which is constantly active while the player is streaming. These communities can watch for

enjoyment, to get better at the game by listening to advice from the streamer, or other higher skilled players in the chat. This is just one example of how League of Legends players have seemingly unlimited access to the entire process of someone becoming a professional and can watch, if they desire, streamers at every rung in the skill ladder that exists in League of Legends. Perhaps one reason why League of Legends is such a successful game and has grown continuously as an esport, is because this type of access is unheard of in any other professional sport. A true community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) exists within League of Legends that gives the players and viewers every opportunity to learn the game at every level.

In my analogy to Lave's community of practice, people who play League of Legends early on with the intent to become a professional may be considered the newcomers learning from those who have been playing the game longer than they have with the same intent to become professional players. They are the apprentices of the game. Learning from the more experienced others (via spectating or meta-gaming), especially in the role that the person wants to specialize in, is important for the growth of the individual in their role. As the player matures and grows in the game, with persistence, they will climb in the ranked section of the League of Legends online gaming community. Once a player reaches master or grandmaster (the highest ranks in the game), they may begin to play with other players that they work well with or who share a similar style or attitude toward the game. The team then has opportunities to play in the grandmaster series where the winner each year gets a chance to play against the bottom team in the League Championship Series (LCS). If the grandmaster team wins, they are awarded the ability to play in the LCS and are officially considered a professional League of Legends team. This is how the system can be described to foster a community of practice.

League of Legends Braided and Nested Communities

Until this point the argument has been made that League of Legends is an excellent example of Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice. People playing League of Legends are certainly a part of that type of community, but that is not the only community that the League of Legends players are involved in. Their level of involvement in that community is directly related to that players goals at any given time. Because goals change situation to situation, their centrality to any community is fluid. This idea of fluid community involvement is an elaboration of Young, DePalma, and Garrett's (2002) description of the ontological descent of intentions. Simply put, the ontological descent of intentions contains all the intentions that an individual may have in any given goal state. As goals change, intentions within that ontological descent change as well. A classic example are when biological intentions begin to supersede intentions to continue playing a video game (eating, sleeping, etc.). Similarly, people are involved in many different communities that can considered to be braided among each other and affect each other. These braided communities of practice take the ontological descent of an individual in pursuit of multiple goals and applies them to the community that the individual may be engaged in at any given point in time. All the communities, that an individual is at varying levels of centrality to, have goals for one's action and perception within them. Therefore, one's intentionality for doing an activity may change day-to-day or moment-to-moment depending on which goal one adopts on a particular occasion. Each of these communities also includes constraints and rules that one would be required to follow in order to remain a member of those communities (Wenger, 2010).

An example of these fluid or braided communities of practice could be a League of Legends player who was also a traditional sports player. This is a simplified explanation, but one could

expect several overlapping characteristics of these two communities. Examples of overlap could be working with teammates, using strategy to beat the opposing team, and using prospective perception (Gibson, 1986; Hodges, 2009; Shaw & Turvey, 1999; Wagman, 2012) to understand what the other team might be doing or strategizing. One would also expect that there are key differences in each of these communities. For instance, an esports team may have less of an emphasis on physical fitness than a traditional sports team (although many are beginning to make physical fitness mandatory it is not to the level of traditional sports). Traditional sports are usually involved in larger body movements whereas esports are almost exclusively concerned with finger, hand, and wrist movements. These communities (and most communities that individuals are involved in) have invariance (Clancey, 1997; Gibson, 1986) among them that can be perceived by the agent engaging in the communities. It is beneficial for the individual, as a member of all those communities, to perceive the invariance and potentially contribute new information and commonalities to centrally influence the communities (if that action aligns with the individual's goals and intentions). At a professional level (centrality for professional League of Legends play), players are always looking for ways to attain an edge against the competition. Not only are individuals involved in communities that are braided, but they are also involved in communities that are nested within larger communities.

It is perhaps difficult to understand an idea of what a nested community may look like when referencing Lave and Wenger's (1991) traditional examples of communities of practice. However, when discussing the vast community of an online game such as League of Legends it becomes less taxing. There is the entire League of Legends community which can be thought of as the largest community among which other smaller communities are nested within. Everything involved with

League of Legends and the people involved in it at any level of centrality fall within this community. This is where (in the discussion of a traditional community of practice) the discussion would stop. To do this would be a disservice to the complexity that is involved in the League of Legends community. Within League of Legends there are a myriad of other micro-communities each with their one peripheries and centralities. A few examples of these micro-communities are coaches, casters, casual players, and professional players (to name a few). Each of these micro-communities can be thought of as having their own periphery or centrality to the larger League of Legends community. The level of centrality (within the smaller communities and the smaller communities nested within the larger) would depend on the rules and history that are being constantly defined by the communities (Wenger, 2010). An example of nested communities could be an individual reaching a professional level of play.

What Does This Mean for the League of Legends Community

Once players have reached a level of professional play, their LCS team becomes its own community of practice, where their goal to win the game may become more important, along with working as a team to accomplish that goal. One would think that the community of practice for a professional League of Legends team would be just the five players. However, players work with coaches, casters, alternates, and other professional players (from different teams), viewers on their twitch streams, and others to discuss strategy and changes in the meta game (changes to the map structure, large changes to champions, bug fixes etc.). Even though there are only five players on a team, the true community of practice consists of many more individuals, all of whom use their unique expertise to bolster their chances to win each individual game. The involvement in a micro-community within League of Legends can be thought of as a dynamic system where each individual works in coordinated

action with each other to perform a task they were incapable of completing on their own (Kugler, Shaw, Vicente, & Kinsella-Shaw, 1991; Renshaw, Davids, Shuttleworth, & Chow, 2009; Turvey & Carello, 1986; Young et al., 2002). A professional player may also be involved in a community of other professionals that play the same role on their teams or use a play style most effectively. Many professional players are also heavily invested in their twitch streams (a large amount of their income).

While many professional players juggle all these smaller communities, they need to be aware of how they are all connected. The obvious connection is the game itself. It is crucial for people involved in multiple smaller communities within the League of Legends community to understand their centrality to the gestalt League of Legends community. People at the center of a community have a much larger influence on the rules and histories of that community (Wenger, 2010). Due to the centrality and influence, decisions that are made based on involvement in central micro-communities will ripple (to varying degrees) into micro-communities on the periphery nested in the League of Legends community.

When discussing a community of several million people it is difficult for those at the center of the community to make decisions that will be beneficial to everyone and every micro-community at varying levels of centrality. Therefore, being involved in a constant feedback loop from people on the periphery is crucial. It is evident that those at the center of the League of Legends community are constantly changing how the game works to provide a healthy ecosystem regarding gameplay. When something is overpowered or unfair it is quickly patched and returned to homeostasis. Regarding culture (which anecdotally many have referred to as toxic at times) it is the responsibility of those who are central to the community to create and uphold the rules and expectations from the

community members that are required to be followed for continued involvement.

Lave and Wenger (1991) have discussed situated learning and communities of practice in incredible detail, but what has been missing from the literature is this explicit idea that communities can develop within other communities and begin to become involved (peripherally or centrally) as a coordinated system of coaction involved in the larger League of Legends community in a way that each individual within the community would be incapable of on their own. These ideas about how people are situated within their nested communities within the Larger League of Legends community could change how we discuss attitudes, culture, and involvement within these communities and others.

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