

From Noob to Veteran in *League of Legends*: Activity Systems and Genre Analysis in Video Games

Leslie Hancock

How do we learn to play video games? In this article, Leslie Hancock explores the process of learning how to play her favorite competitive game, *League of Legends*, using antecedent knowledge and genre analyses while participating in the game's discourse community. After researching across a variety of genres within *League's* activity system, Hancock learns how to improve at the game and becomes a fan of the game's competitive esports scene.

When I talk to people about *League* and esports, I'm usually treated to a loooooong blank stare. (That's OK—when people talk to me about traditional sports, I give them a blank stare, too.) Most people have heard of more casual and popular games like *World of Warcraft*, *Minecraft*, and *Fortnite*, but far fewer people know of one of the world's largest competitive games out there: *League of Legends*. As an avid *League* player, it was only a matter of time before I became an ardent fan of the vibrant and growing esports scene (“Let’s Go, Cloud9!”). I’ve been a player and fan for seven years, so it’s easy enough for me to talk about it now, but back when I was still learning how to play, it took me a while to grasp the basics of the game. There was so much I had to learn: the jargon used by the player base, the items and what they do, the champions and their abilities, the locations and layout of the map, the spawn locations of the monsters, and paths of the minions, the roles to choose from and their objectives—and so much more! If you’re thinking, “I have no idea what any of that meant,” that’s exactly where I was when I first started playing *League*.

Learning how to play the game felt like an overwhelming and daunting task. Not only was I learning the visual layout and the controls of the game, I was also learning an entirely new *kind* of game! *League of Legends* is what's known as a MOBA, or a multiplayer online battle arena. I had never played a game from this genre, so I was pretty lost right from the beginning! Thankfully, I was able to tap into my library of **antecedent knowledge**, my prior knowledge and experiences, from other video games I had played. Not only could I call upon this prior knowledge and **transfer** it to this new game—taking my antecedent knowledge from a previous context or situation and applying it to a new one—but I also knew ways I might be able to do some research and learn more about it.

Welcome to Summoner's Rift

When I first started playing, I was fortunate enough to have a couple of friends who were able to help me develop a good understanding of the fundamentals of *League*. Actually, I hadn't originally wanted to play the game—I thought MOBAs were kind of a stupid game genre, and I wasn't very open-minded about playing one—but eventually they wore me down and convinced me to play a few games with them to at least try it out. Because hey, *League's* a free game, so why not? Right?

First, I had to install the game. Thankfully, I have lots of antecedent knowledge when it comes to downloading and installing new games to play! It made the whole thing a much easier and faster process. I knew from

Game client: An interface where users can change their game settings, see news and information about the game, chat with friends, and launch the game. See Figure 1.

downloading other games that I could probably find the download link from a quick Google search. So, I went to Google, typed in “download League of Legends,” and saw the first search result was the exact link I needed to install the game. I saw that I would be required to make an account before I could play the game, which is similar to many other games I've played. OK, no problem. I created an account and clicked the big “Download Game” button. I opened

the installer file, let it do its thing, and finally a *League of Legends* icon popped up on my desktop. I was ready to play!

I double-clicked the *League* icon and opened the game client. I was ready to get right into a game with my friends, but first I had to take a moment to look over the client and ponder what all these different buttons meant (see Figure 1). Thanks to my antecedent knowledge, some aspects looked familiar because they resembled buttons or menu options I'd seen in other game



Figure 1: A modified screenshot of the *League* client from 2013. Arrows and textboxes added.

clients, like the icon with the silhouette shape of a person signaling a friends list, and the giant “Play” button signaling how I might go about entering a game. The client itself for any game could be considered a genre all on its own because gamers have come to expect certain features and common **genre conventions**, which are recognizable features of a genre that help us identify what it is. **Genres**—productions, texts, the “things” and “stuff” of our world—are made up of these common conventions. You might be thinking “Wait, aren’t genres just stuff like books or poems or essays and other written stuff like that?” True, genres can be written texts, but genres can *also* be any kind of production or creation that we try to understand by identifying features or characteristics that are repeated. In relation to this article, genres include things like the video game itself (*League*), *League*’s game client, the characters within the game, the written texts surrounding the game (game guides, YouTube videos), esports productions, and all sorts of other genres! For now, let’s focus on the *League* client as an example of a genre following common genre conventions.

I recognized buttons in the *League* client that might take me to an in-game storefront, a profile page, a friend’s list, and a chat window. I figured the “Ranked Teams” button must take me to the competitive ranks page, which is a pretty standard feature in any game with competitive play. Considering all the aspects of the client, its buttons and words and their meanings, was my conscious **uptake**—the process of taking up a new idea—of the *League* client. Using my antecedent knowledge and transferring what I knew from previous games, I was able to go through a quick uptake process of certain buttons and terms as I glanced around the client the first time I saw it.

But there were some buttons and pages within the client I *didn't* recognize. As you can see from the labels on the screenshot I've included (Figure 1), I had lots of questions about the interface, like, "What was the Runes page for? What are Masteries?" I knew what "Items" meant in other games (another common genre convention I recognized!), but I didn't know how they worked in this game. I also needed to know what "item sets" were and what I could (or should) do with them. I knew what the words "runes," "masteries," and "item sets" might mean, but I wasn't sure what they meant in the context of *League*. Unfortunately, my antecedent knowledge wasn't able to help me with this one, so I couldn't transfer what I already knew to this new situation.

Before I could get into too much of a panic, one of my friends sent me a message through the *League* client and told me how to join their game lobby. (We weren't cool enough to be using a voice chat program like Discord yet, so we typed to one another in the *League* client.) They also added me as a friend, and a notification popped up showing their friend request—another similar genre convention I can recognize from other games! My friend told me not to worry about runes and masteries for the time being; instead, I should just get into a game with them to try it out and get a feel for everything.

We finally got into a lobby together and . . . Oh, geez, more stuff I didn't recognize.

As you can see in Figure 2, there is an awful lot going on here. My friends referred to this as the "game lobby." I asked them what the heck all this stuff on my screen was about. This is when they explained that each team has



Figure 2: A modified screenshot of the *League* game lobby in 2013. Arrows and textboxes added.

five players who pick five champions, and each team is allowed to ban a certain number of champions so that neither team is allowed to play them. They told me to pick any champion to play, whatever looked fun. I think the first champion I chose to play was Soraka, a goat goddess champion (see Figure 3). My friends told me Soraka was a healer. In video games, “healer” is an archetypal class of character known for restoring health (or “hit points”) to their allies. I had played other healers in other video games, so I thought maybe this would be a good place for me to start. Plus, she was just completely goofy looking. Soraka had a giant horn on her head and ridiculously oversized goat feet. And what even is her weapon? A giant *banana*? Soraka is *amazing*.



Figure 3: The character model for Soraka in 2013.

The lobby timer counted down from thirty seconds, then the game loaded. For the first time, I heard the announcer say, “Welcome to Summoner’s Rift.”

The UI (user interface) of the game was relatively simple and reminded me of other games I’d played (see Figure 4). I recognized the bar at the bottom of the screen as the abilities my champion was able to use, although I had no idea what they were yet. I recognized the map of the arena (often referred to

User Interface: The visual elements around the screen, like menus or boxes of information, that help the player play the game.

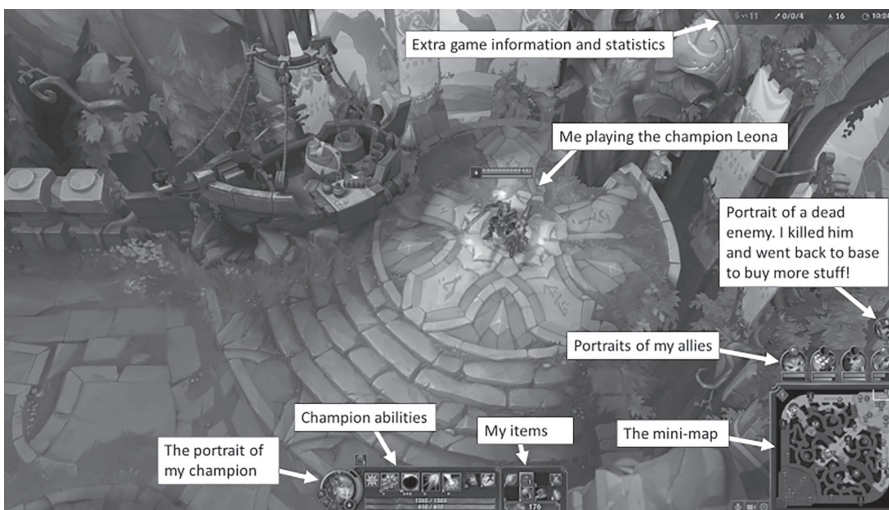


Figure 4: The user interface and player perspective in *League*. I am playing the champion Leona in this screenshot. Image captured Oct. 2019. Arrows and textboxes added.

as the “mini map” in most games) and the portrait of my character. Pulling from my antecedent knowledge once again, I knew that if I hit the Enter key on my keyboard, I could probably pull up an in-game chat box (and it worked!). Again, transferring my prior knowledge was really helpful for learning this new game!

At first, I tried using the arrow keys to move Soraka. Nothing happened. I tried left-clicking on the ground around her, and she still wouldn't move. (Way to let me down on this one, antecedent knowledge!) I tapped the Enter key to pull up the chat box and typed a quick message asking how to move my champion. My friends laughed and told me to try using the right-click button on my mouse. Magically, Soraka took her first steps away from our team's base and out into Summoner's Rift. My learning process and initial uptake of the game's controls was off to a rocky start, but it was exciting to see my champion take her first steps onto the Rift. I was finally playing the game!

Nooblife and Learning the Lingo—What's a Yordle?

In my first few games of *League*, I was exposed to all sorts of new terms, acronyms, and phrases I'd never heard before or didn't understand in the context of this particular game. This was my earliest foray into the discourse community of *League of Legends*.

A **discourse community** is a group of people who share a set of discourses—vocabulary, signs, and symbols, as well as methods and modes of communication—which are understood as basic values and assumptions and ways of communicating about their goals. These groups will often adhere to various rules (stated or implied) that govern what can and can't be said or done, and the group is generally unified by a common focus.

In the old game lobby (it has since been completely revamped), it used to be common for players to “claim” which of the five roles they wanted to play: Top, Jungle, Mid, ADC, or Support. Each of these five roles corresponded to a certain area of the map which became that player's domain (see Figure 5). Both in and out of the game, players use these terms and so many others to describe what each player's objective is in their role, classify types of champions, specific locations of the map, and so much more!

I could write a sizable dictionary filled with all the terms and references used by the *League of Legends* community. Here's a small sampling of some of the most commonly used words and acronyms that I had to learn to play

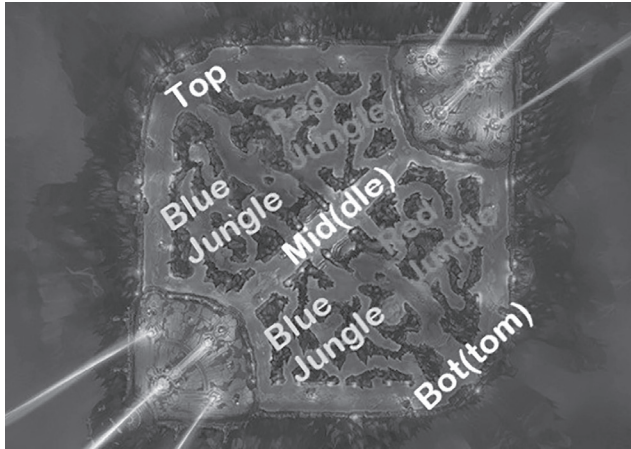


Figure 5: Summoner's Rift labeled with each region of the five player roles. Modified with text added.

the game. I've defined the terms as I understand them, so you may see them defined differently depending on where you look or who you ask.

- ADC – Attack damage carry; goes to Bot lane
- APC – Ability power carry; goes to Mid lane
- Baron (short for “Baron Nashor”) – The toughest monster to kill on the Rift; a highly desirable prize both teams fight over
- Carry – A certain class of champions that have the ability to take over a game and “carry” their team to victory
- CC – Crowd control (stuns, roots, slows, disables, disarms)
- Champion(s) – The playable character(s) in the game
- Feeder – A player who intentionally kills their champion over and over again to try to force their team to lose and allow the enemy team to win (also called a “griever” or “inter,” short for “intentional feeder”)
- Jungle – Refers to all the jungle areas of the map (see Figure 5) as well as the person playing that role, who may be called both “jungle” or the “jungler”
- Lanes – Refers to Top, Mid, and Bot, or the top, middle, and bottom lanes of the map (see Figure 5)
- Support – Champions who typically have abilities that heal or shield their allies, and/or abilities that have some sort of crowd control; goes to Bot lane



Figure 6: The *League* champion Teemo. Doesn't he just *look* completely evil?

- Yordle – One of the many races/species of champions in *League*. Yordles are short, furry, and have large ears. The Yordle “Teemo” is traditionally the most hated champion in the game (see Figure 6).

As a *League* player, it was mandatory that I learned all these words and acronyms. To play the game, I needed to learn the ins and outs of *League's* discourse community, and if I wanted to get better at the game, it would be necessary for me to *really* submerge myself within the community—into its discourse practices, values, and rules.

But *League's* discourse community extends beyond the immediate game to the greater genre and activity system surrounding it. *League's* terms are also used by players and fans in the forums, game guides, and esports communities. If I wanted to get better at *League* and climb the ranked ladder, not only did I have to learn how to become a participant in the discourse community, I also had to begin accessing genres produced by the community to start researching ways to improve.

Research and the *League* Community—Escaping Bronze 4!

I was *so excited* to start playing the competitive game mode (referred to as “ranked” by players). With my friends, I had only been playing “normal” mode (the unranked version) and against bots (artificial intelligence playing as the enemy team instead of real people), which had begun to bore me. I like to get involved in the more challenging competitive mode of all the games I play, so I was super stoked about trying my hand at competitive *League*. I played my ten placement matches and was placed into Bronze 4 . . . Next to the lowest possible ranking in the game.

The more I played ranked the more I became attached to one champion: Leona, “The Radiant Dawn” (see Figure 4). Leona’s character story is that she’s a warrior templar of the Solari, a group that worships the sun, who fights to protect the helpless and innocent. Her lore is pretty cool, but I also liked how hard it was for enemies to kill her (referred to as being “tanky” in gaming communities). And best of all, I liked that she bashed enemies with her shield as one of her attacks. There is something super satisfying and fun about walking up to enemies and—HOOYAAAHH—bashing them in the face!

I was playing a ton of Leona, learning the ins and outs of her abilities, and I was able to climb to Bronze 2 with her. In each tier—Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond—5 was the lowest level and 1 was the highest.¹ But I was having a hard time cracking Bronze 1, and I knew I was going to have trouble trying to win enough games to get to Silver 5, the rank I desired above everything else to prove that I was *not* the worst player in the game! Just, you know, kind of average-bad? Not the worst!

I started looking for *League* game guides, a common genre found in gaming communities that helps players improve their gameplay. This was my first experience with the numerous genres related to *League of Legends* produced by players and fans. Using my Google ninja skills, I typed in “Leona guide” into the search bar. One of the top hits was for the site Mobafire (*mobafire.com*), a very popular champion guide in the *League* community. I found a guide on Mobafire from a user named “Xpecial” that showed me what order I should level up Leona’s abilities, what runes and masteries I should use, and lots of other general gameplay tips for playing Leona (Figure 7). I also found another guide from him on a site called “Team SoloMid” (*solomid.net*, which has since moved to *tsm.gg*). A third search result took me to a video guide for Leona (Figure 8). This was another guide created by Xpecial, on the site Lolclass (*lolclass.gg*). There were also a number of YouTube videos and many search results finding the keyword “Leona” on Reddit’s subreddit discussion forum, *r/LeagueofLegends* (*reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends*).

I spent my free time reading these guides, watching the videos, and subscribing to different communities such as the *League* subreddit and

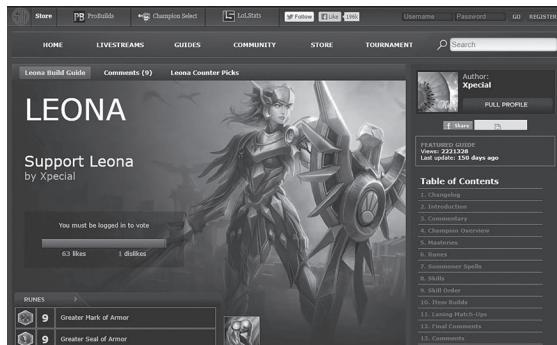


Figure 7: A Leona guide from 2013 written by the professional *League* player, Xpecial.

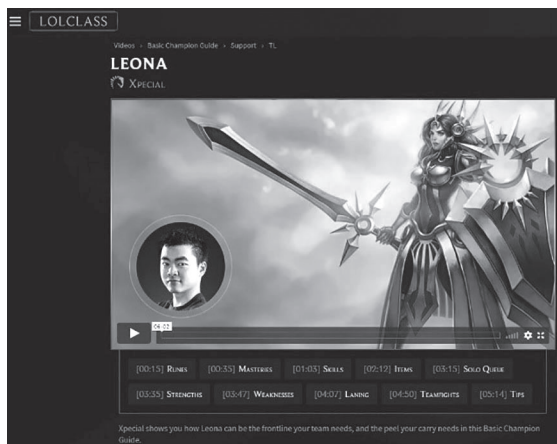


Figure 8: A LolClass Leona video guide recorded by Xpecial in 2014.

1. A quick note to say this was changed a couple seasons ago. Rank 5 was removed from each tier, and rank 4 is now the lowest.

r/Summonerschool, the subreddit dedicated to helping players improve at the game. I discovered that Xpecial was a professional player and would sometimes do live streams of his game on the streaming site Twitch. Xpecial would usually have a webcam so you could see him while he played and a headset with a microphone so he could talk to his viewers about his games and answer their questions. I began watching Xpecial’s stream and found out that he not only played the same role as me (Support) but was also a professional player! Xpecial was a member of Team SoloMid (TSM). He played with four other professional players, and they regularly competed in a tournament series—the North American League Championship Series (LCS), against other teams with professional players.

I started watching the professional games and got *hooked* on them. One of the most exciting matches I watched was the LCS summer split finals series with Cloud9 playing against TSM (see Figure 9). The adrenaline of watching these games, with the professional players, shoutcasters, analysts, hosts, a live audience . . . esports was so exciting! They were playing a game that I can play any time I want to! I can play the same champions that the professionals play! And at some point, it hit me: I was doing *research* by watching their games! Not only were they fun to watch, but they were helping me get better as a player because I could hear the analysts explain the game, and I got to see how the pros played it. Just by watching them play, I learned more about the champions, items, and the game’s “meta” (the ever-evolving and shifting “best” way to play the game that emerges over time from the game’s community).



Figure 9: The first game of the 2013 finals matches between Cloud9 (my favorite team!) and TSM. Xpecial sits on the top right—wearing the black TSM team t-shirt. The analyst, “Jatt,” and the shoutcaster, “Rivington,” are at the bottom with the PAX Prime 2013 live audience behind them.

By watching these professional games, reading the guides, watching the professional players streams (I eventually branched out to watching more than just Xpecial!), and participating in the forum communities, I was actually doing *real research*! I was researching across a number of genres—a whole **genre system** made up of all sorts of genres that all network together to help players improve and converse about the game (see Figure 10). And these genres, along with the players and people related to the game, have all been participants in *League's* discourse community.

As I began researching across *League's* genre system, I learned to expect certain common genre conventions for specific genres I looked at. For example, when I looked up champion guides (“guides” being the genre I was looking at), I would expect to see sections about a champion’s masteries and items, as well as what order I should level up their abilities. It’s also common to see sections where the guide’s creator will explain how to play the champion and some of their basic strategies. Whether I looked up video guides or written guides, I’d come to expect the “champion basics” sections because they are common conventions in *League* champion guides. Through these guides and other genres created and used within *League's* discourse community, I began to learn more about the game’s terms, strategies for playing my champions, and protocols for community member behavior. As I read guides and community boards and interacted with other players, I learned about behaviors and values accepted by the community (such as “trash talking” the enemy team) and those that were frowned upon (such as personally attacking other players or “trolling” in the game). Learning about



Figure 10: A web demonstrating the interconnection of *League's* discourse community with several genres participating across *League's* genre system and within its greater activity system.

expectations for player behavior was part of my uptake of the game and its discourse community, and it also helped me navigate behavior and language expectations across *League's* broader activity system.

The Activity System of *League of Legends*

By immersing myself in the discourse community of the game and *League's* large network of genres, and by the simple act of installing and playing the game, I had become a small part of *League's* **activity system**—the network of the game's people, texts, tools, and rules. The activity system for *League* is enormous because it's made up of layers upon layers of so many other activity systems! Just think about all the people and texts I had to interact with to learn how to play the game. All of those are part of their own activity systems and are within the giant *League* system. For a better sense of how *League's* activity system works—what it looks like and the different parts—here's a breakdown of some of the people, texts, tools, and rules involved:

- People *League's* broad community: the players (like me!), professional players, coaches, managers, owners, sports psychologists, fitness coaches, media managers, everyone involved with *League's* esports production crew (casters, analysts, the technical teams, makeup artists, and so on), esports journalists, freelance analysts, and the many developers at Riot Games (the company that develops and publishes the game)

- Texts The various genres relating to the game: game and champion guides, champion release videos, patch notes, developer blogs, esports journalist articles, official *League* merchandise, music videos produced for the game and its esports events, several Reddit forums, Twitch streams, team web pages, YouTube channels, the official *League* web page (leagueoflegends.com), the game itself (because that's also a text!), and so much more

- Tools For *League*, I generally think of “tools” as the basic hardware for playing the game and for accessing the community. The necessary equipment to play the game requires a halfway decent gaming computer or laptop with a mouse, keyboard, monitor, and stable Internet access. Only a computer or laptop is necessary for full engagement with the game and its community, but I also utilize my smartphone and television—both of which are connected to my house's Wi-Fi—to read the community's Reddit forum (r/leagueoflegends) and to watch

my team’s weekly matches in the League Championship Series (the professional league). Many players also opt to use a headset and microphone setup so they can communicate with their teammates using *League’s* in-game voice chat or by joining one another in Discord (a voice and text chat for gamers).

Rules I would say there are three groups of rules in this large activity system: first, the rules set by Riot Games (the developer of *League*) in the Terms of Use user agreement; second, the unwritten rules negotiated by the community for how players are expected to play the game and how they are expected to behave toward other players; and third, a general category covering all the rules of the various sites, communities, forums, and so forth of all the genres *League* players interact with, which are all activity systems of their own within the larger activity system of the *League of Legends* community.

In the case of *League*, this very broad activity system integrates the game and the community together in a reciprocal and dialogic relationship. In other words, the game functions as a part of the greater community and the community functions within and as a part of the game. One way to think about it is this: the game doesn’t exist without a community and the community can’t exist without the game.

And somewhere in all of this is me, a single player, learning how to play *League of Legends* and cheering on my favorite team. I, too, am a part of this activity system!

Esports Fan and *League* Enthusiast—Continuing the Climb

Over the years I’ve been playing *League*, I’ve never stopped referencing my resources, reading game guides, and watching how the pros play in professional games. It’s easy to say “I got out of Bronze! Mission accomplished!” but really, that was just the *beginning* of my journey. I’ve been researching, learning, practicing, and trying for years (*years!*) to climb the ranked ladder, slowly passing through Bronze to Silver, Silver to Gold, Gold to Platinum, and—finally!—after my years of effort, in 2019 I reached the elusive rank of Diamond 4. But I know I have so much more to learn if I want to continue the climb!

Learning how to play the game and continuing to improve at *League*, like most things in life, meant I had to (and *still* have to) perform research. I had to research across the genres within *League’s* activity system as well as

keep up with the language and behaviors of its discourse community. But I didn't do all this work just to research the game; I did it because playing and improving at the game is FUN! And speaking of having fun, I think it's time for me to play some *League*.

See you on the Rift!

Image Sources

1. Image provided by a user from the *League of Legends* Discord server. (User requested to remain anonymous)
2. Image provided by a user from the *League of Legends* Discord server. (User requested to remain anonymous)
3. Retrieved from League of Legends Fandom Wiki. 9 Oct. 2019, leagueoflegends.fandom.com.
4. Screenshot of *League of Legends* taken by Leslie Hancock. 11 Oct. 2019.
5. Retrieved from League of Legends Fandom Wiki. 9 Oct. 2019, leagueoflegends.fandom.com; map locations were added to the image.
6. Retrieved from League of Legends Fandom Wiki. 9 Oct. 2019, leagueoflegends.fandom.com.
7. Retrieved using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (archive.org). <http://www.solomid.net/guides.php?g=48170-xpecial-leona-build-guide>.
8. Retrieved from LolClass, 10 Oct. 2019, <http://www.lolclass.gg/video/58/leona-basic-champion-guide-with-xpecial>.
9. EpicSkillshot–LoL VOD Library. “Cloud 9 vs TSM Game 3 | 1st place NA Regional PlayOffs Finals | PAX Prime 2013 | Full game HD.” YouTube. 9 Oct. 2019, <https://youtu.be/78g4BIFKfZ4>.
10. “League of Legends Activity and Genre Web” designed by Leslie Hancock. Special thanks to ISU's Redbird Esports for sharing the image file of the team's logo with me.

Leslie Hancock is an instructor and English Studies Master's student at Illinois State University. Her research interests focus on sociocultural pedagogies in the teaching of writing for nontraditional students in alternative learning environments. When she's not working, you can find her playing video or board games, watching KDramas, posting to her recipe blog, or trying to catch a Sizzlipede to complete her Pokédex . . . someday . . .

