



Understanding Disengagement From Competitive Multiplayer Games



An Exploratory Study of League of Legends

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Abstract

Competitive play in the multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA) League of Legends (LoL) is a popular and engaging form of leisure. While it is well-understood what draws players into such games, less is known about the process of disengagement from play sessions in competitive multiplayer settings. However, disengagement is a necessary part of play, and one that has a significant impact on player experience. Our work addresses this knowledge gap through an exploratory interview study that examines the disengagement experiences of regular LoL players (n=8) and coaches (n=2). Leveraging grounded theory, our preliminary results identified four key contributors to the experience of disengagement: (1) satisfaction and frustration related to player performance, (2) team dynamics and social interaction, (3) individual and social aspirations, and (4) the role coaching in the structure of play sessions. These themes structure the complex dynamics of player experience at the end of play sessions. Building upon our initial findings, we propose a lens on disengagement in competitive online multiplayer games, adding nuance to the existing body of literature that has examined disengagement in single-player settings.

League of Legends

League of Legends (LoL) is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game where two teams with five players each try to destroy the opponents' base. The game is viewed from a top-down perspective and is played on a map with three lanes that connect the opponents' bases, which are placed in diagonally opposing corners. Over the course of the game, the players interact through voice chat and through their champions with each other, the opponent characters, and Non-player Characters (NPCs). During the match, the players try to outmaneuver each other with their champions (characters with unique abilities). The game ends as soon as one team destroys the opponent's Nexus - a crystal close to each team's base.

Player Disengagement

Game design and research puts a strong focus on providing players with enjoyable and satisfying experiences that keep players engaged for a long time [1]. Here, games that facilitate negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, or boredom, are often considered to be poorly designed [2], and disengagement may be treated accordingly as something negative. However, recent work started to acknowledge disengagement as an essential part of the experience, which also needs to be considered in the holistic design of experiences [3], calling for a deeper reflection on how players end their session. This can be especially relevant in team esports where team dynamics play a key role.

References:

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- Background image: <http://sw01.bcc.cuny.edu/cristopher.beltre/>.

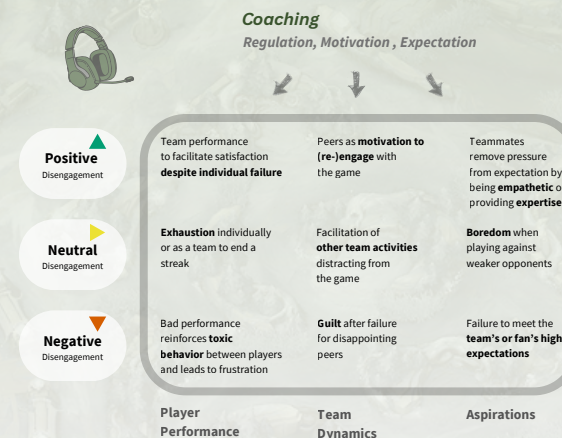
Research Question

RQ: How is disengagement approached in competitive eSports games, and which aspects of gameplay affect players' experiences of disengagement?

Method

To explore how team members experience disengagement in competitive eSports games, we interviewed eight players and two coaches who have extensive experience with LoL in (semi-)professional competitive settings. We leveraged Grounded Theory by Corbin and Strauss [4] to analyze the collected qualitative data as this method is particularly suitable for the generation of theoretical understanding in an under-explored field.

Results



The results are structured following the main themes of player performance, team dynamics, aspirations, and coaching, outlining their effects on positive, neutral, and negative disengagement. The next section provide selected findings that illustrate the experiences shared by the interviewees.

Satisfaction and Frustration Related to Player Performance

Individual player performance and match outcomes are the most influential effects on the perceived experience of disengagement, especially at higher levels of competition. Team performance and individual performance can both influence the exit experience to different extends and can be weighted differently. Toxicity among peers influences disengagement negatively. Ending a streak due to exhaustion may be regarded as neutral disengagement.

Team Dynamics and Social Interaction

Companionship has a big influence on the team and its players, especially in semi-professional and casual teams. It can promote team synergy as well as change the communication within a team, and, thus, improve their performance. Companionship can be the main motivation or incentive to play in a team in the first place and contribute positive disengagement. However, on the other hand, players feeling guilty after under-performing, therefore, experiencing the end of a session negatively. Distraction from game experiences, e.g., through other team activities can further promote the absence of positive and negative disengagement.

Individual and Social Aspirations

Pressure on players, especially at a higher competitive level can come from others and, above all, those of the players themselves. This pressure ultimately affects the players' health and is responsible for facilitating negative exit experiences. But in case of successful gameplay and if expectations can be met or exceeded, the players feel relieved, therefore, being able to exit the game positively. On the other hand, the lack of aspirations, e.g., through boredom when facing weaker opponents seemed to affect the exit experience neutrally, as well.

The Role of Coaching in the Structure of Play Sessions

The coaches are primarily responsible for the training schedules but can also strongly affect the atmosphere within their team by motivating players or setting expectations. By doing so, to some extent, coaches also coordinate when and how players disengage from the game.

Two Points for Reflection

Point 1: How can we reconcile player agency, coaching, and supporter expectations to facilitate positive disengagement experiences?

Point 2: How can be (technically) provide disengagement that also regards the collective context and experiences?