

Among the 2,500 employees working for video game developer and publisher Riot Games Inc., there's a mantra: Put the players first. Just as Beyoncé would not be the Queen Bee without her BeyHive of fans, Riot Games would not have enjoyed the meteoric rise to success of its "League of Legends" game in the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) PC sector if not for its own swarm of die-hard players. The belief in putting players first is why Riot Games focuses its business strategy on user experience in lieu of aggressively monetizing its game. And it's also the reason why in 2016 Riot Games invested \$7.5 million into a multiveneue event, dubbed League of Legends: The Riftwalk, in order to thank players for their loyal gaming.

In the seven short years since "League of Legends" launched, it has grown an online community comprising millions of passionate gamers the world over and has also spawned a "League of Legends" eSports division with enough video game spectators to sell out venues such as Madison Square Garden and the Staples Center in Los Angeles. The company is typically hush-hush about its numbers, but in a 2016 interview with gaming news site Polygon.com, Riot Games executives quietly confirmed that the game now has

A League of Its Own

Riot Games Inc. delivers an immersive Radio Frequency Identification experience that resonates with 20,000 gamers, earning player loyalty and setting social-media feeds on fire. *By Kelli Billstein*

an astounding 103 million monthly active players, up from 67 million in 2014. Considering that the total addressable market for MOBA games, according to SuperData LLC, which aggregates data on interactive media worldwide, currently hovers around 140 million monthly active users, Riot Games has about 75 percent of those eyeballs riveted on its content.

These stats put "League of Legends" in a league of its own as far as the MOBA game sector is concerned. It begs the question: If



Riot Games is doing so ludicrously well, then why pour millions into a multivenue event just to say thanks? The answer is this: The lifeblood of a game like "League of Legends" ("League" for short) is the fervency and satisfaction of its player community, tenuous forces that should never be taken for granted given that modern attention spans continue to wane and interactive entertainment grows increasingly competitive. As such, the event was more than just a chance to say "thanks for playing." It was an over-the-top celebration of the gamer community as well as an opportunity to make "League" evangelists out of thousands of loyal players. But unlike the game itself, this experience would be off screen and in person.

It PAX a Punch

Prior to 2015, Riot Games had taken a shotgun approach to event marketing, attending a smattering of gaming trade shows from DragonCon to MomoCon with no direct message to convey to players and no ostensible objective. Back then Riot Games' goal had been to cover as much ground as possible, reaching potential "League" players

MULTIVENUE EVENT

Company: Riot Games Inc.

Event: League of Legends: The Riftwalk

Objectives: Offer "League of Legends" players an unforgettable experience, celebrate the player community, and thank the game's loyal fan base.

Strategy: Connect with the "League of Legends" creative community at PAX East and accompany Riot Games 2016 League of Legends World Championship eSports events in five cities. Impress players with an experience that inspires online sharing.

Tactics: Engage the audience in an interactive tour, dubbed the Riftwalk, by using Radio Frequency Identification technology that personalizes the experience and enables easy social-media sharing.

Results: Generated millions of social-media impressions and engagements, garnered more than 20,000 registrations to the event's RFID microsite, and attracted thousands of fans willing to wait in line up to five hours to experience the Riftwalk.

Creative/Production Agency: The Trade Group, www.tradegroup.com

Budget: \$5 million or more

wherever they might be. In spite of those early hit-or-miss events, "League" spread like wildfire by virtue of its quality and enthusiastic online community of primarily 16- to 25-year-old males recommending it to one another. By 2015, staggering under the weight of its explosive popularity, Riot Games took a break from exhibiting and hit restart on its event-marketing strategy, bringing a new events manager on board and establishing a fresh strategy.

"We decided to invest in the biggest gaming shows that are community focused," says Elisha Cabrera, Riot Games' new events lead in North America. "PAX East is definitely that in North America, so we wanted to put all our effort into this one show."

PAX, aka the Penny Arcade Expo, is every gamer's utopia. Now having multiplied into five shows held in

various cities across the United States, PAX is a gaming trade show where "Dungeons and Dragons" aficionados, "League" fanatics, and the like can congregate to learn about the latest developments from game publishers, attend panel discussions, and engage in "cosplay," where they don elaborate costumes inspired by their favorite characters.

To make its PAX presence nothing short of awe-inducing, Riot Games teamed up with creative and production agency The Trade Group to plan, design, and execute an incredible experience. Riot Games gave The Trade Group three directives for its event at PAX. First, it hoped to create a real-life version of Summoner's Rift (the arena in the game where champions do battle), pillared by four awesome photo ops. Second, Riot Games wanted to show the love to its creative community by showcasing art produced by the players themselves. And third, Riot Games felt it was important to use cutting-edge technology to enhance the Riftwalk experience, while also simplifying and encouraging social-media sharing.

That social-media component was crucial to Riot Games because as Cabrera says, "The social aspect is what really draws people in. As long as we can reinforce conversations about 'League,' that's what's going to keep players playing. We wanted to make something that was conversation-worthy for PAX East, and our gut feeling was that the Riftwalk would do that really well." So three weeks prior to the show, Riot Games posted on Twitter and Facebook that it would be present at PAX East, but offered no hints of what players could expect to find.

Walking the Riftwalk

On April 22, 2016, attendees flooded the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center to experience three days of



all things gaming. Inside the lobby, they encountered a life-like statue of a "League" character named Lucian, fabricated by the masterful Hollywood creature creator Steve Wang, which served as a great photo op as well as a teaser of what was to come from Riot Games at the show.

The Riftwalk was located in one of the convention center's ballrooms, intended to spirit attendees away from the hustle and bustle of the show floor to the primeval, jungle-esque Summoner's Rift. Upon discovering Riot Games' presence was a whole immersive experience, attendees eagerly lined up behind velvet ropes that stretched down a long corridor outside the Riftwalk. At the entrance, they were greeted at a 10-foot circular reception desk framed in faux rock, where staffers strapped sleek, black Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) bracelets onto their wrists. The staffers instructed attendees to register their unique RFID bracelets on the Riftwalk microsite, which they could do in one of three ways: using one of the eight iPad kiosks outside the Riftwalk, their own smartphones, or an app that Riot Games developed especially for PAX East called MiniMap.

Inside the Riftwalk, attendees were immediately transported to the environment they recognized from many hours spent playing "League." All the house lights were off, and myriad theatrical lighting rigs mimicked the vivid colors of the game. A smoke machine piped cool vapor over attendees, and the ambient jungle noises of the game wafted in the air. Proceeding down the path, attendees heard a robotic voice announce, "Thirty seconds until minions spawn," a phrase that heralds the start of each game.

Measuring 15 feet in height, fabric graphics with verdant scenes from the "League" landscape served as



Get in the Game

Every detail was accounted for as Summoner's Rift, the battle arena in "League of Legends," was brought to life in three dimensions at PAX East. Graphics printed on fabric panels provided a suitable context, expertly created landmarks set the scene, custom carpet conjured the game's terrain, and faux rocks mimicked "League's" landscape.



both perimeter and divider walls, and a painstakingly hand-painted carpet — airbrushed to look like the game's worn cobblestone paths — led visitors along the choreographed experience. Faux 3-D stones carved from foam and placed at the foot of the fabric walls along with a mix of artificial and live ferns and foliage completed the scene.

Attendees followed a slaloming trajectory through the Riftwalk, encountering 27 different displays and four unique photo opportunities. Like anthropologists drinking in a history museum's artifacts, attendees ogled everything the Riftwalk showcased, from splash art and video compilations to busts of early "League" characters. Attendees could scan their RFID bracelets at any of these displays to have information about the artists and the work sent to their personal Riftwalk microsites.

Impressive features of the Riftwalk did not stop there. Cue the first photo op: a 12-by-15-foot-tall fountain-like landmark, known as blue base, made of resin, foam, and wood. Attendees chose a weapon (fabricated from steel and Fiberglas) and then struck poses with up to four friends as cameras captured a GIF photo comprising four shots. After attendees scanned their wristbands, the GIFs were also added to their personal microsites.

In the center of the Riftwalk was the most popular photo op of all: a sculpture of Baron Nasher, a multiheaded, sharp-toothed serpent in the game. Attendees posed below the snarling jaws of the 15-foot-tall monster for a 180-degree photo. The result was a frozen moment in motion, similar to a bullet-dodging Neo in "The Matrix."

From there, attendees continued through the Riftwalk past more community art and even "cosplayers" dressed as "League" characters. Advancing to

the third photo op at a 12-by-15-foot red platform reminiscent of an Indiana Jones temple exterior, attendees did a victory leap with their friends for a slow-motion video. And at the final photo op, attendees gawked at a 13-foot-tall puppet of a character named Thresh, a grim reaper-esque mutant that captures souls in his lantern. Riot Games commissioned 4 Itchy Tasty Cosplay to create the Thresh puppet, which was operated by a puppeteer inside it. Attendees cowered inside a recreation of Thresh's lantern, located 10 feet behind the puppet, for a false-perspective photo.

It was a Riftwalk to remember, and Riot Games made sure that attendees did just that. Within minutes of completing the experience, visitors received a special "stitch video" via email. Each video was approximately one minute long, with each participant's photos seamlessly interwoven with randomized "League" content, all set to dramatic music.

"If you did the multiplication, you'd see there were over a thousand different stitch video combinations possible," says Neeshu Hajra, vice president of business development for The Trade Group. "Friends going through the Riftwalk together would have totally different videos, making them feel completely personalized and almost one of a kind. Not only is that a special experience, but it also engenders virality and sharing."

As stitch videos and photos were shared on social media, word got out at PAX East (and the world beyond) about how incredible the Riftwalk was. The line to experience it grew so long that many attendees waited for up to five hours. A reporter for iDigitalTimes wrote, "If you are at PAX East and call yourself a League fan, you have to go to the Riftwalk. The lines are insane, but [the experience is] worth the wait."



Art Appreciation

Attendees were riveted by the art on display inside the Riftwalk. Created by enthusiastic "League of Legends" players, the art took many forms, from drawings to elaborate costumes.



Bonus Round

The Riftwalk was Riot Games' undeniable main attraction at PAX East, but that wasn't the only way the company connected with players at the show. The aforementioned MiniMap, available for free download in the iTunes store, featured social-media feeds pertaining to "League" and offered a sort of scavenger hunt, challenging attendees to answer questions about each of Riot Games' activations at PAX East in order to be entered in a raffle.

One of those activations was Riot Games' eSports presence on the trade show floor, where eSports collegiate athletes staged a live tournament that passersby could observe. Another offering was a cosplay panel helmed by eight expert "League" cosplayers who answered questions about their craft. Riot Games also invited cosplayers to a "cospitality lounge" where they could take a load off while enjoying refreshments, repairing their elaborate costumes, and using comfortable dressing rooms. Riot Games' own cosplay experts were also on hand, armed with spirit glue, heat guns, and paint to fix any of attendees' wardrobe malfunctions.

Because cosplay is a big deal among the creative community, Riot Games wanted to do something extra special for those who dressed up as "League" characters at PAX East. So an after-hours mixer was planned for the first day of the show inside the Riftwalk. Riot Games employees walked the show floor, extending after-hours invitations to "League" cosplayers. About 150 showed up to the mixer, where they chatted and posed for selfies, enjoyed appetizers and drinks, and listened as a DJ spun tracks.

Taking Riftwalk for a Walk

By the end of PAX East, it was clear that Riot Games' presence had been a blockbuster hit. Nearly 170,000

RFID wristband scans were tallied from interactions with the Riftwalk's various components and photo ops. Roughly 22,000 photos were delivered, and more than 31,000 microsite page views were tracked from Riftwalk attendees — a metric that impressed Corporate Event Awards judges. "Everyone has done RFID," said one judge. "But to have this level of interaction is really impressive."

Interactions aside, the Riftwalk scored Riot Games valuable face time with its loyal target audience. The company expected the experience to hold visitors' attention for 20 to 30 minutes. In reality, however, participants spent an average of 30 to 40 minutes exploring the otherworldly environment. During the first day of the event, the line for the Riftwalk grew from a 30-minute wait to a three-hour wait, and it would eventually extend to as long as five hours. "The true litmus test of success for Riot Games was the players' willingness to wait up to five hours in line for the Riftwalk," Hajra says. "Fans did it just because they heard from their friends online how incredible it was."

The Riftwalk was originally intended to be a one-off for PAX East, but after seeing this response from players, Riot Games decided to take the experience on tour alongside its eSports event, the 2016 League of Legends World Championship. The Riot Games eSports division had already vetted cities for the World Championship, so those locations — Toronto, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles — were guaranteed to have great "League" player turnout.

In New York, the Riftwalk was staged inside a loft in the Pennsylvania Hotel across the street from Madison Square Garden, where the eSports tournament was happening. Meanwhile, in Chicago and Los Angeles, the experience took place inside a giant outdoor



Strike a Pose

The Riftwalk was studded with four photo ops, each offering a different takeaway: a GIF image, a 180-degree photo, a slow-motion video op, and a forced-perspective pic. Attendees posed for each op at different points along the experience, then scanned their Radio Frequency Identification wristbands so that the content would be added to their personalized microsites.



tent. Thankfully, with the exception of the custom carpeting, the Riftwalk components were modular enough to accommodate various venue sizes and ceiling heights, making the unplanned extension of the experience possible.

Game Over

By the end of the tour, Riot Games walked away with enhanced excitement and loyalty from its already cult-like following. During PAX East alone, the company's social-media team seeded a few choice bits of content from the show, which instantly went viral among fans. Three short YouTube videos from the Riftwalk received 1.5 million views, five photos posted on Instagram garnered a total of 170,000 likes, and Facebook posts about the experience netted a collective 25 million impressions.

Foot traffic within the Riftwalk was off the charts as well, both in terms of the quantity of attendees and the amount of quality time they spent consuming content. A total of 20,000 players passed through the Riftwalk over the course of its tour, 11,000 of which came from the Riftwalk's debut at PAX East. Each of those 20,000 gamers spent an average of 30 minutes engaging with the community art and photo ops, amounting to 10,000 hours' worth of enthrallment.

An experience that pleases fans is all well and good, but a quick glance at 2016 revenue underscores the fact that Riot Games' strategy is paying off financially, too. According to SuperData, "League of Legends" earned Riot Games \$150 million per month, amounting to jaw-dropping revenue of \$1.8 billion by the end of 2016, creating a gigantic, practically insurmountable rift between "League" and its next closest competitors. **E**

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