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.

CCS Concepts

• **Software and its engineering → Interactive games**.

Keywords

Disengagement, Team Dynamics, Competitive Play, eSports

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1 Introduction

Today, gaming is a widespread entertainment activity, and with this, Electronic Sports (eSports) has gained substantial popularity [17, 27, 35]. With rising professionalism, eSports leverages training practices from traditional sports, such as efficient training schedules [1], coaching [82], and coping strategies to deal with the stress and pressure in this competitive domain [51]. eSports sits at the intersection of engaging experiences drawn from games [14, 24, 36, 67, 75], and aspirations from sports [74]. However, while a substantial and growing body of work provides a comprehensive understanding of how and why players engage with games (cf. [31, 61, 70, 71]), the experiences of how players end sessions with a positive feeling has received less attention in the literature. Recent work by Alexandrovsky et al. [3] has shown that how players end sessions – disengage – contributes significantly to the overall player experience. In contrast to the current notion of disengagement as a single state (cf. O'Brien et al. [64]), the authors recognize disengagement as a complex process. Further, they found that positive disengagement is associated with experiences that yield closure and satisfaction, and benefits from settings where player agency is maintained [3]. However, previous work has focused on single-player games, and it is unclear how these results translate to multiplayer settings, especially in competitive contexts where the experiential outcome reaches beyond in-game goals. Looking at disengagement from a sports and well-being perspective, research suggests that eSports players may employ unhealthy training practices of extended play sessions [10, 44] with no substantial gain for skill acquisition [9] while at the same time, these training habits frequently lead to burnouts and abrupt career ends [50].

This suggests a gap in our understanding of the design of disengagement in eSports games and calls for a reflection on contemporary (dis)engagement practices. To close this gap and to provide initial insights on how eSports players disengage, our work reports on an interview study with eight (semi-)professional League of Legends (LoL) [G1] players and two LoL team coaches. It is guided by the overarching research question: *How is disengagement approached in competitive eSports games, and which aspects of gameplay affect players' experiences of disengagement?*

Our study builds upon previous work by Alexandrovsky et al. [3] that examined disengagement in single-player scenarios and transfers their findings into the domain of competitive multiplayer eSports with the means of League of Legends (LoL) – one of the

most popular Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) titles in eSports – as a demonstrative case in this field.

Our preliminary findings indicate that in contrast to single-player games, the players' performance aspirations, which contribute to the players' disengagement experience, are far more complex and include the context of play as well as the social environment. Further, the inherent social structure of team eSports has implications for the players' sense of agency and, with this, limits their ability to exit at their own volition. In addition, we identified coaches in the role of mediators who can support players in regulating their playtime (i.e., how they disengage), adjusting their expectations, and endorsing friendly team dynamics that help players better cope with stress.

2 Background and Related Work

In this section, we introduce eSports and, since this is the object of our study, we provide details on the game League of Legends (LoL). Further, we discuss current practices in eSports training and team dynamics. Finally, we examine state-of-the-art engagement and disengagement approaches in games.

2.1 eSports

Electronic Sports (eSports) refers to *"a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system, are mediated by human-computer interfaces"* [35]. Generally, eSports involves playing competitive video games that are organized in a sports structure and where the players are referred to as athletes [35]. Players compete either solitarily or in teams against each other in tournaments. Over the past decades, eSports received much attention from players, the gaming industry, and research. The eSports audience has reached over 495 million players and spectators worldwide [20]; it has become one of the most profitable and attractive public events [62]. However, eSports have been only recently acknowledged as an official sports discipline [35]. Reasons resisting against including eSports as a sports discipline is often because athletes appear *"to be sitting riveted to their chairs"* [35]. However, it has been shown that the player's physical and mental conditions are vital for their performance [20, 35, 77, 84].

2.2 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. Players can choose from one of over 160 characters (champions), each with unique abilities, whom they will control throughout the course of a match. 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, using different strategies and skills to gain an advantage over the opponent team. The game ends as soon as one team destroys the opponent's Nexus - a crystal close to each team's base. Additionally, the game contains secondary tasks such as slaying

Figure 1: Screenshot of a match in League of Legends (LoL): The blue team sieges the red team's base. The red team, already in a numbers disadvantage, tries to defend their turret. The turret starts to eliminate the wave of blue minions that come in through the mid-lane. At the top of the screen, the scoreboard displays the statistics of the current match. In the center, the kills from either team (29/31) are shown. Right below is the current game time displayed (25:37). To the left and right are the achievements for each team depicted: gold collected, number of turrets destroyed, and neutral monsters killed. At the bottom right, the mini-map highlights the area of the map that currently can be seen.

NPCs (e.g., dragons), which provide additional strategic advantages or bonuses in the score. The game requires a high level of coordination between the team members and high skills in control of the player's own character. In LoL, players fill different positions that are connected to their strategic roles. Each role comes with a set of tasks that determine the teams' success in the match [5]. For example, *Top-Laners* would play a character that is good in one-on-one battles and is responsible for gaining an advantage over the top lane. In contrast, *Junglers* clear neutral monsters and aim to influence different areas of the map [33]. A screenshot of a match is depicted in Figure 1. LoL has over 70 million registered players and is considered one of the most popular eSports games [39] and, hence, a representative game to study gameplay in competitive settings.

2.3 Esports Training

eSports training started employing methods from traditional sports psychology – Psychological Skill Training (PST) to curate the athlete's training program [78]. PST is a set of methods that are meant to enhance the athlete's performance and self-regulation, including methods such as goal-setting and self-talk – self-instructed emotion regulation [54]. However, a standardized approach on how PST should be implemented in eSports training is not yet established. Adjacently, Trotter et al. [78] identified *social support*, *self-regulation*, and *psychological skill use* as factors that directly or indirectly influence the athlete's performance. Similarly, Białecki et al. [8] reviewed training methods adapted from traditional sports to eSports such as post-exercise recovery [1]. Although the authors note that there is no standardized method to fit all kinds of eSports disciplines, current eSports training lacks well-defined exercises

and training programs [8]. For instance, on average, training sessions (i.e., play sessions) prolong over 5 hours per day [44]. However, a relationship between the training duration and professionalism could not be verified [44]. In contrast, it has been shown that regular breaks and spaced practice are highly beneficial for the athletes' progress as well as their physical and mental health [10, 40, 41]. With the training and health benefits in mind, many eSports athletes include physical exercises as well as mental training into their exercise routine [44]. In alignment, DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al. [25] showed that short 6 minutes breaks of active walking are favored by the players over resting breaks and improve the executive functioning of the athletes; however, they do not affect the athletes' performance.

2.4 Team Dynamics

Team dynamics are important to consider when approaching how individuals situate themselves in professional sports settings. For instance, Warner et al. [81] conducted a social network analysis to examine team dynamics of basketball teams. The authors identified that close connections, in the form of friendship and trust, support the team's success. Similar observations on team cohesion have been reported in other domains such as software development [26] and Paralympic sports [28], among others. In alignment, interviewing LoL players, Himmelstein et al. [37] report that lack of team reliance and ineffective communication among team members is one of the major blockers for the team's advancement. With the athletes' intrinsic motivation to play well and to support their team, eSports athletes report that the game provides social support and facilitates meaningful friendships [30]. On the contrary, toxic behavior such as harassment, cheating, and grieving in online games and eSports is prevalent [2, 47]. Beyond additional burdens on the victims' well-being, it has also been found to negatively affect team cohesion and performance [49]. These findings are also reflected in Buchan and Taylor's analysis of factors for optimal play and team cohesion in MOBAs, which are *friends or strangers*, *communication*, *mental state*, and *team composition* [15]. Buchan and Taylor [15] highlight, that playing with people one knows – friends – directly affects all aspects of playing. Further, the communication needs to be at the right balance in order to be effective and not get in the way of playing. In the same way, players need to be in a positive psychological state, including their emotions, stress, confidence, and tiredness. Similarly, the skill levels of the players should match to facilitate a positive team experience. Finally, a good team composition consists of different roles, and the players should be willing to commit to these roles.

2.5 Player Engagement and Disengagement

Playing games is generally considered inherently enjoyable [22, 32, 68, 79, 86]. The core assumption is that games are capable of satisfying basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are necessary for intrinsic motivation, flourishing, and well-being [22, 69]. Hence, game design and research puts a strong focus on providing players with enjoyable and satisfying experiences that keep players engaged for a long time [14, 24, 36, 67, 75] and maximize Flow experiences [13, 16].

Consequently, games that facilitate negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, or boredom, are often considered to be poorly designed [21, 48]. Accordingly, disengagement or attrition is frequently conceptualized as the absence of engagement. However, the degree of players' adherence is often unrelated to the players' enjoyment and motivation to play [43, 55, 56, 60]. This notion of engagement and disengagement is problematic as it can draw players into unwanted interactions and cause them to lose the sense of control [58], which facilitates obsessive passion [42] and hampers the individuals' well-being [47, 52]. Yet, research exists that scrutinizes this shallow assumption of the engagement-disengagement dichotomy. For instance, Berge criticized the strong emphasis on immersion as an implied goal of game design and advocated for *outmersive* game design, which aims to facilitate a critical distance from the game for the players by breaking their attention and drawing them outside the game [6]. Accordingly, many players find uncomfortable gaming experiences appealing and enjoy being confronted with negative emotions such as sadness or loss – *emotional challenges* [18] – in games [11, 12]. More recently, Miller et al. proposed the design framework of critical play, that advocates for game designs beyond simple functional challenges that facilitate reflection and emotional challenges [18] and focus on transformational experiences that emphasize the process rather than the outcomes [57].

Accounting for long-term interaction with technology, O'Brien and Toms [65] propose the concept of User Engagement (UE), which is defined as *"a quality of UX that is characterized by the depth of the actor's investment in the interaction; this investment may be defined temporally, emotionally, and/or cognitively"* [63]. This model of engagement conceptualizes interaction over time in the *Engagement Cycle*, which consists of four stages: (I) the *point of engagement* is the first contact with the interactive system, (II) the *period of sustained engagement* is the actual time span users interacting with the system, (III) *disengagement* describes the termination point of an engaging period (e.g., end of a session), and (IV) *re-engagement* is referred to when users return to the interactive system at their own volition. UE explicitly conceptualizes experiences as fluctuating over the different stages and acknowledges disengagement as an essential part of long-term interaction with technology [64]. In this model, disengagement is considered to be negative and is conceptualized as a lack of engagement or the systems' failure to match the users' needs [64]. 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, 4, 85]. Accordingly, Scully-Blaker [72] discusses *stasis* – disengagement that operates on the level of game mechanics – and *stillness* – disengaging players through aesthetics; i.e., designs that aim to facilitate an emotional or ludic response – as means of creating low-tension gameplay through players' inactivity. This approach is further reflected in the critical play framework, which structures reflection in games in five categories and provides a series of game elements to yield reflection in players [57].

Alexandrovsky et al. [3] surveyed players about their experiences when exiting play sessions from single-player games and identified positive, neutral, and negative disengagement as a process that is triggered by satisfactory experiences, the gaming context, and how well the game allows players to leave. In alignment with this

updated notion and to maintain a neutral perspective, we conceive disengagement as the exit from a play session regardless of the cause of withdrawal. For example, this may include quitting because a goal was achieved or quitting due to frustration or exhaustion. In accordance with our notion of disengagement, we consider *positive disengagement* as a voluntary exit from a play session with a satisfactory Player Experience (PX) and the player's general willingness to return to the game (re-engage) at a later point.

While recent research on disengagement experiences has been focusing on single-player games (cf. [3]), in the case of multiplayer games, the findings are inconclusive due to various social obligations and how the games are designed; a dynamic that Scully-Blaker [73] describes as *zugzwang*: being forced to play despite of being exhausted or not enjoying the activity. In the context of multiplayer play, and especially within (semi-)professional eSports, this dynamic leads to a blend between playing for enjoyment and playing for labor [7, 77], creating additional challenges to healthy engagement with video games [10].

Hence, in our work, we address this gap by explicitly focusing on multiplayer gameplay in (semi-)professional eSports settings and provide a first nuanced examination of disengagement for multiplayer games.

3 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 [19] to analyze the collected qualitative data as this method is particularly suitable for the generation of theoretical understanding in an under-explored field.

3.1 Participants

For our interview study, we recruited eight LoL players (P1–P8) and two coaches (C1, C2). All interviewees have had substantial experience with competitive eSports in teams. Players and coaches are or were part of different teams that played across different types of competitions. Corresponding to their level of professionalism, the players play or have played in different leagues. For instance, one player played as a substitute in the first division of the Prime League[1], one as a former professional now playing in the second division of the Prime League, while others play in the first division of the German university league (Uniliga[2]) or in the 3rd to 5th division of Prime League. The two coaches were both members of a professional team, one as the primary coach and one as an assistant coach. Nine men (players and coaches) and one woman (player) took part in our work, reflecting the unbalanced demographics in professional eSports. The age of the players was between 21 and 26 years, with an average of 23.5 years. The coaches are 24 and 30 years old. The interview guide was developed iteratively in discussions among the authors, and prior to the main study, we conducted a pilot interview with a semi-professional LoL player who also had prior experience in research on disengagement in games.

3.2 Procedure

We recruited participants via personal references and contacted them in person or on Discord. We conducted the interviews online, using the video conference tool BigBlueButton[3], which is hosted by the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) and ensures data protection. Before the interviews, we handed out information about data protection and asked for the participants' consent to conduct and audio-record the interviews. We also informed the participants that they could withdraw at any time and that they could skip questions if they did not feel comfortable answering.

The interviews were semi-structured and organized around three sections. The first section collected demographic data and the participants' degree of involvement in eSports. The second set of questions targeted the interviewees' team structures and how their play sessions in teams usually proceed. The final section explored the participants' own experiences on how they disengage in games. For coaches, we slightly adapted the interviews and asked additional questions about their experience with how their players perceive and how they manage disengagement, leveraging their role in the team as an additional lens. The full set of questions is provided in the Appendix A. The interviews took $40 - 65$ min on average, with the most extended interview lasting 110 min. After finishing the interviews, we thanked the interviewees for their participation. The participants were not compensated. The study protocol was approved by the KIT ethics board under the umbrella agreement "Games User Research (Study Series)", April 24, 2023.

3.3 Analysis

We leveraged Grounded Theory [19] to analyze the interviews. This method is particularly suitable to discover new categories and concepts and to generate a theoretical understanding of less known phenomena [19], which aligns with our objective to generate a theoretical understanding of disengagement in competitive multiplayer games. The analysis with Grounded Theory comprised three consecutive steps: (I) Open Coding: attaching categories and codes to collected data, (II) Axial Coding: identifying relationships between codes, and (III) Selective Coding: choosing core concepts and forming overarching themes.

During open coding, we assigned codes to small chunks of data. In the axial coding step, we organized the codes from open coding in a codebook and further drew connections between them. Lastly, in the selective coding step, we did a second pass on the data and coded them using the categories in the codebook. The analysis was led by the first author and conducted iteratively and in collaborative discussions among all authors.

3.4 Positionality

Subjectivity is an inherent part of qualitative research as it requires interpretation and constant reflection on the data. To ensure transparency and to illustrate our perspectives, we describe the backgrounds of the researchers. The first author is a student in computer science, played in various semi-professional and amateur LoL teams, and also has years of experience in team and individual sports. The second author is a PhD candidate in Human-Computer

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[1]https://www.primeleague.gg/en
[2]https://www.uniliga.gg/
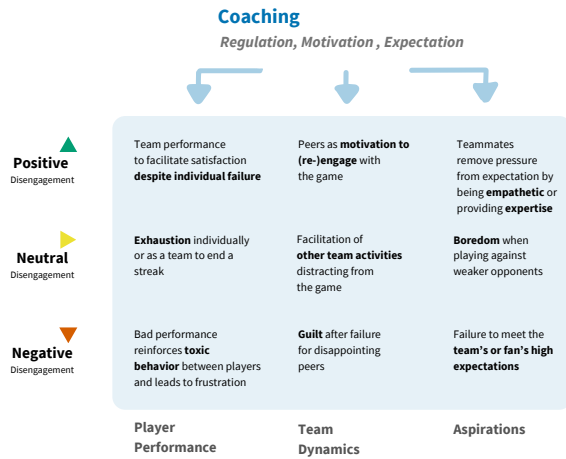
[3]https://bigbluebutton.org

Figure 2: Overview of disengagement experiences reported in our study from the perspective of player performance, team dynamics, player aspirations, as well as the moderating role of the coach.

Interaction (HCI) with a background in computer science and is currently involved in research on accessible sports. The author would rather play board games instead of digital games. While having little experience with eSports, they used to do team sports and now engage in individual sports such as swimming or cycling. They also regularly watch live sports at home and on-site. The third author is a professor in HCI with a focus on accessibility and game user research. The author has a substantial background in game user research and was semi-professionally involved in eSports. The last author is an HCI researcher with a background in computer science and game user research. Their work on games research involves the examination of game mechanics on player behavior and disengagement from games. All authors are strongly convinced that disengagement is an integral part of playing video games and that how players disengage is highly relevant to the player experience.

4 Results

In this section, we present the findings from the grounded theory analysis of the interviews with LoL players and coaches. We structure the results following the main themes of player performance, team dynamics, aspirations, and coaching, outlining their effects on positive, neutral, and negative disengagement. The results are further summarized in Figure 2.

4.1 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. However, there is a clear distinction between training sessions (scrims) and official matches: Results of scrim sessions were usually not the deciding factor afterward, whereas results of official matches were attributed to a higher importance for the teams' emotional state and how they perceive their exit experience.

Scrim sessions rather focus on progress and learning instead of success as defined by wins in the game. For instance, clear training goals as well as opponents that appropriately challenge the player are crucial: *"I think it's good to have a clear goal or an idea of what we're practicing […] I don't really like winning scrims because I think you learn the most from close games. If you're much better or worse individually [compared to the opponent], the scrims quickly become pointless"* (P5). While the latter was rather perceived unsatisfying, acquiring new skills *"as a team and learn [ing] something individually"* (P2), for instance, to focus on *"something that [the players] are not good at and improve that"* (C2), was attributed with player satisfaction and could, thus displacing the sole focus on winning a match.

In contrast, for official matches, winning is the main objective and has a strong influence on how players perceive disengagement. Generally, players are in a good mood after a win, which can also increase their motivation to re-engage: *"Of course, it gives you the motivation, but also the belief, and I think the team develops a certain naturalness. So, if it works, then it works"* (C1). However, the exit experience also depends on the individual performance. For instance, in a team, players may still feel satisfied after a win and disengage positively despite their individual failure: *"[S]o if you've played badly individually but still won, then you might be a bit disappointed, but not as negative as if you've lost the game. So I think there is a relationship there"* (P6). Nevertheless, being trapped in a winning streak can make it *"difficult to break this momentum at all"* (C1). This highlights that successful play does not necessarily result in positive exit experiences in competitive games.

However, a bad performance increases frustration and promotes negative exit experiences accordingly, also affecting the emotional connection among the team members: *"If you lose, especially if you lose often, then people are really tilted and leave instantly. In general, we were a relatively emotional team, and yes, sometimes people were already gone after the game before I could say anything"* (C2). Especially when playing with strangers, e.g., in Solo Queue (SoloQ)[4] where team members lack companionship and synergy, a subjectively bad performance can trigger toxic behavior from other players, e.g., *"when people abuse the ping system to spam people or be negative, that always makes me really angry because it frustrates me that this important communication channel is misused for negative things"* (P8). Such frustration can even lead to consequences for the well-being such as *"headache"* (P8), as one of the reasons players *"stop [playing] earlier"* (P8) than intended.

Finally, delivering a good performance is fatiguing for the players, and disengaging from the game was considered rather neutral in this context as the team was *"too exhausted and did not want to play a third game"* (P3) or *could not […] keep playing"* (P7), for example, because they were *"too tired"* (P8) to do so, thus requiring them to pursue a different activity or sleep.

4.2 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

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[4]Solo Queue is in LoL a game mode where players play without a pre-made party and are put in a team with other random players that match their rank.

and, thus, improve their performance. Companionship can further be the main motivation or incentive to play in a team in the first place: *"You can actually make pretty good friends [...][.] Yes, that's a big aspect of it"* (P2). Such strong connections affect how players re-engage and help to displace negative exit experiences. Especially after a bad performance, the significance of companionship has been noted as crucial: *"You're together in Discord [...], and I'm really so, so pissed off in the game, my mate then says, yeah, take a break, your game is pretty bad right now. Sometimes you think to yourself, yeah, no, he's just talking, or he just wants to annoy me, so then, um, you don't listen. There have also been moments when you've said, yeah, maybe he's right, then you take a break [...]"* (P2).

Disappointing the companions also negatively affects disengagement. After losing team matches, players often feel guilty: *"I used to regularly lose sleep when I lost. But not so much anymore. But also because I always make a lot of in-game calls. Then I always thought it was my fault when we lost"* (P5). Players also feel committed to their team and keep engaged in the long term. For example, P3 noted: *"If you play one semester in a team [...], you cannot just say that you do not want to play anymore"* (P3). But despite a strong obligation to not disappoint peers, guilt also stems from expectations that are implicitly or explicitly set in a team or, in the case of professional players, also their supporters.

To cultivate companionship and friendship, teams plan shared activities outside of eSports: *"We didn't set it up specifically as a team-building exercise, we usually just meet up and play a board game together [...] I think that helps a bit, a more relaxed atmosphere, and that you get on well with each other"* (P3). These activities can, on the other hand, also provide an environment for players to cope with negative experiences: *"For me, it was more like a waste of time because I think the week before the top-laner left. In other words, I knew anyway, okay, there's no real value in playing it now, except that we play the games when we want to play with friends"* (P8). This distraction may shift the focus away from negative disengagement and facilitate a neutral way of disengaging.

4.3 Individual and Social Aspirations

Other central aspects affecting disengagement experiences that were identified in the interviews were expectations and the pressure on players, especially at a higher competitive level. The main reasons for this pressure are the expectations for the players 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.

If expectations can be met or exceeded, the players feel relieved. Here, teammates can influence how players reflect on playing experiences retrospectively: *"It was a lot of pressure because I just didn't have a solution at that moment because I simply didn't have the experience. I think my teammate was actually very helpful because he was the person for me who was very empathetic and who knew exactly what to say to trigger what you need in a person at that moment"* (P4). This further underscores the importance of companionship as a team dynamic and the close relationship between aspirations and companionship.

With successful gameplay, the expectations for a team can increase. However, if a new player replaces a member that has left,

the same raised expectations still hold. P1 mentioned that this can lead to problems within the team: *"I think you could definitely tell that expectations had simply changed [...] there was a comparison very, very quickly, especially with our new Jungler [...] very quickly there was a feeling that, hey, maybe you're not as good as the old jungler and that's your fault, and we were such a great team, and that's also very, very toxic for the team atmosphere"* (P1). This failure to adjust the expectations in accordance with the current situation can lead to feelings of guilt and frustration.

Additionally, players and coaches underlined the importance of opponents who are comparable in strength: *"I'm not so satisfied if we simply win against a weak opponent. [...] I'm only satisfied when it's against strong opponents, and we've managed to come out on top, even though nobody expected it"* (P4). Here, it is necessary to consider different skill levels within a team and reflect on how this affects the individual experiences of satisfaction. However, the lack of satisfaction indicates exit experiences that are not perceived as positive but rather facilitate boredom in this context, which often can be attributed to a neutral form of disengagement [3].

On the contrary, some players perform *"better under pressure than with less pressure"* (P7). One coach summarizes this by stating that *"love it and embrace it"* (C1), showcasing that coaches have the power to set expectations and, thus, shape players' disengagement experiences. Finally, players stressed the importance of the professional level that shapes expectations. While lower leagues are *"less ambitious"* (P8), professional players in higher leagues have their own fan support. For instance, playing in a *streamer team, one wants to perform in every game, including the scrims, because thousands of people are watching"* (P7). With this, in professional eSports, the aspirations and pressure extend beyond team dynamics, individual performance, and coaching but also consider the expectations of the public audiences.

4.4 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 doing so, to some extent, coaches also coordinate when and how players disengage from the game.

When playing on their own, some players expressed difficulties in regulating themselves and their playing time: *"I was so frustrated that I accidentally hurt myself by hitting the table. And on days like that, when it gets so bad that I can no longer regulate myself"* (P8). Here, coaches can help to organize their players' schedules, for example, by setting goals together and helping players to balance their values or expectations: *"And there are also some players, [...] [they] had this thing, yes, winning is not so important to me in scrims, but I want to get better there [...] [others] said I want to win because they get their confidence from scrims, so if they win in scrims, then they also have confidence for the official"* (C2). Here, structured streaks can help players develop disengagement routines and avoid negative experiences. For instance, one coach introduced a *"closing hour"* (C1) to help players facilitate distance from the game. Thus, setting goals and expectations also affects player well-being and perception of exit experiences, underlining the importance of nuanced coaching strategies. To establish such positive or neutral

experiences, coaches can further support team building, companionship, and the overall atmosphere in their team. For instance, coaches can motivate their team and further contribute to positive (re-)engagement experiences: *"[T]hey had an unbelievable willpower, all of them. And that was just because of one dialog […] I said, okay, we are all in this together; we now have the opportunity to pull out everything from this team"* (C1). Here, their power to motivate and govern the team can change how players perceive their exit from the game as well as their notion of re-engagement.

5 Discussion

Building on the results of our analysis, we first revisit the research question. Then, we discuss the role of agency in multiplayer games along with player fatigue in eSports settings, and we reflect upon opportunities to support disengagement from multiplayer games through game design.

5.1 Answering Our Research Question

In our work, we addressed the research question *How is disengagement approached in competitive eSports games, and which aspects of gameplay affect players' experiences of disengagement?* Our preliminary results – also summarized in Figure 2 – illustrate that the performance of individual players and the whole team is the dominant factor in shaping the satisfaction or frustration of exit experiences. Further, the satisfaction and frustration with the session are dependent on the context and the players' goals. Specifically, in training sessions, the players expect to improve their skills. With this, it is important for athletes to play against opponents that match their skill level while winning the match becomes secondary. On the contrary, in tournament matches, the athletes specifically focus on winning and are frustrated if they lose. In this highly competitive setting, the players' need for competence is strongly present. These outcomes augment previous findings [3] with the relationship between players' performance and the experience of disengagement. Here, it is also important to highlight that individual performance not only affects their own experience but also influences the collective experience of disengagement. This finding is in line with research on team dynamics (cf. [15, 59]) and shows that companionship serves as a mediator that can soften negative emotions, such as frustration and guilt. At the same time, strong bonding between team players reinforces stress through implicit or explicit expectations of commitment and guilt if the athletes do not meet their own aspirations or the expectations of their peers. These intertwined connections between performance, coaching, and team dynamics underline the inherent social fabric of team-based eSports. These findings support Buchan and Taylor's framework for optimal play in eSports, which also highlights that the social component of play affects all other aspects of the experiences [15].

5.2 Lack of Agency in Multiplayer Games

Our results show that stress and pressure stem primarily from internal aspirations, team members, and the context of play (casual, training, or tournament). In response to Alexandrovsky et al.'s finding for the need for agency to yield positive disengagement experiences, this highlights that the players' sense of agency differs between these contexts and that in these settings, the players'

autonomy and agency is often impaired. In contrast, coaches try to motivate their teams without putting too much stress on them. Here, coaches play a crucial role in moderating the communication between the players, regulating the players' expectations, and administering structure to the play sessions that are tailored to the athletes' current states. In this sense, coaches can also help the athletes to reflect on their playing and current state and support their agency in deciding when and how to disengage. These results support the notion of disengagement as a complex process that involves strategic planning of the playtime, which requires accounting for players' affective state and post-play reflection [3].

5.3 Natural Endings After Exhausting Sessions

Long and exhausting play sessions often lead to a decline in players' performance. These results reflect findings from research on eSports training (cf. [9, 10]). With this, exhausted players often feel frustrated and exhibit toxic behavior, which frequently results in disappointing endings. Our results show that breaks and switching to other tasks, such as recommended by DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al. [25], can accommodate for exhaustion and allows players to end at a good point. However, in line with previous findings on neutral disengagement facilitated through boredom or tiredness in single-player games [3], in the context of team dynamics, our results show that collective exhaustion facilitates a natural ending that all players are happy with. In this context, coaches often take a moderating role, observing their athletes' performance as well as mental states and coordinating when a session should end or players should take a break.

5.4 Towards Disengagement Support in Multiplayer Games

HCI research and industry have examined methods to promote disengagement, mostly through tools that govern playtime. Such methods revolve around time trackers [29, 38, 45], nudges to disengage [66], and setting individual goals for engagement time [46]. However, these time-based methods of disengagement do not comprise what players experience at the last moments of the play sessions [3] and may yield frustrating experiences with negative long-term consequences on well-being [76]. Especially in the context of multiplayer games, the current landscape of approaches and tools to promote disengagement fails to account for the codependent experiences between the co-players. Here, our work highlights a strong need for better disengagement tools and designs that account for multiplayer settings and support the individual's need to disengage and deliberately facilitate *positive disengagement*. This involves game designs that actively support the players' autonomy [23] in terms of their investment and follow recent approaches of stillness [72] and reflection [57]. In the context of multiplayer games, slowdowns, in particular, could allow groups of players to rest after an engaging challenge, to reflect on their gameplay, or to prepare for the next period of intense gameplay [57]. Such methods can build on monitoring players' level of engagement throughout a session [53], provide game elements that unobtrusively encourage disengagement [6, 87], post-game visualizations that allow for players' reflection on their playing [57, 80], or tools that draw from

research on combating toxicity to moderate and facilitate friendly communication [47, 83].

6 Limitations and Future Work

This exploratory work provides first preliminary insights into the processes of disengagement in the context of competitive eSports. Our exploratory study focused on in-depth interviews with a small group of LoL players and coaches. While these results provide first insights into which aspects of gameplay, team dynamics, and coaching affect the experiences of disengagement, they require further empirical validation with a larger sample, for example, in the context of an online survey addressing eSports teams more broadly. Likewise, future work needs to examine how our findings transfer to other eSports titles such as Dota 2 [G3], Counter-Strike 2 [G4], or Valorant [G2] where the team sizes and the core game mechanics are fundamentally different. Further, our sample was mainly male-dominated, and the interviews might have missed valuable insights from other genders, especially in the context of toxic behavior. The sample, as well as the authors, have a Western cultural background, and their perspectives and social habits may be influenced by that, possibly limiting the transferability to other eSports communities. Finally, the first author plays LoL semi-professionally themselves. While this allowed us to conduct detailed and in-depth interviews with the participants, the interpretation of the results might have been influenced by the author's own experiences.

7 Conclusion

Today, the games research community has developed a substantial understanding of designing engaging multiplayer experiences. Yet, research and practitioners have mostly neglected to account for how players disengage from play sessions in the design of player experiences. However, this natural and essential part of the play is determinant for how players perceive their gaming experiences (cf. [34]) and their well-being [76]. This work follows up on recent work that characterizes exit experiences of play sessions in single-player games by Alexandrovsky et al. [3] and investigates how disengagement is present in competitive eSports games. We examined the characteristics of disengagement through in-depth interviews with eight semi-professional LoL players and two coaches. Our initial results substantiate the findings of the previous work while confirming the notion of disengagement as a complex process and highlighting the importance of gratifying exit experiences. Further, our study provides additional preliminary but differentiated findings concerning the effects of player performance and players' goals in competitive settings. Finally, as presumed by previous work, the interview results indicate that the social dynamics of multiplayer games tarnish the players' sense of agency when it comes to disengagement. With these preliminary findings, this work provides a deeper understanding of how players disengage in multiplayer games, helps our research community to design for better overall player experiences, and outlines an avenue for future research in the field of engagement/disengagement design in multiplayer games.

Acknowledgments

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A Interview Guideline

A.1 Questions for Players

Demographics and Background.

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- For how long have you been playing League of Legends?
- What is your motivation to play as (semi-)professional player?
- What is your motivation to play in a team?
- What is the highest league or competition you played in?
- How many matches do you play per week? Are they equally distributed? (Practice alone and as a team)
- Do you have played in a traditional sports team? For how long? What sport?

Team Structure and Typical Playing Session in the Team.

- What is the ambition/ motivation of the team?
- For how long does the team exist with the current line-up?
- How many sessions per week do you play together? (Practice session + match days)
- What is your Position in the team? (Top, Jungle, Mid, Bot, Support)
- How would you describe your role in the team? (e.g. leader, quiet)
- Are there training methods from traditional sports that you use? (suggestions if none known: warm-up games, rest days after matchdays, focusing on certain aspects in training)
- Are you practicing in other forms than playing? (E.g. review games, draft preparation, theory crafting)
- Do you do team-building activities together outside of the game?
- Can you describe a typical session from your perspective?
- How long is a typical session?
- How are the sessions structured? What parts do they have?
- Do you incorporate breaks? How long are the breaks and in what intervals?
- If the sessions are not structured, do you take breaks? How long and in what intervals?
- What are you doing in breaks? (take a break from the pc completely, just tabbing out of the game)
- Is there a difference in performance or behavior/atmosphere after breaks?
- Is there a difference in structure between training sessions and official matches?

– Is there a difference in atmosphere/behavior between training sessions and official matches?
– Can you describe the team atmosphere after games/sessions? (Satisfied, frustrated, motivated, uplifting)

Disengagement and Player Experience.

– What is your usual feeling after matchday (1. right after games and 2. the following day)
– What makes a good or bad session for you?
– How often is the experience related to performance results?
– Do you always feel like it was a good session after a win?
– Do you sometimes experience positive emotions like satisfaction or motivation after a loss?
– What do you think causes satisfaction at the end of a session?
– What do you think causes frustration at the end of a session?
– How do you handle frustration after games?
– Are there elements in the game, that influence the experience at the end? (frustration through game bug etc.)
– Can you describe when and how you end a session?
– Have there been situations where a session was ended sooner or later than initially planned? If so, why?
– Do teammates influence your decision to disengage? How and how often?
– Would you stop playing if a teammate or your coach told you so?

A.2 Questions for Coaches

Demographics and Background.

– What is your age?
– What is your gender?
– For how long have you been playing League of Legends?
– Have you played as a player in a (semi-)professional team before?
– What is your motivation to coach a team?
– What is the highest league or competition you played or coached in?
– How many matches does your players play per week on average? Are they equally distributed? (Practice alone and as a team)
– Do you have played in or coached a traditional sports team? For how long? What sport?

Team Structure and Typical Playing Session in the Team.

– What is the ambition/ motivation of the team?
– For how long does the team exist with the current line-up?
– How many sessions per week do you play together?
– Do you recognize roles in your team? (a leader, more quiet)
– If yes, can you see patterns in how they affect others in their playing behavior? (e.g. how motivated they are)
– Are there training methods from traditional sports that you use? (suggestions if none known: warm-up games, rest days after matchdays, focusing on certain aspects in training)
– Are you practicing in other forms than playing? (E.g. review games, draft preparation, theory crafting)
– Does your team do team-building activities together outside of the game?

– If yes, how do you structure it? What is the typical feeling of the players afterwards?
– Can you describe a typical session from your perspective?
– How long is a typical session?
– How are the sessions structured? What parts do they have?
– Do you incorporate breaks? How long are the breaks and in what intervals?
– If the sessions are not structured, do you take breaks? How long and in what intervals?
– What are you doing in breaks? (take a break from the pc completely, just tabbing out of the game)
– Is there a difference in performance or behavior/atmosphere after breaks?
– Is there a difference in structure between training sessions and official matches?
– Is there a difference in atmosphere/behavior between training sessions and official matches?
– Can you describe the team atmosphere after games/sessions? (Satisfied, frustrated, motivated, uplifting)

Disengagement and Player Experience.

– What is your usual feeling after matchday (1. right after games and 2. the following day)
– What makes a good or bad session for your players? Are there patterns recognizable?
– How often is the experience related to performance results?
– Do your players always feel like it was a good session after a win?
– Do you sometimes recognize positive emotions like satisfaction or motivation from your players after a loss?
– What do you think causes satisfaction after a session?
– What do you think causes frustration for your players?
– How do they handle frustration after games?
– Are there elements in the game, that influence the experience of your players at the end? (frustration through games bug etc.)
– Can you describe when and how you end a session?
– How much/often do teammates influence their decision to disengage and how?
– Have there been situations where a session was ended sooner or later than initially planned? If so, why?
– Would players stop playing if you told them so?