Patch Notes: Just Numbers or Something More?

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Abstract

Patch Note Documents (PNDs) are often used by digital game developer Riot Games to inform players on changes made to the game *League of Legends*. While these documents serve the role of disseminating information, they also contain rhetorical elements. These elements serve to justify the developers' decisions to players while reaffirming creative authority. Some justifications, particularly those related to the inclusion of cosmetics and new content, are left absent. The non-inclusion of the proclaimed most important elements of PNDs reveals how Riot Games seemingly releases content for its own sake (or for the sake of profit). This lack of clarity contradicts the proclaimed use of PNDs, revealing the true intention of PNDs, as spaces where Riot Games reasserts their dominance over players in player-developer and player-corporate negotiations. This dominance is then used to generate capital at the expense of player experience. The rhetoric of Riot Games in PNDs reveals a devaluation of older content and maintenance work, which leads to player frustration and a depreciation of their communities.

Introduction

Patch Note Documents (PNDs) are a method of communicating to players the changes made to a game. While the feature is not inherently limited to digital games, it has become prominent in the medium, particularly games utilizing the games as a service business model. The range of these changes are vast, alternating between mentions of new additions of content, reworkings of older content, removal of unwanted content, bugfixes, balancing, and quality-of-life (QOL) features. However, when reading through any specific PND, it becomes clear that certain changes are celebrated more than others. Determining the hierarchy of these changes reveals troubling innovation-fetishizing viewpoints. These viewpoints are potentially destructive, often leading to negative player experiences while simultaneously erasing certain types of labor. PNDs occupy a contested space of language and labor. Metatextual analysis of the PNDs of *League of Legends* (van Roon, 2009) henceforth referred to simply as League, reveal how maintenance and archival labor are devalued and erased.

The Function of Patches

Patches in *League* have different purposes from other forms of patches in software. While patches sometimes address

software security and unintended behaviors (bugs), these patches always consist of intentional changes to the game itself (not the executable content, but the social phenomenon). Patches in this sense are not focused solely on addressing the technical aspects of the game, but also perceived flaws of the game's design. In other words, the game's patches are meant to improve the subjective user experience as well as the objective technical aspects. While it will be revealed later that this is a problematic way understanding patches, it does serve well as groundwork to further understanding.

The Function of PNDs

Most visibly, PNDs serve to keep players informed on the potentially bespoke changes included in these patches. Consider a change made by Riot Games for *League* in Patch 12.1 (Figure 1).

League is a game where character resources (health and mana) are often measured in hundreds and thousands. Games often go beyond twenty minutes, with many reaching thirty or even forty. Given this, it is reasonable to consider that players might not be able to discover these changes without external assistance from the developer. While players might be able to discover or sense larger changes, quantifying those changes might prove to be a difficult task, so PNDs serve as an easy method of acquiring relevant and accurate information.

When viewed as a collection, PNDs can also be seen as archive. Those interested in analyzing trends over the course of a game's development can often refer to patch notes to extract miscellaneous information (Kica

et al., 2016). This work is valuable, given the intimate relation patches have with game balance as well as the importance of game balance to player satisfaction (Claypool et al., 2015). Another less quantitative importance of PNDs as an archive is the accountability of a game's developers. Design philosophies discussed in previous PNDs might be brought up by developers or dissatisfied players in future patches. In the case of developers, it is often used to explain their justifications for a certain change. This comes in the form of showing how a change makes a certain aspect of the game adhere better to any given design philosophy. In the case of dissatisfied players, it is usually to show dissatisfaction or outright protest towards a planned change. This sort of protest has become a key practice in player-developer community negotiations, as seen with satirical videos by YouTubers (Caravella & Holmes, 2022). An example of this would be Riot Games's discussion of changes done to the character Nidalee in Patch 4.10. Consider these quotes from 4.10's PND.

> For Nidalee, she's always been one of the best at forcing low counterplay games through her long-range spears and high evasiveness. […] With her oppressively high spear damage and catlike (maybe just cat-ish) elusiveness, Nidalee's been a contentious low-risk, low-interaction champion for quite some time. Specifically, old Nidalee's gameplay often revolved around the question of "when should I stop throwing

spears?" to which the answer was typically "never."

This rationale returns in Patch 7.23 with the inclusion of the character, Zoe, a character notorious for high amounts of low-risk, long-range damage. Through the lens of accountability, Zoe's introduction could be viewed as a particularly egregious offense to this design philosophy. Zoe has an ability that amplifies received damage while locking them into a particular spot, making Zoe's damage easier to hit compared to Nidalee.

Thirdly, PNDs can be viewed as rhetoric. Storytelling elements in PNDs utilized by Riot Games "develop a sense of Riot Games as a benevolent developer committed to doing what is best for the game," while also granting Riot Games power over the direction of the game's design (Gursoy, 2020). While in earlier eras PNDs were posted by a singular staff member on the design team, PNDs often include a team of writers now that focus on explaining, contextualizing, and legitimizing the changes made in the patch, which can be an arduous and scrutinized task (Dedmon, 2017). This disclosure and dialogue are invaluable, however, as it serves as valuable ethos building, allowing companies such as Riot Games access to cultural capital (Zimmerman, 2014). Consequently, any change viewed as illegitimate might erode the goodwill of players. Game developers seem to be aware of this fact, and often put effort into making sure that each change is justified to their respective audiences (Sherlock, 2014).

Viewing PNDs through this lens can lead to interesting questions regarding developer intentions. If PNDs can be used to persuade players to accept otherwise unpopular changes to the game, it could be considered that PNDs serve to persuade players of other elements as well. So far, players and scholars have taken for granted that the legitimizing of design changes remain the primary purpose of PNDs. Consider this statement from a blog post critiquing MMO design culture (Zubon, 2009).

> I may have attacked the City of Heroes patch notes before, but one thing they do well is pointing to themes. Some of that is the advertising copy for, "Come try our new stuff! It's awesome!" but the valuable part is expressing the developer intent in the patch notes.

This quote allows Lee Sherlock to conclude that players now expect developer rationales to justify changes, and that "patching and its associated documentation practices maintains a dialogue between game developers and players that is founded in technical practice but also reveals the emotional and ideological stakes of computer games as designed experiences that accumulate their own histories" (Sherlock, 2014). However, a problem arises when Sherlock's conclusion is compared to observations made by Ayse Gursoy (2000). Consider Gursoy's observation regarding how changes are legitimized through the game world's fantasy.

In my reading of the PNDs, I coded many instances where the documents referenced the fantasy of the game world to augment communication about changes to the game. Tying changes directly to the game world allows the writers to motivate changes as serving the game's overall fantasy, even as they change it.

Riot Games constructs the reality of the game's world, and then uses that reality to legitimize experiential aspects of the games design. This is done even though the game's design is often intentionally divorced from the game's world. This can be most evidently seen through character descriptions. Contrast the description of Aurelian Sol and Graves from Riot Game's website. The first is described as an "almighty being" the second is "a renowned mercenary, gambler, and thief" (Riot Games, n.d. a-b). The first invokes biblical language, whereas the second is a guy with a gun. However, in a *League* match, either character has the potential to defeat the other. This is an egregious offense to design drawn from the game's world, yet this change persists, implying that Riot Games selectively chooses when to use the game's world as justification (and ignoring it when it goes against their desires). This strategy, and PNDs by extension, can be understood as a way for Riot Games to subvert the power of players in player-developer negotiations.

This example demonstrates how Riot Games has not always been the benevolent developer they present as. PNDs act as a contested space where players' interests and the developers' interests experience conflict and tension. Moreover, such an instance addresses player-developer interests, but fails to consider that Riot Games, as much as it is a creative studio, is also a profit-driven corporation.

A Hierarchy of Changes

In the past, Riot Games has implemented a certain order of PNDs. This order, viewed as rhetoric, seems to argue that changes to existing characters and items take precedence over other aspects of the patch. This order follows: introductory blurb, mid-patch updates (often referred to as hotfixes), a Patch Highlights graphic, changes to individual characters, changes to items that augment characters, systemic changes (e.g., announcements of a new competitive season, changes to game modes, changes to behavioral systems), bug fixes and QOL changes, ending with microtransaction purchasable cosmetics. Yet, initial observation becomes contested with the Patch Highlight graphic. Given the name, it can be inferred that the graphic is meant to summarize the most important aspects of the patch (Figure 2).

Both the patch's balance adjustments and the supposed centerpiece of the patch constitute half of the graphic's space. The other half is dedicated to new content, in this case a new character accompanied by microtransaction cosmetics. The only complete sentence of the graphic relates to the earliest possible date of purchase for the new cosmetics. Considering a PND's proclaimed emphasis on clarifying

developer intent and rationale, it seems antithetical to populate half the graphic with information that is never connected to developer justification (Figure 3). It should be noted that, in the case of Renata, no provided leads to information detail developer rationale behind her inclusion (Figure 4).

The authors of this PND did not feel the need to justify the inclusion of the aforementioned content. It is as if these included pieces are merely expected, if not mundane, so that players are expected to accept these inclusions uncritically. This is surprising since many character and item releases receive general disdain from the players. Characters such as Zoe, Aphelios, Yone, Samira, Seraphine, and Viego present notable examples of inclusions that have caused frustration. This trend of released characters that degrade player experience dates back to as far as 2010 with the release of Xin Zhao. Item inclusions are not flawless as well. Similarly, the following items – Spear of Shojin, Runeglaive, Leviathan, Ardent Censer, and Sated Devouer – are accused of degrading the quality of the game.

Indeed, Riot Games demonstrates a priority higher than their proclaimed goal of player-developer negotiation or legitimization when related to the inclusion of new content. Merchandise and newer content take precedence over the maintenance of older content. Recall the originally stated intent of a patch (to improve the subjective user experience as well as the objective technical aspects). In many cases, the integration of new content contests with the supposed function of

patching. This aspect reveals how Riot Games fetishizes newness while devaluing maintenance work, even when doing so negatively impacts the player experience.

The deletion of an old piece of content in place of a new one, reworks, experience similar problems as new inclusions. This might seem intuitive to a non-player, since a rework functions as a new piece of content, with the only change being that an unrelated old piece of content is deleted. However, Riot Games tends to affiliate reworks with the maintenance work that they devalue. PNDs for reworks often accompany justifications. As with entirely new content, these reworks tend to degrade player enjoyment. The Aatrox, Galio, and Banner of Command reworks relay frustration in the community. Even mere graphical updates have not been left uncontested since Elise's graphical update faces communal criticism.

The rationale behind this fetishization of newness is that Riot Games, as a corporation, is incentivized to release new content out of the expectation to generate capital. It is no coincidence that all non-rework content is monetized. New characters and cosmetics and can be purchased with RP, a currency obtainable through exclusively real-life purchases. While characters remain attainable through in-game currency, cosmetics are exclusive to RP transactions, and new characters are always released with one RP-exclusive cosmetic. Reworked content appears profit-motivated, since reworks accompany discounted existing cosmetics, which encourages players to make a purchase otherwise not spent. When considering this, it becomes evident as to why Riot Games refuse to justify new

content. The rationale that, Riot Games is doing this to make money, would unlikely be accepted by the community. At the very least, players expect this reasoning to be implicit, even if accepted as common truth.

Broken Game Thinking

A telling narrative is constructed when viewing *League's* history of maintenance and newness through the proposed lens of broken world thinking (Jackson, 2014). Broken world thinking proposes viewing works through two components. The first component understands that spaces – natural, social, and technological – are fragile, caught in a constant process of decay and change. These decayed spaces may or may not be usurped by something new, and in the case that something new comes along, the new space may be worse than the replaced space. The second line of thought suggests that these spaces in decay are repaired and maintained through immense care and labor. Through this subtlety, the space might experience restoration. By applying broken world thinking to *League*, it becomes clear that *League* is a broken, decaying game, yet those who may repair it become disempowered by motivations of profit and a fetishization of newness. While balance and repair work may be done, the effects are overshadowed by the overwhelming effects of new inclusions. At the time of writing, there are 159 released characters (though there will almost certainly be more by the time of publication), each of which contains a dedicated community of fans. Through broken world thinking, these characters and, by extension, their communities are spaces

that decay over time. New inclusions and newly discovered strategies (not inherently negative things) upset the balance of the game, which renders some characters as sub-par and difficult to use. Despite this, players continue to use the character they love, even while seeing the character decay away. Under current player-corporate relations, these characters could even be seen as doomed, destined to be deleted in a so-called rework to make space for something new. Consider Aatrox, a character who post-rework was so unrecognizable by the community that they jokingly refer to the new character as Boris, signifying that their true loyalties remain tied to a now deleted character.

Broken world thinking allows us to reconsider *League's* issue of toxicity. In 2020, a prominent *League* influencer, Voyboy (2020), described how *League* was too toxic to enjoy anymore. More recently, the game's most celebrated player, Faker, voiced concerns over his in-game experience (Ramun, 2022). Riot Games inadequately addressed the issue, despite the inclusion of new systems designed to target toxic behavior. Reports work after toxic behavior occurs; thus, the honor system ineffectively determines who participates in toxic behavior, and automated detection systems sometimes do more harm to the victim than the aggressor (Stavropoulos, 2020). Perhaps through a lens of mending and care as well as communal solidarity and player responsibility, *League* can be restored as the game that players care for. However, under the control of Riot Games, *League* may never get an opportunity.

Conclusion

Like how PNDs are a contested space for players and developers, PNDs are also a contested space for players and corporations. The non-inclusion of the proclaimed most important element of PNDs reveals how Riot Games seemingly releases content for its own sake (or for the sake of profit). This lack of clarity contradicts the proclaimed use of PNDs, revealing the true intention of PNDs, as spaces where Riot Games reasserts their dominance over players in player-developer and player-corporate negotiations. This dominance is then used to generate capital at the expense of player experience.

In conclusion, the fetishization of newness devalues labor of maintenance and repair. While critical to the functioning of modern society, maintenance and repair work has been often valued as inferior to the act of innovation and creation (Jackson, 2014) In *League*, this devaluation of maintenance has led to degraded player experiences. Unless new power negotiations happen and players regain some control of the game's direction, League may continue to decay away.

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Figures

Figure 1: A change made to the champion Gangplank in patch 12.1.

Figure 2: 12.4's Patch Highlights section.

Figure 3: A section of 12.4's PND detailing upcoming microtransaction cosmetics.
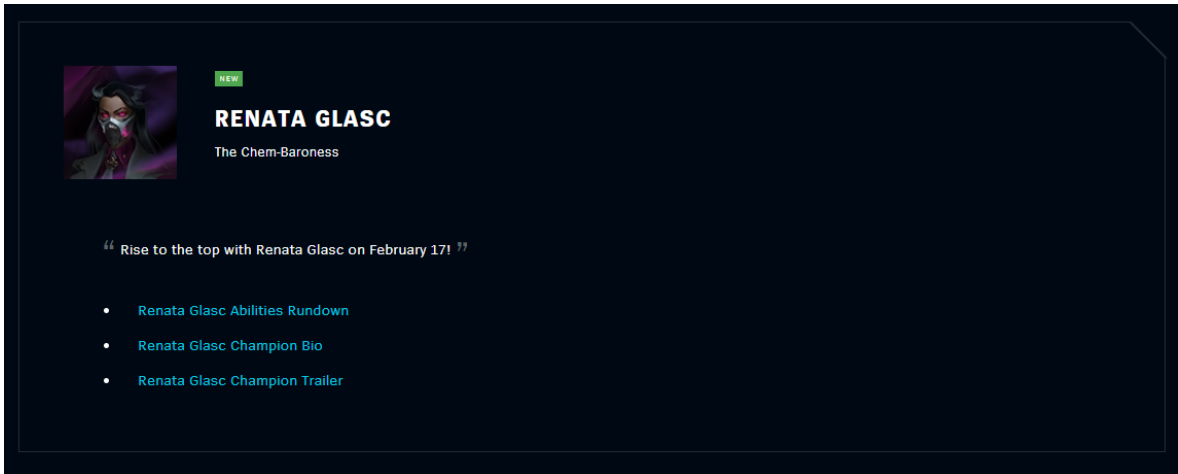
Fig. 4: A section of 12.4's PND detailing the newest champion added to the game.