Bringing Down the Banhammer: Understanding the Impact of Competitive Players on Moderation Tactics in *Overwatch*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how the need for player moderation tactics in *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) has shifted following the introduction of competitive and professional matches. With a player's season rank heightening stakes when playing competitively, so too does the need to avoid toxic players impacting their win rates. Alongside this, the analysis of forums and developer updates examines what values (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014) are embedded in the implemented moderation tactics, and players are responding to the tactics in community forums. This will provide a clearer insight on what data Blizzard developers are using to inform the design choices behind their moderation tactics.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the never-ending source of support that is my family. Especially my parents, Difna and Nicholas, who encouraged me to chase my dreams, even if it means I'm across the Atlantic for a little while longer. And to Jojo, who never fails to make me ugly laugh when I need it most.

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INTRODUCTION

My experience playing online multiplayers has never been relaxed. I somehow manage a simultaneous state of panic and utmost focus, trying to both help out my teammates and make sure I avoid getting hit from behind. I want to be the perfect teammate. *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) is a team-based multiplayer online first-person shooter, set on a "near-future" Earth (Blizzard Entertainment, 2018a). It was the first game I played online with friends. For at least a year after launch I was playing regularly with the same group of friends on the Xbox One. We each found the heroes we were comfortable playing, our team dynamic worked in some matches, and less so in others. Overall, we enjoyed playing together, and it was a great way to let off steam in the evenings after work.

Over time, our schedules changed, and big life events started to happen in my friend group. I moved to Canada to pursue my master's degree, and the time zone difference meant that slowly, we stopped playing online together. Then, for a class project I picked *Overwatch* up again in February 2018 (this time on PC) and something was different. I was playing with a different set of friends, who were equally as enjoyable to play with, but there was more pressure to perform this time. *Overwatch* on the Xbox One only has voice chat available to converse with your teammates, and we had used a private voice chat group through the Xbox Online service. For the PC, both text and voice chat are available. My friends and I were in a private voice chat group, but three other players on our team were strangers making use of the text chat to converse with us.

In one particular match a message popped up: "What is Lùcio doing?" I was playing the hero Lùcio – a healer from Brazil who uses music to heal or speed up teammates. What followed was in essence, a telling off, from this other player. For context, we were playing in "**Quick Play**[1]", the non-competitive mode, where there is no ranking system, just the chance to gain **experience points (XP)** to increase one's overall **player level**. I asked my friends if I was doing anything

[1] Bolded words are defined in the Glossary section.

wrong, it had been a while since I played after all, but neither had any criticisms for me. This player then also switched to a healer, insinuating that my skills were clearly not up to par.

The match ended and I was left feeling disheartened. Another match rolled through, and another player pointed out my mistakes when playing a different hero. It was a couple matches later that we stopped playing and I could not shake the night's experience. Was I playing so poorly to be the only one called out? Twice? Had I been letting my friends down this whole time? This player's level was significantly higher than mine. My account was brand new (in order to purchase *Overwatch* on PC) and I was only at "Level 1." In game, I would have appeared as a brand-new player – so why was I being held to any standards when I could very well have been a completely new player? At this point in time there was a clear expectation of play established in *Overwatch,* which was not prevalent when I had previously played – even in the more relaxed quick play mode.

Quick play mode had never been tenuous like this - there were no real stakes involved if a team lost compared to competitive where players can lose their standing in the **competitive ranks**. The expectation of perfect play from **competitive mode** had seemingly seeped into quick play. Why was competitive play on PC so focused on perfection, and so different to any of the competitive matches I had played on Xbox? This was because competitive play on PC is currently the only route to becoming a professional *Overwatch* player in the Overwatch League (OWL) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019a). Players were holding themselves to higher standards, to keep winning, and climb high enough in competitive mode to have a chance at becoming a professional player. Perhaps this was not the intended route of the player who chastised my play, but the expectations in competitive play had certainly rubbed off on them and they brought it into the amateur space of quick play where I was situated as a player.

Managing this conflict between casual and competitive players would not be an easy task for Blizzard, as it was likely that this was not an isolated incident, with potential to flourish into a community-wide problem. *Overwatch,* at launch, was heralded as a non-toxic online game experience (Webster, 2016) setting itself apart from the infamously "toxic" online communities surrounding games like *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation Inc., 2013) and *League of Legends* (Riot

Games, 2009). Yet over time, *Overwatch* succumbed to the toxicity, with it escalating by late 2017 (Kyanwan, 2017; McWhertor, 2018a). The increase in toxicity has resulted in players demanding better moderation tools via official forums to manage disruptive players, either for general abuse, or expecting high levels of play in the wrong spaces.

This thesis investigates how the introduction of the OWL has created aspiring professional players in *Overwatch,* influencing Blizzard's approach to how they moderate the community in order to maintain balance between the casual and more "serious" competitive players. Blizzard has responded to the ever-growing call from players and industry for better moderation in games – alongside a collective of other major games developers – to form the Fair Play Alliance (FPA) (Fair Play Alliance, 2018). With this as the backdrop to my thesis, I set out to track the discourses surrounding the implementation of moderation tactics to manage the player community, and the developer-community interactions surrounding moderation.

The presence of "toxicity" and moderating it in any online space is a significant challenge for developers and community managers. In both academic and industry literature "toxicity" has more recently been acknowledged as an umbrella term used to address any kind of behaviours and practices perceived as disruptive by the community (Fair Play Alliance, 2019; Lajeunesse, 2018). Outlining "toxic gamer culture", Mia Consalvo makes the clear connection between toxic incidents within the gaming community and the issue of misogyny at the heart of many of the conflicts (Consalvo, 2012). These toxic behaviours are present in the *Overwatch* community - both in game and out. For example, professional OWL (Overwatch League) Philadelphia Fusion team player and streamer "Eqo" used "racial gestures" (pulling back his eyelids to resemble Korean players) during his stream (McWhertor, 2018a). Eqo apologised both in a series of tweets and through the team's official Twitter, and he was banned and fined $2000USD for his behaviour. Another example is pro player "xQc", who was suspended multiple times, and finally released from his professional contract after making homophobic comments towards another OWL player. While reprimands are increasingly swift in punishing some high-profile players, they still continue to act poorly, setting a bad example for the parts of the community that looks up to them and normalizing such behaviour as an expected 'part of the game.'

This thesis builds on previous scholarship on moderating online game communities, eSports and forums. Research on moderating game communities has mostly covered older MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), such as *Everquest* (Daybreak Game Company, 1999) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Through her research on MMOGs, TL Taylor highlights the importance for nuanced moderation systems in order to respond to newly emerging player practices, introducing the idea of "participatory governance" between players and developers (TL Taylor, 2006a). More recently, Kou and Nardi completed a close analysis on the tribunal system used in *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) identifying it as a "hybrid system" where both "norms and rules" impact player behaviour (Kou and Nardi, 2014, p. 1). This research takes a close look at each moderation tactic in *Overwatch,* a MOBA (Multiplayer/Massive Online Battle Arena), extending research on MMOGs to MOBAs and examining if player practices/behaviours change in newer online gaming spaces. This research will also shed further light on how game developers moderate their communities, how the community reacts and the conversations between the two parties that follows.

With *Overwatch* initially standing out as a non-toxic game space, only for it to slowly become more toxic as time went on, I believe it is a key research site in the greater narrative of managing toxic communities. Blizzard have made concerted efforts to combat this rise in toxicity, reporting a 40% decrease in reports of toxic behaviour in 2019 as a result of their new social features (Grayson, 2019). In addition, I argue that this rise in toxicity was a direct result of the competitive mode and subsequent professional scene generating aspiring professional players occupying the same space as casual players. More specifically, the conflict that arises when competitive players use the more relaxed "quick play" mode, expecting the same level of play as they have experienced in competitive matches.

This thesis sets out to investigate the relationship between competitive players and how moderation tactics are implemented into *Overwatch.* Therefore, noting any changes in tactics, the values attached to the tactics, and player reactions are all key in building the bigger picture of moderation in *Overwatch.* For this research, I pose three questions:

1. How has player moderation tactics changed through the introduction of ranked, and then professional e-sports matches?

2. What values are embedded in the moderation tactics and how is that playing out in community forums?
3. What data is Blizzard using to inform the design choices of moderation tactics?

In chapter one I will cover current literature on eSports, moderation/governance in games, and forums. This will set up the framework for understanding the context in which the moderation of *Overwatch* takes place, establishing any prior investigations on other developer approaches to moderating massive online communities. This framework will also inform my methodology, discussed later in the chapter, on how to approach analysing the player forums and developer-community interactions.

Chapter 2 investigates the Battle.net and Blizzard player forums through textual analysis, looking at the general player discourses surrounding the different moderation tactics implemented over the course of *Overwatch's* development. The intention of this chapter is to highlight if the competitive players have had any impact on moderation, whether players note any shifts in moderation over time, and any recurring topics to do with player moderation. The forum analysis will give a clear overview of the player opinions on the moderation tactics, how successful they think they are, and what issues/solutions they might bring to light.

Chapter 3 probes the community-developer relations and the values embedded in them (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014). I analyse developer forum posts, either their own or in response to player-initiated forum threads to reveal any tensions or harmonies occurring between players and developers over the design choices for the moderation tactics. It is also to highlight any dissonance between the intentions behind the moderation tactics established in Chapter 2, and the developer discussions about them. On top of forum posts, I will also analyse the developer update videos on YouTube to establish how the developers are discussing the moderation tactics.

Overall, this thesis argues that there is significant bias towards competitive players from Blizzard. They are never overlooked, with the moderation tactics often being made specifically to support their style of gameplay. The developers also address competitive players directly in their discussions on moderating the community in both the forum posts and developer update videos –

and this does not go unnoticed by other players. The conflict generated between competitive and casual players is a key factor contributing to the implementation of the moderation tactics. However, the developers do not address this conflict directly, instead referencing the community as a whole when addressing toxicity and disruptive players. I suggest the next steps this research must take in order to provide a more well-rounded understanding of moderation lies in conversations with developers and players. I conclude that giving players control over how they moderate each other allows easier management of emergent player behaviours, but it is equally important to have a governing body with non-negotiable rules to protect those vulnerable to abuse online.

WHAT IS OVERWATCH?

Before beginning this research, it is useful to offer a fuller description of *Overwatch* the game as well as its developer Blizzard and their history in the videogame industry. *Overwatch* is an online multiplayer first person shooter (FPS) released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2016. It was the eighth Blizzard-Activision product to generate over a billion dollars (USD) revenue, disclosed in their first financial quarter of 2017 (Wawro, 2017). *Overwatch* has flourished in popularity since launch in 2016, with a report in May 2018 indicating that it had reached 40 million players worldwide (Statista, 2018). In the professional scene, the OWL was launched in November 2016, and has grown from 7 to 20 international teams over the last three years[2].

Blizzard is a AAA studio based in Irvine, California and are the developers and publishers behind major titles such as *World of Warcraft*[3] *(WoW), Hearthstone, Diablo III,* and *Heroes of the Storm (HotS)*. Over the years Blizzard have been embroiled in multiple legal disputes over copyright infringement, both for and against them, with one of the most notable ones being the filing of a cease and desist order against a private WoW server (Chalk, 2016). In this case, a group of players created a private server that ran a hugely popular "vanilla" version of WoW (a non-updated, classic version with no expansions or moderations), but this meant that they were not paying Blizzard to play. Thus, the cease and desist was filed, and the server was closed after much fighting on 10th April 2016 (Morrison, 2016). In response, Blizzard announced the release

[2] The most recent season generated 13 millions views on streaming services
[3] The world's most subscribed MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game) (Minotti, 2019).

of *World of Warcraft: Classic* in 2017, with the scheduled release date being August 27th, 2019. This amongst other lawsuits and discrepancies over copyright and ownership of content has, arguably, demonstrated Blizzard as an unempathetic corporate body to players. However, Blizzard are not the only developers to pursue their players with legal action. Developers of the popular franchise *Fortnite*, Epic Games, sued one of their players for using and distributing cheats via videos of the player using them on YouTube (BBC News, 2018). *Overwatch,* more recently, has become the launch pad for Blizzard's efforts against toxicity, collaborating with other games developers to create the Fair Play Alliance and pushing for better social systems to reduce toxicity within the *Overwatch* community.

How does one play *Overwatch*? To begin, players pick "heroes" from three different classes:

1. Support - healing, increasing damage, giving armour.
2. Tank - high amount of health and armour, protects lower health heroes, defensive heroes.
3. Damage - deal high amounts of damage, offensive heroes.

Then, players will queue into a match with either pre-selected teammates, or the game's matchmaker will generate a team for them. *Overwatch's* format is a 6v6 match where players must complete a team objective in order to win. There are four objectives that are randomised each time a game is generated:

1. Assault – players must capture and/or defend two points on the map.
2. Escort – players must escort a payload to the end of the map.
3. Hybrid – a mix of Assault and Escort, players capture one point, and this produces a payload for them to escort.
4. Control – players must capture and defend three points, one after the other.

If players win, they gain more XP, and **SR (Skill Rating)** if playing competitive mode, and if they lose, they gain less XP, losing Skill Rating if playing competitive mode. Skill Rating determines what competitive rank a player is in. The current ranks in competitive mode are Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, and Grandmaster. Once players reach Grandmaster, they are able to pursue a professional *Overwatch* career by competing in official semi-professional tournaments, hoping to be noticed by scouters.

A typical match in *Overwatch* opens with players selecting their heroes. For this scenario, let's say that it is a defending team on an escort objective map. The objective is to escort a payload through different checkpoints on the map. The defending team must ensure at least one player is close to the payload so that it moves along to the next checkpoint. Once a player has selected their hero, they enter the home base, where during the match they can heal, and be safe from the enemy team. A countdown timer ticks during this time, sounding in the final ten seconds, then the doors on the home base opens and the match begins.

There are many ways to outmanoeuvre the enemy, for example pairing up with a healer allows a player to keep their health bar up and delay death by enemy fire. If a player is killed, they respawn in the nearest home base. Another example of outmanoeuvring the enemy team would be using side passages to flank the enemy players, gaining an advantage by surprise attack. All the maps in *Overwatch* have high and low side passages to hide in or attack from. Killing enemy players, supporting fellow teammates and using a hero's "ultimate"[4] ability are all the core game mechanics occurring within the span of a match. Once the payload reaches the final checkpoint, the defending team wins.

Overwatch can be defined as a **MOBA**, even though it does not fit the typical MOBA genre format found in popular MOBAs *League of Legends* and *Dota* 2. Usually MOBAs have "lanes" (the top, middle, and bottom route on the map) and players pick particular lanes to suit their hero choice. In *Overwatch* players are not attached to one route, they choose from many paths and passageways to traverse the map. The game is not a continual world that exists, it is contained in a series of matches with win or loss outcomes. This means *Overwatch* cannot be considered an **MMOG** (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) like *World of Warcraft.* Being more contained means that the social interactions between players are equally contained to the matches, where in MMOGs communication persists while a player is online. This means studying MOBAs like *Overwatch* can introduce new questions of communication in online spaces, if them being more

[4] There are currently 30 heroes in *Overwatch.* Each "ultimate" is tied to their aesthetic and class – for example "McCree" is a damage class hero, designed after a Wild West cowboy. His ultimate, named "High Noon" locks on all enemy targets in view and "fans the hammer" on McCree's six-shooter pistol, often killing players instantly, unless they have particularly high health.

contained than persistent has any impact on how toxicity takes place, or more generally what the surge in popularity of MOBAs means in the greater context of online gaming.

To gauge any gaps in the field and what literature has already discussed moderation tactics in online games, the following chapter will explore the topics relevant to the research problematic at hand: how the professional scene has impacted the moderation tactics implemented into *Overwatch.* To do so, I will examine literature on: eSports to better understand what stakes exist within the professional gaming scene, moderation and governance, to discern what other tactics have been discussed, both in games and online in general, and forums to highlight the context surrounding them, and to help create a framework for my forum analysis.

Literature Review and Method

LITERATURE REVIEW

My literature review covers three areas of inquiry: e-Sports, moderation and governance, and forums. The guiding principle in this literature review is to investigate each of these areas as part of the larger picture in understanding moderation tactics in *Overwatch*, as each area feeds into my research questions. The first area, e-Sports provides an overview of the environment of professional play, and the stakes involved in casual turned professional players.

E-Sports

As a principle part of my thesis, the impact of professional players occupying an amateur space requires a deeper reading to better understand how these professional players have come about and what impact they have on the games they play. Literature on eSports has been significantly interested in how it can be defined against traditional sports (Adamus, 2012; Martončik, 2015; Witkowski, 2012). There is notable concern surrounding its legitimatisation as a "sport", in order to be taken seriously as a competitive space, and so parallels to professional sports are drawn. The defining characteristics include "competition" (Adamus, 2012, p. 481), and "regular training, team work or the perfect execution of tactics planned in advance" (Martončik, 2015, p. 208), seeking where eSports and traditional sports overlap as physical and competitive. By this I mean, the legitimization is drawn through the eSports requiring a level of physicality and competitiveness in order to be considered a sport. TL Taylor calls into question athleticism as a defining characteristic, defined as an "overt demonstration of physical activity and skill" (2012, p. 36), which Taylor argues is laden with cultural and social values, and rejects the idea of a checklist style approach to confirm what components of an eSport makes it a sport (which many previous scholarly works have used), instead looking at how eSports are constructed as "real" sports through play. Taylor looks at everyday play and tournaments as the foundation of what makes professional gaming a sport, where it lacks "athleticism" she notes that players embody concentration and skill in their posture, and a "deep internalization of moves" (TL Taylor, 2012, p. 39) for peak performance in tournaments. In a similar framework, Witkowski looks at how physicality is embodied in professional play while spectating a *CounterStrike* tournament and notes the multiple sensory layers occurring in a single match that players must adeptly navigate with fellow teammates in order to win (2012). While not physically running around a pitch,

Witkowski highlights the hand-eye co-ordination, knowledge of maps and coded language used in matches as an embodied practice. In short, these works acknowledge eSports as a legitimate competitive sporting practice.

Many works set out to provide a historical context and timeline as to how eSports came about. eSports can be traced back to early LAN (Local Area Network) parties and the popularity of playing and watching games in arcades (Borowy and Yong-Jin, 2013; Taylor, 2011; TL Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012). Specifically, Borowy and Yong-Jin discuss the birth of eSports as a result of companies capitalising on the "experience economy" in the late 80s for arcade events (2013, p. 2255), supposedly extending the consumer's experience beyond playing the game and into a social setting.

This leads into another recurring theme in eSports literature: spectatorship. TL Taylor's book encompasses several aspects of eSports, looking into its social and economic factors, as well the components of a "pro" player (p. 92, 2012) and the fandom that surrounds it. There is discussion of play no longer being a hobby, but rather a career with a network of actors and political/economical stakes involved in this performativity of play (Taylor, 2016; TL Taylor, 2012; Witkowski and Manning, 2017). Beyond the physical spectacle of the players, is the ability for this spectatorship to exist through streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv and the recording technologies (camera, microphone, streaming services) used to capture the intensity of professional matches (Taylor, 2016).

Several scholars make note of eSports being a hyper-masculinised and "doubly male-coded" space (Harper, 2014, p. 117), with male and female teams often being separate, if there even are female players present in the professional league (Borowy and Yong-Jin, 2013; Harper, 2014; Taylor, 2011; TL Taylor, 2012). This adds to the greater conversation of gender inequality in professional gaming spaces, and how the coding of these spaces have become masculine and heteronormative in interactions and expectations (Taylor, 2011).

A noticeable gap in this area of scholarship is that there is no grounding of this professional environment back into the core game. By this I mean that, while the larger arena tournaments do

occur, there are professional players and aspiring professional players playing the game in-client amongst other non-professional players. What impact does this have on an average player, especially when these professional players or even just highly ranked players are entering an amateur play space? Do these professional players solely play in a competitive gameplay mode? I would also argue that professional players are the ones being *paid* to play the game at a competitive level, so players can be highly ranked (Grandmaster level for example) and still not necessarily be a "professional" player. Otherwise, all who play the competitive mode of a game would be considered professional players – which is not the case.

Moderation/Governance

Literature on moderation or governance in games looks to the management of **toxic** players, analyses of moderation tactics implemented, and the difference of developer implemented versus community negotiated moderation with the design values embedded in them (Busch et al., 2015; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014; Kou and Nardi, 2014; TL Taylor, 2006a). Primarily these texts have looked at MMOGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) such as *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company, 1999) and how integral players are to building the gameworld (TL Taylor, 2006a).

A key concept involved in this particular area of inquiry is "co-moderation" (Duguay et al., 2018, p. 9), where users and designers combine efforts in order to make dealing with issues more efficient and effective. While not specifically referred to throughout the scholarship by this term, there are several cases where the "co-moderation" structure has taken place. Busch et al. discuss community governance through two case studies of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), and how the different approaches to community moderation resonate with the game development companies' corporate rhetoric (2015). They note how putting players in charge of moderation adds an additional form of labour (or "playbor") to the gameplay experience. Kou and Nardi provide a close reading of *League of Legends* where players were placed in charge of governing fellow players in a "tribunal" to choose whether they were punished or pardoned for their wrongdoings (2014). They suggest that there is an "ecology of governance" between the developers (Riot Games), players, forums and tribunal – reinforcing the fact that the system operates at a human level (Kou and Nardi, 2014, p.

7). However, players brought their own set of player expectations to the tribunal, to produce what Kou and Nardi refer to as a "hybrid system" and recognise that game developers and players produce their own set of rules and expectations (2014, p. 8). This is equally reflected in TL Taylor's approach to participatory governance in *EverQuest* (2006a). Taylor discusses how formal systems of governance do not have the ability to adapt to the nuanced meanings and practices players create and develop as an online community, and therefore require the community's input in order to be effective.

Outside of moderation in video games and their communities, literature focuses on "internet governance" in terms of media policy, social media and managing online communities – both in the technical infrastructure and regulation of users (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015; Freedman, 2010). Duguay et al. specifically analyse Tinder, Instagram and Vine to determine queer women's experience with how the platforms moderate content and users, often to the detriment of marginalised groups – and highlight "the disconnect between platforms' formal governance rules… and the impacts on user experience of platform architectures and cultures" (Duguay et al., 2018, p. 2). This sense of ambiguity and dissonance is felt in online games also, through EULAs and ToS (Terms of Service) (Bartle, 2006; Ruch, 2009; TL Taylor, 2006a). Busch et al. highlight EULAs and ToS as a means of legal protection and implementation, allowing Blizzard to claim ownership of custom content made in their game and protect their IP (Intellectual Property), by outlining the terms in legal documents that the player must agree to in order to access and play their game.

While both platforms and games have formal systems in place to manage the legalities behind operating and managing large online spaces, there are distinct differences between moderating them. For one, social media platforms rely largely on user generated content. Games may contain user generated content, such as "mods", but the moderation in place generally focuses on player behaviour in game, rather than what they produce. In addition, the neutrality of those creating these spaces differ. By implementing the EULA companies set out to be neutral hosts of content, but when game developers are creating and curating the spaces, they cannot be neutral in moderating. There is emotional investment attached to the game as a more "created" spatial experience than within a social media platform.

The well-known MMOG designer Raph Koster, however, leans away from how these legal documents work in favour of the developers and into the uses of EULA's and ToS from a player perspective, in the essay "Declaring the Rights of Players" (Koster, 2014), to provide a set of avatar rights to be applied holistically. His essay pulls apart his rule-set from 2000 and shifts instead to advise admins of virtual worlds (specifically Multi-User Dungeons or "MUDs") on how they should treat their players (Koster, 2014). To give a couple examples, Koster's original rule set included a rule to prevent players being "accused, muzzled, toaded, jailed, banned, or otherwise punished except in the cases and according to the forms prescribed by the code of conduct" (Koster, 2014), in order to protect avatars from being attacked by anyone in the MUD – even those with special privileges. Another interesting rule is: "A virtual community in which the observance of the code of conduct is not assured and universal, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all" (Koster, 2014). This rule is interesting because it states that a community that does not observe the formal policies in place is essentially a lawless space and therefore not a good attribute for an online space. So, from these two rules alone Koster makes it clear that the code of conduct cannot be ignored. His 2014 essay does highlight the issues of ownership and running a MUD as he includes the responses from a mailing list with admins and virtual world designers who disputed these rights throughout – with their main issues being that admins are people too, that avatars are only representations of players, and these "rights" would leave developers open to countless lawsuits. Koster argues that if admins/virtual world designers want their small game to become a thriving, popular one, there should be a sense of responsibility attached to it, as the space is unlikely to succeed without some kind of authority. He does, however, acknowledge the complexities of lumping the admins with all the work, suggesting a code of conduct each for players and developers in order to keep all within the game accountable.

This all provides an insight into the multiple social, legal and economic layers at work in any one online social system. While the "platform vernacular", (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 266) may differ, where "mediated practices and communicative habits of users" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257) shape how the platform functions – such as Twitter and Instagram using hashtags, but for different purposes, or particular vocabularies being more common on one platform than another. Even with differing platform vernacular, with some crossover in places, similar issues of managing

platform users do arise. This area of inquiry has highlighted the conflation between the terms "moderation" and "governance" as they are used interchangeably throughout the literature. Bartle writes on developers being deities rather than governing bodies of their virtual worlds, due to their ability to control all the "Reality" of the gameworld, and their ability to intervene without consequence (2006). Perhaps, especially with where this thesis is headed, this is no longer the case. Significant responses from player communities to developers when they are unhappy with components of a game through forums or articles suggest that developers are not as unaccountable as they once were. One the one hand, as Bartle makes clear, the fact game developers are capable of changing the "Reality" of the game gives them god-like qualities, but players modding and hacking games is not new – and this impacts the Reality of the game world. Similarly, with emphasis on protecting companies legal rights, EULAs (End User License Agreements) and ToS (Terms of Service) coming from the developers puts them in a more regulatory than godly position, as these agreements reflect that without them they do not have full control over their game world, and in some respect are not giving players free will in the biblical sense – but that's a debate for another time. As an overview, governance seems to appear as the overarching structure, the rules which users must abide by, whereas moderation seems to be the "on the ground" tactics to manage players, but this can easily become entangled back into the greater structure in the form of EULAs exist to combat players taking advantage of the software.

Forums

Scholarship on forums highlight the levels of toxicity occurring on them, and how they are optimal spaces to conduct large-scale attacks (such as doxing) as a result of their design (Massanari, 2017; Nagle, 2017). Massanari analyses the infrastructure of Reddit, for example, and coins the term "toxic technocultures" to define social platforms that propagate toxic behaviour (2017). Reddit is also highlighted as a space grappling with community expectations, such as privacy and anonymity of users amongst "trollers", highlighting the issue of people assuming false personas. One important example is the case of "Grandpa Wiggly, " who was briefly known as the "grandpa of Reddit" yet was caught out by diligent redditors finding evidence proving the person was not real – despite a significant amount of work done to uphold the identity (Bergstrom, 2011). The unmasking led to some users sending death threats and generally nasty messages to Grandpa Wiggly, and Bergstrom notes that this upending of

community expectations resulted in Grandpa Wiggly being labelled a "troll" (Bergstrom, 2011). The significance of this particular case is that it provides an insight to anonymous users on forums using anonymity to hide their true selves, or take on a character, meaning that trolling is not uncommon on forums as a result.

Other scholarship notes how forums are spaces in which participants generate a sense of community and similarity, often propagating the identity of the forum itself through the content produced – whether positive or negative (Fayard and DeSanctis, 2009; Massanari, 2017; Singer et al., 2014). In his book Kies analyses one of the earliest forums *Radicali Italiani,* a radical political party forum from around 1995, to determine its characteristics through interviewing members of the forum. He came up with four: "a public space", "a chaotic space of discussion", "an open but responsible space of discussion" and "a free and creative space of discussion" (Kies, 2010). While this is focusing on a radical forum, it does generate an insight into the overlap of purpose each member may bring to an online forum's community.

However, forums are also recognised as providing a space to communicate with developers and others within the game's community for assistance with either gameplay issues or player issues (Moeller et al., 2009). Moeller, Esplin and Conway provide an insight into the Pro-Evolution Soccer community, and the use of forums to vent frustration and call for moderation (Moeller et al., 2009). While these forums can operate as a useful mediation space, they can also result in developers (or more likely community managers) "cherry-picking" (TL Taylor, 2006a, p. 18) issues to respond to with concern, rather than addressing the wider community issues being presented.

From this literature review I have established:

1. eSports have been grappling to be taken seriously, and now that they have been legitimised through huge sponsorships, the existing level of spectatorship has been heightened through streaming services.
2. There is no literature investigating what happens when professional players mix with leisure and/or non-pro players on game servers, and the resulting impact on the non-professional player base.

3. Moderation and governance are frequently conflated terms in scholarship. For the purpose of this thesis, I will establish that governance has a more overarching and legal precedent, where moderation is more akin to "on the ground" tactics. For example, an EULA is a form of governance, a legal agreement between developer and player, whereas banning a player is moderation. I think this distinction will be up for debate as I continue through this project, but this is my current stance.
4. Forums contain a strange duality of meticulous information gathering by players/users, but also the potential to incite a considerable amount of chaos. They can provide a space to communicate, organise and produce solutions, but can also (quickly) devolve into angry and toxic spaces. This does not make them impossible to study, but it does mean that when analysing forum threads, I can expect an array of responses to just one forum topic. It will also be key to note how the forums are structured in order to understand the sense-making practices at work within this particular subculture of *Overwatch* players – as not everyone who plays the game will use these forums.

METHOD

The majority of this research took place in community forums, examining developer endorsed responses to community originating threads, threads of their own, and developer video updates. I looked at *Overwatch's* links to moderation tactics used in other online games (Connors, 2018; Jones et al., 2018) as well as player reactions to these new tactics both in game and in forums. Another key model that informed my work is Hall's model of encoding/decoding - where the message being sent is encoded with meaning by the sender, to then be decoded by the audience through their own frameworks of knowledge to interpret the message's meaning in sometimes multiple ways – this shows how players are producers and consumers (Hall, 1999). This is to understand how players differentially read and interpret (decode) the rules given by Blizzard (encode), and how these rules can then become "negotiated spaces" through the production of community feedback (another layer of encoding for Blizzard to decode and respond to), or twelve-page rants on forums (thus being producers) – providing meaning making and, potentially, oppositional readings of the core rules.

Since I am looking to highlight the developer values and corporate rhetoric within the design of moderation tactics and the game itself, Flanagan and Nissenbaum's "Values at Play in Digital Games" will aid in an understanding of how values are embedded in play and design (2014). Flanagan and Nissenbaum argue that within values exist the greater "sociocultural patterns" in "participation, community, and play" (2014, p. 3), and are therefore paramount to investigate in the growing games industry. They define values as: "properties of things and states of affairs that we care about and strive to attain" (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 5), they are something positive to be emulated through play, players and embedded by the developers. In addition, they hone in on ethical (such as kindness, honesty and respect) and political values (such as security, accountability and democracy) for their research – and these were the sets of values I drew from when examining the developers approach to creating and implementing moderation tactics.

Using Flanagan and Nissenbaum's work also aided me in better distinguishing whether certain values (such as justice or trust) are reflected in the discourse concerning moderation tactics from developers, and if so, are then actually implemented through the tactics themselves, or whether it is a façade of transparency, if that can even exist. This theoretical framework will also tie into Busch et al.'s concept of "corporate rhetoric" informing governance design in games (2015). Busch et al. define the political rhetoric in regulatory documents as "corporate rhetoric" as they analysed game developers' legitimisation of their governance efforts (2015).

My methodological approach was split into three parts. First, I collected data from forums via screenshots off of the Battle.net Overwatch forum and the now current Blizzard Overwatch forum. The time period for collection was between June 2016, when the first competitive season of Overwatch started, and March 2019, in order to include the most recent forum posts. In order to narrow the scope of this collection I searched key terms associated with the moderation tactics – such as "avoid teammate", "report system", "looking for group" and "endorsements" while also looking for general topic discussion under the search term "moderation". From previous experience using and reading forums, threads of comments can move off topic, so I will use my own judgement to determine which posts of the thread are worth collecting, and which are too off topic, while noting my justification down next to the thread. For example, a preliminary search suggests that players can go off topic and into significant detail on a particular hero being

"broken" or "OP" (overpowered), where the original topic thread might be about finding a group to play with – in such a case, I made note of the complaint, but did not provide any additional analysis. On top of this, I used the "most relevant" filter in order to avoid results being off-topic.

I read and collected a large number of threads that contained these key search terms, unless they were focused on non-game issues (such as forum moderation instead of in-game moderation). I specifically filtered my results once more into the two categories of "general discussion" and "competitive discussion" to filter out players filing bug reports, or asking questions about the game's lore. This resulted in about 250,000 posts appearing in all my searches[5]. From that I read about 200 forum threads (the original post and comments that followed).

My collection of forum posts added keywords worth searching as I went, and I noted these down and searched these terms as necessary (such as "meta" or "GOATS" to provide context on topics I was not previously aware of). Within the time frame of this research project, it was not possible to collect every post on the different moderation tactics, so was important to set boundaries around what was and was not relevant data as I proceeded through this research. What I was interested in most from these forum posts was to see if players were explaining the problems they faced in the game and if so, what solutions they are suggested. I chose forum posts that encapsulated all the comments and arguments being made in other threads. I also included any developer responses in the organically found forum posts – and specifically sought them out in the second part of my forum scraping. Time stamps from the site helped me in generating my timeline as part of my later method.

Second, I collected any developer responses to these forum posts, by specifically searching for "Jeff", "Scott" or "Jeff/Scott replied" (Lead Developer Jeff Kaplan and Principal Designer Scott Mercer are usually the ones who reply to community posts), developer updates from their YouTube channel featuring Jeff Kaplan (lead designer of *Overwatch*) explaining what new updates bring to creating a "more enjoyable gameplay experience" to use Kaplan's exact words (PlayOverwatch, 2018a), and developer initiated forum threads – including player responses. One

[5] The Blizzard forums did not give a more specific total attached to search terms – the 250,000 represents the total posts made in general discussion and competitive discussion.

player “WyomingMyst” was a MVP (Most Valued Poster) and had generated a thorough list of all developer posts and interactions with players on the forums, including categories, which I used to find all the relevant developer posts and interactions under the “Game Features and Functions” section (WyomingMyst, 2018a). I collected the developer content between June 2016 and March 2019 in order to pick up on any shifts in the discourse over time. Both sets of data were analysed through McKee’s style of textual analysis in order to draw conclusions and discourses from the community and developer interactions (McKee, 2003). McKee’s particular style of analysis is a post-structural textual analysis, meaning that it is only one way of reading the discourse, and is in no way a perfect interpretation, but one that seeks to identify the most common interpretation available. This research is trying to make sense of the community-developer relations, how they unfold through moderation tactics, and how players interpret these different moderation tactics. Therefore, a post-structuralist textual analysis is the right approach for this thesis. I considered each post within a thread and determined how players perceive the tactic being discussed, then from that discern whether it is an appraisal or complaint (or both) towards the developers, or whether it is a call for developers to recognise the issues at hand.

With both sets of data collected and analysed, I generated a timeline depicting the discourses surrounding moderation tactics alongside landmark moments in the game’s development, for example when each competitive seasons starts and ends, to visualise the forum posts and developer responses, and formulate an idea of the impacts each of these moderation tactics had from both player and developer perspectives – including the values potentially present within each of these design decisions. The timeline is constructed from the launch of the game up until March 2019, in order to contain all major moments in the game’s development. All of this will generate a clearer insight into how a AAA game development team has gone about moderating their players, and how players have responded to being moderated, and perhaps whether it has been a successful framework in tackling player issues, or side-stepping the problems entirely. Finally, I address my research questions in my findings:

1. How has player moderation tactics changed through the introduction of ranked, and then professional e-sports matches?
2. What values are embedded in the moderation tactics and how is that playing out in community forums?

3. What data is Blizzard using to inform the design choices of moderation tactics?

This is the major part of my conclusion, wrapping up all the data from the player forums, developer forum posts, and developer update videos to provide a clear overview of moderation in *Overwatch* and how it has been impacted by competitive players.

"Why can't we be friends?"

In this chapter I will provide the post-structural textual analysis of the player forums (McKee, 2003) to highlight the issues experienced by players with the specific moderation tactics deployed by *Overwatch*'s developers. Some of these threads do contain responses from developers, but I have saved forum threads initiated by developers specifically for the following chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to look primarily at the player input for *Overwatch*'s gameplay issues created by (or solved by) moderation tactics. This chapter introduces and discusses each moderation tactic discovered through my research, with a brief discussion as to what it is, and then delving into the player responses over time to the specific tactic. Then, I can briefly summarise the player discourse and interventions on the tactic.

Current literature has investigated players becoming professionals in e-sports, and casual players of mobile games, but it has not considered the implications when these two types (which exist on a spectrum) mix as one population in a game. Jesper Juul discusses how *Guitar Hero* provides a space for mastery, through heightened difficulty in playing each song, and leisure play through the "no fail" mode which allows players to complete songs with no penalties (Juul, 2012). Juul also indicates the "mastery" players show great discontent toward the "no fail" mode, not wanting their own ability to be "diminished" (Juul, 2012, p. 143). Unlike *Overwatch, Guitar Hero* is not online, and therefore the mastery and leisure players do not mix in the same space, unless they happen to be friends. But in general, they do not play alongside one another. In *Overwatch,* especially in the quickplay mode, the player population is an unpredictable mix of leisure and competitive players. My intention for this analysis is to use the discourse surrounding the moderation tactics to highlight the rift between casual and competitive players, and how this rift causes conflicts in what players might expect and want from their gameplay experience.

I obtained the data in this chapter from Battle.net and Blizzard forums, as Blizzard Entertainment moved the forums to a different domain on February 20th, 2018. I organised the search results by "most relevant" in order to avoid off topic forum threads. The length of forum threads varied from one single post to discussions over nearly six months, also the content within them has either remained wholly on-topic or immediately devolving into off-topic debates between players

about better heroes to play and so on. I have also ordered the data by main topic and chronologically in order to show the evolving conversation around these tactics.

There are four systems that I will discuss in this chapter including the Report System, the Avoid as Teammate system, the Endorsements system, and the Looking For Group system. After introducing each system, I move to analyse key threads/discourses that I have identified about each moderation tactic. The threads are grouped by tactic, and discussed chronologically, to determine how player responses may have shifted (or not) over time.

REPORT SYSTEM

The report system (a system found in many multiplayer games which allows players to report other players to the game's developers for inappropriate/harassing/generally bad behaviour) in *Overwatch* has evolved since its initial launch in May, 2016. In the early months, it was a simple system, where a player would go into their "social menu" (to access friends, change settings), find their list of "recent players" (a list of up to 63 recent people a player has encountered in matches) and click on a player to report them to game authorities. That action brings up a drop-down menu and text box where the player can select from four choices: "inappropriate Battletag[6]", "harassment", "spam" or "cheating". The text box is used to give more specific details for why a player is reporting someone. Around 2017 (when the report system was added to consoles) three additional categories were added: "poor teamwork", "griefing", and "inactivity", while "harassment" and "inappropriate Battletag" were removed (JayWaddy, 2017). Additionally, descriptors for each of these categories were added to clarify what was and was not considered part of that category, likely to avoid false reporting. In May 2018, Blizzard updated these categories again, removing "poor teamwork" and "griefing", condensing them into simply "gameplay sabotage". One of *Overwatch's* principal designers Scott Mercer explained that the two categories were vague and the new category made it easier to know why a player was reporting another player (Mercer, 2018a, 2018b).

[6] Battletags are user names for Blizzard games (named from their Battle.net client).

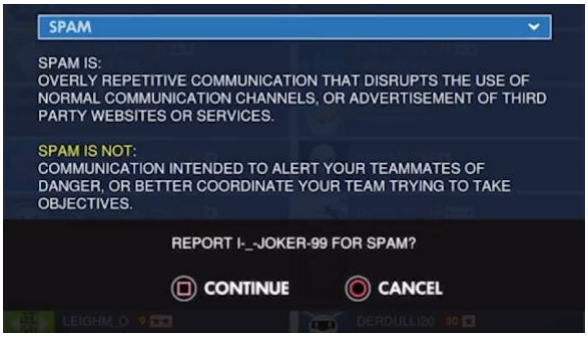


Fig 1. Reporting a player for "spam" with the new descriptors (JayWaddy, 2017).

AVOID AS TEAMMATE

The "Avoid as Teammate" (AaT) tactic evolved from "Avoid this Player" in the early months of *Overwatch.* Similar to the report system, a player would click on another player's icon and select "Avoid this Player" to permanently avoid the player from appearing in their matches. The flaw with this first avoid system was that it allowed players to avoid players as opposition as well as teammates, which meant they could tailor the difficulty level of their competitive games, hence why it impacted matchmaking and one particular high-ranked player (who was a very tough opponent) was avoided en masse. The official justification behind the removal of AtP was because this mass-avoided top ranked player was then unable to get into any competitive matches. Blizzard removed the tool directly as a response to this in June 2016, and due to its severe impact on matchmaking not just for the professional player – the unlimited amount of "avoid" slots, and players using them liberally, meant that the game's matchmaker systems struggled to generate teams overall (Prell, 2016).

In response to this removal, the developers brought in Avoid as Teammate a year and a half later. 18 months is a wide window of time to have lost such an impactful moderation tactic, without offering an improved replacement. Yet, the AaT system generated its own controversies, with players now potentially avoiding players simply for having different play styles, possibly facing long wait times to play because so many players were being 'avoided,' and no meaningful feedback from developers in explaining why the number of avoids was seemingly small (players were allowed two avoids) with no possibility to increase it. While AaT may have created a preventative method in reducing toxicity in matches by stopping players who do not play well

together – it at the same time fostered a climate where players could dictate how people should play the game, and who, canonically, was avoidable.

ENDORSEMENTS

Developers released the "endorsements" tool in a major **patch** update to the game, alongside the "looking for group" (LFG) function in late June 2018 with the intention to have moderation tactics that instead of punishing bad behaviour, encouraged good behaviour. It is not clear whether this was a direct response to player demands for better ways to moderate the community, or whether this was a pre-planned system. The concept of the endorsement tool was to provide a way to flag whether a player is a good teammate or a toxic player by providing an "endorsement level" going from 1 (the lowest) to 5 (the highest). The system was also Blizzard's approach to fostering a more positive gameplay environment. Instead of focusing on punishing players they set out to provide the tools necessary to encourage players to be kinder to one and other – resulting in a reported 40% drop in toxicity after its implementation (Grayson, 2019). At the end of a match, players can endorse a teammate or enemy (so long as they are not friends on the platform) via three different types: "shot caller: leader, strategist", "good teammate: helpful, effective communication", and "sportsmanship: positive, respectful".

Depending on a player's endorsement level, they can receive "periodic" loot boxes[7] equivalent to their level (Overwatch Wiki, 2019). This incentivises players to maintain a high endorsement level through behaving well and coordinating with teammates in matches. Players can only endorse a specific player once every 12 hours, and endorsing players gives 50XP, with a maximum of three players per match (out of 11 players). If a player is banned or receives enough actionable reports, their endorsement level is reset to 1.

[7] Loot boxes are in-game and purchasable rewards containing five randomised cosmetic items, such as character "skins" (costumes/outfits) or new player icons. These cosmetics vary in rarity, with the rarest items being highly sought after by players. Gaining more loot boxes means another chance at receiving the rare items.

Fig. 2 Endorsement level icons. (Source: *Overwatch* Wiki "Endorsements")

LOOKING FOR GROUP (LFG)

The basic purpose of the LFG system is to help players find other players to group up with and play matches together. Players initially used the Battle.net forums to either find or set up a group to play with. This then migrated over with the new forum host to Blizzard's forums, where there was a designated sub-topic on the forums dedicated to helping players find and create groups for the different consoles (PC, Xbox and PlayStation 4).

The in-game LFG system allows players to set up parameters for who they want to join their group, what roles are available (i.e. healer or tank), the competitive tier they might be working towards and having voice chat, to name a few. It can also be used to meet new players who are not necessarily interested in competitive play, and play in a more socially connected manner than through the internal matchmaking system, where players may encounter problematic teammates. Where LFG allows players to select others to play with, the internal matchmaking system generates teams through internal algorithms, with no player input on what teams they are placed in. In essence, LFG curates a player's team, and by extension their gameplay experience.

MODERATION

I began my forum search with the general term "moderation", rather than the specific tactics, in order to gain an overall understanding of how players perceive and discuss moderation tactics. Yet this initial search produced a wider array of topics than was relevant to this project. A significant amount of the forum threads I found discussed how the forum itself was moderated (Blizzard have moderators who close threads if they get too "toxic" or off-topic, or timeout users who are trolling the forums), and some players disputing why they were banned (which is also against forum rules) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019b). As a result of this, it is possible that a lot of

the forum threads on these sites may have been deleted for containing inappropriate content before I began this research, meaning these remaining threads have been somewhat curated.

The following threads and analysis are arranged chronologically. There are some recurring topics in the threads, like community moderators for example, and in order to track the wider player discourse on moderation over time I have not specifically grouped these sub-topics together. The threads below are compiled from everything I collected as the ones that remained most on topic from the initial post, contained recurring themes or opinions, or any that generated long discussions (high amounts of responses from players). With the purpose of this chapter being to highlight player interventions and discourses surrounding the moderation tactics, it is key to analyse how they discuss moderation in a more general sense, before going into specific moderation tactics.

DEC 1st, 2016 – "Is there any moderation for voice chat?"

Goedmaker[8] opened this thread in the "general discussion" topic, and it received five responses from other forum users and no intervention from Blizzard. It was one of the earliest threads addressing moderation in *Overwatch* I came across, framing the first instance where a player has spoken up about moderation in general. This thread focused on understanding how Blizzard are able to handle players reporting problematic individuals who have been using voice chat (usually via a headset with a microphone attached) to use slurs, expletives or generally scream at fellow players on their team. This "comms abuse", as it is colloquially referred to, is a direct result of *Overwatch* being a social space and impacts both casual and competitive players. Goedmaker (the forum thread poster) does not understand how these players can be reported as Blizzard doesn't collect voice chat logs, and therefore there is no clear evidence to submit when reporting. In essence, Goedmaker's understanding is that players can get away with being abusive on voice chat repeatedly and avoid any penalties through the formal report system due to a lack of evidence (Goedmaker, 2016).

The thread is fairly short, one user responds that "Online interaction is not rated by the **ESRB**" making a point as to why players will be toxic in online multiplayers, inferring it as a lawless

[8] Usernames are taken directly from the publicly accessible forums.

space without a formal ruleset in place, when in actuality Blizzard has a clear code of conduct (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019c). The user also highlights that it is impossible to listen to all the voice chat data as it would take too many employees, and too much money to coordinate such a moderation tactic.

Another user shifts the topic slightly, stating that some players were being muted by their team simply for playing an unpopular hero. This is something that crops up throughout the forum threads, where particular heroes are disliked en masse within the player community, either due to them being too powerful, or an association as to what kind of player uses the hero. This mass muting appears to be an early emergent moderation tactic generated by the player base to punish particular players (and heroes) and discourage them from playing these heroes. It's key to understand that the choice of hero is important in competitive play, as each hero has a recommended "counter" hero, where "counters" can prevent certain attacks, and play to the weaknesses of the hero they oppose. Players muting others for choosing, or sticking with, certain heroes instead of picking counter-heroes is more likely to occur among competitive players than leisure players – unless they really despise one particular hero.

The final post on this thread is one that appeared consistently on forum threads discussing toxic players stating: "1. mute 2. report 3. get over it" (VitamiX, 2016). While a rather curt response to Goedmaker, it represents a mindset of many players who exhibit and voice their frustration on these particular forum topics, who don't understand why players complain when there is a report system already in place to deal with toxic players – in whatever form that takes. Certainly, what they are suggesting would possibly prevent Goedmaker from experiencing future abusive voice chat and direct the toxic player through to the report system where they, ideally, will face repercussions. However, as *Overwatch* is designed to be a team game, many players have flagged the importance in being able to coordinate and communicate with fellow teammates, and that is difficult to do when players are **muting** each other for abusive chat, hero picking or issues with microphones. This is also the very first forum thread from my data collection and it is already clear that there are layers of social and mechanic conflict occurring simultaneously.

MARCH 17h, 2017 "MODERATION OF IN GAME VOICE COMMS"

This thread, originated by RATSTAB, again returns to the issue of how to best moderate voice chat in *Overwatch*, with two respondents offering their opinions. The two respondents have vastly opposing opinions to each other and to the initial post on RATSTAB's search for an effective method to manage voice chat within the game itself. RATSTAB suggests that instead of muting or immediately banning players through the push of a button that there could be an in-game function to flag or "tag" players who are being abusive via voice chat, for Blizzard support staff to follow up on and track (RATSTAB, 2017). Voice chat is a consistent site of issues for players in any game that uses it, not just *Overwatch.* Wright et al.'s extensive study of *Counter-Strike's* (Valve Corporation, 2000) community interaction refers to disruptive text chat as "Insult/Distancing Chat" as an umbrella term, covering trash talk to deeply racialised, gendered or homophobic talk (Wright et al., 2002). Nakamura specifies that voice chat allowed for a "new kind of mediated race, sex, and gender discrimination" and that users had begun to create blogs to expose players participating in these discriminatory practices (Nakamura, 2012).

Three months after the December 2016 post on voice chat abuse, the issue surfaces again. It would seem the report system within the game is (still) not able to support and solve this issue. Though it would be a considerable financial investment for Blizzard to employ workers to listen to and moderate all the reported "toxic" voice communications, Blizzard gained record net revenues of $7.50 billion at the end of 2018. It is therefore a financially feasible moderation tactic to be stricter on voice chat bans. Yet the fact remains that the report and punishment systems have not impacted the in-game toxicity and complaints *of* toxicity in any meaningful way.

That being said, the player-initiated discussions on these forum threads set out to give suggestions or at the very least ask the community their own stance on how to solve these problems. Players are not immediately complaining that the developers are not doing their part, but rather the players are offering insight and an understanding as to the massive undertaking that is combating toxicity in this size of an online multiplayer game[9]. Entering into this part of my

[9] In fact, *Overwatch* was about to reach 30 million active players the month following this forum post: (Altar of Gaming, 2018)

research, I admittedly expected the conversation to be player focused, with players only interested in themselves and their play, when in fact the players are also looking to alleviate the amount of work that Blizzard has to do by asking for moderation tactics that they can implement themselves, such as the "tag" a player suggested in RATSTAB's post. This thread is again short, with only two responses this time, and no intervention from Blizzard.

In this post RATSTAB suggests dealing with voice chat is a complicated issue, not to be addressed simply by players with "banhammers or instant mute nuke buttons", but via an authoritative body in the form of the support staff, with the assistance of the players tagging toxic individuals for them. The first response reflects how players have previously abused the report system implemented by Blizzard to target other players with mass reports. Equally, RATSTAB does not want a report function that lacks nuance: a "banhammer" is suggestive of instantaneous and swift removal of players, with no chances to appeal the ban. By placing a moderation tactic into the players hands, giving them the control in these situations, the consensus is that players will abuse the tactic – and this has been the case in *Overwatch* (see *Avoid this Player section below*) and in others, such as *League of Legends'* "tribunal system" (Kou and Nardi, 2014). On top of this, RATSTAB refers to "Xbox Live circa 2013" to describe how players are behaving in voice chat. Xbox Live is regularly flagged as a toxic communication space, with an abundance of racist and sexist comments being used against players who do not fit the hegemonic ideal of a white, male gamer (Gray, 2014). What RATSTAB highlights is that toxic players in voice chat have maintained the same attitudes from other online game spaces and are behaving inappropriately in the online chat space provided to converse with teammates, creating an unproductive and negative communication space. There is an expectation that with time, player behaviours should have developed beyond this toxic mindset of verbal abuse being an acceptable way to talk to other players, unfortunately this is not the case.

The second respondent calls out RATSTAB for muting people they do not want to hear, deeming RATSTAB equally as problematic as those being toxic stating: "Mute that person **you** cannot stand? What exactly do we find "problematic" now?" highlighting the subjectivity of what players deem problematic, and therefore mutable, in voice chat. RATSTAB does not respond to the replies on their thread and so the conversation ends.

Voice chat is a holistic player issue and does not solely affect casual or competitive players, plus this particular kind of toxic voice chat that RATSTAB is referring to is less to do with how players play, and more to do with racism, sexism and general verbal abuse. Of course, there are instances where disruptive players will draw on a player's ability and assume who is behind the screen, such as the ever-tiring notion that "girl gamers" cannot play well. The conflict between competitive and casual players mixing in quickplay may include this, but it cannot just be attributed to the instance of these players mixing, as general verbal abuse occurs across the game.

APRIL 6th, 2017 "VOICE CHAT MODERATION NEEDS TO BECOME A THING"

Based on its recurrence, voice chat would seem to be a recurrent conflict in game, as another thread on voice chat moderation appears in my search results. This thread, however, delves deeper into the problems surrounding the practicalities of moderating voice chat. The number of dislikes next to SFJake's post caught my attention – it received nine dislikes on the opening post. Nine is not a large number overall, but it was the first relevant thread on moderation I saw with any dislikes. It is not clear whether this is the responding/reading players' way of showing total dislike of SFJake's opinion, whether other players think SFJake is asking for too much, or other players just generally don't like SFJake. This post received 15 responses, with replies from SFJake appearing throughout, and again – no intervention from Blizzard.

SFJake starts this thread by articulating a sense of frustration towards Blizzard, making a point of their net worth, and financial ability to implement a system to moderate voice chat through collecting a small fragment of the abusive chat rather than the entire match voice chat data. SFJake also takes this issue outside of *Overwatch*, tying it to a longer history of online bullying in multiplayer games, how it impacts all types of online games, and how it seems no games companies are interested in preventing it. The lack of accountability also seems to be aggravating SFJake, specifically that offending individuals are able to continue being rude on voice chat with no consequences, because the report system cannot collect clear evidence of offensive voice chat, unlike text chat (again, much like the previous forums on this topic). This signals to me that Blizzard are not clear on how their report system works, what the follow up on reported accounts is, or what form that might take. No sources confirm that Blizzard collects and examines voice

chat, only the reports of abusive voice chat. Blizzard tends to hide many of *Overwatch's* systems (both social and mechanics) in order to prevent players exploiting them (D'Anastasio, 2017). How do they punish those on voice chat with only the word of a player reporting them, especially if there have been consistent abuses of the system, meaning mass reports could also be another form of griefing by trouble-making players? How can they assure these players that comms abuse is being dealt with? There is no feedback system for players who file a report, and so their reports go off into the aether, with no clear sense as to whether any repercussions have arisen from the report. With this, it is not surprising the volume of forum threads on this topic.

The first respondent to SFJake's post essentially asks for actual solutions, rather than complaints, and highlights the difficulties associated with moderating voice chat including language barriers, accents and audio issues. Brycerras (the first respondent) does not discount toxic voice chat as an issue, but in their mind the "mute" function is the most effective current moderation tactic, and one that the player has the ability to immediately implement if needed. The "just mute" approach to problematic players is not a new phenomenon. In the late 90s, Julian Dibbell wrote on governance in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), specifically LambdaMOO, where a player used a sub-program to force another player to perform sexual acts against their will. This was met with much uproar and calls for the offending player to be removed entirely from the game, but when it resulted in a wider questioning of how LambdaMOO was to be governed in future instances, many players highlighted that experiencing mean players was inevitable and using the "@gag" command was a simple and effective method without censoring players (Julian Dibbell, 1998). In a similar line of thinking, Brycerras make the point that if communication has broken down so much already in a team, then keeping the voice chat open for "team work" is not going to provide any real coordination.

Voice chat has a dual function: it is both a tool to communicate efficiently with teammates, and a weapon to abuse teammates for whatever reason the offender chooses. However, if players can and are being silenced in text chat for being disruptive then it does mean that in-game communication moderation is not consistent, as text chat is easier to report than voice chat. The lack of consistency means these problematic players will continue to use voice chat in the way they want, until they face any kind of repercussions. By way of contrast, Microsoft, for Xbox

Live, introduced “communication bans” for players who were repeatedly reported for toxic voice chat, lasting between 1-14 days (Microsoft, n.d.). This was done to deal with the normalised toxic behaviour on their platform, by removing all forms of communication from an offending player’s reach. Account silences in *Overwatch* only seems to refer to text chat on the Blizzard support site (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019d), but players receive both voice and text chat bans when their account is silenced.

SFJake tries to provide tangible solutions to the problem, not quite in the same way as the previous forum thread, as SFJake wants Blizzard to deal with it themselves, rather than the players having a button to “tag” players. SFJake suggests that Blizzard’s servers could “record” the voice chat from matches and if a player is reported, the match’s voice data is sent to the moderation team – otherwise it can be deleted over time. The more basic “mute” tactic is clearly not satisfactory in dealing with the toxic players SFJake encounters and he is seeking a more effective solution to prevent these players from being offensive to everyone, rather than just silence them for himself. SFJake also recognises the threat of players abusing the system, suggesting a “lock out” function for those who try to use the report system incorrectly, and he has no doubt that this countermeasure would be required.

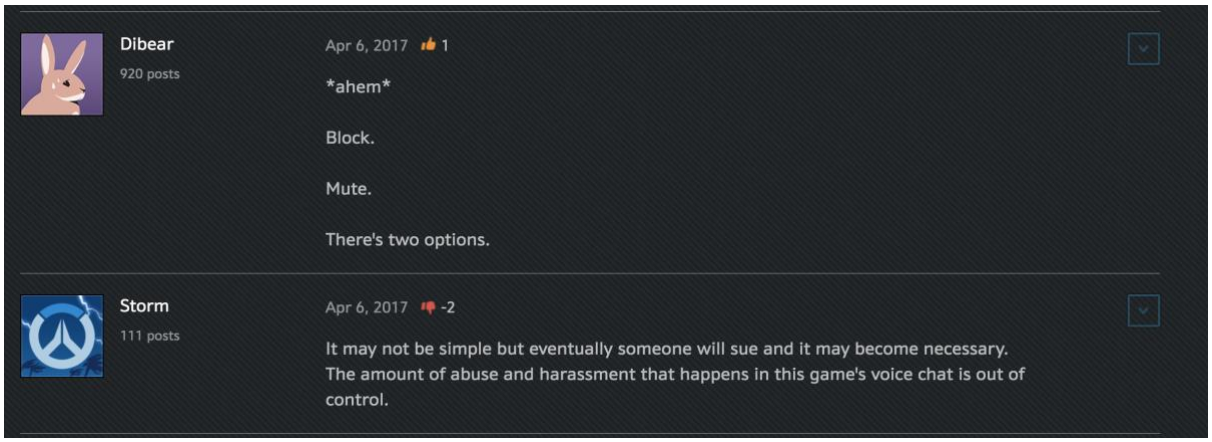


Fig 3. Two players responding to SFJake’s post (SFJake, 2016)

More complicated solutions – here with a “thumbs down” -2 (Fig. 3.) in comment rating - are less popular with players on the forum thread. The user “Storm” believes that abuse and harassment is so bad that it could result in a lawsuit against Blizzard. It breaches a larger question about the

legality of online abuse, because while Blizzard do have a code of conduct and **EULA (end user licence agreement)**, they are seemingly not able to enforce these regulations. What is especially interesting concerning player communication moderation and the EULA is that section 2Aii states that "All data and communications generated by, or occurring through, the Platform" is owned and licensed by Blizzard. That would suggest that any or all communication in *Overwatch* is Blizzard's property, and by extension – their responsibility. EULAs are more often than not for the legal protection of developers (Busch et al., 2015), however, if this interpretation is right, Blizzard's lack of moderating communications beyond text chat is solely on Blizzard. Perhaps Blizzard believe their mute function is also effective enough to cover voice chat issues, like some of the other players in the thread. Another player in this thread describes *Overwatch* as a "public space", even though you cannot access the servers to play or watch matches (other than OWL matches which are broadcasted) without purchasing the game, so can it truly be considered public? I believe not, as the legal implications and responsibilities would then not fall to Blizzard and instead onto governments, and further if Blizzard own the content then it cannot be a free or public space.

This forum thread also gives the first example of divided player expectations in competitive and quickplay modes. SFJake refers to "comp" (competitive mode) stating that disruptive players should be removed from competitive play as they impact a whole competitive team focusing on winning. When team communication devolves, more likely than not the team will lose the game. When playing in a gameplay mode where a player's SR (Skill Rating) is at risk of falling or increasing depending on the outcome of the match, it is no surprise that the tension and pressure is higher in these matches. However, there is no reason that players who are consistently using voice chat in a toxic manner should be moved from competitive to another game mode, like quick play, as a solution. SFJake doesn't state that these players should play quickplay, but other than competitive this is the only other way to play the game – unless players play in matches against AI opponents, or the more free-form "arcade" mode[10]. The discounting of quickplay is a recurrent theme in some of the competitive discussion threads, or threads that move into

[10] Arcade mode has time-sensitive play modes, such as Lucio Ball during the Summer Games event, and "custom" games where players can create their own modes with their own rules outside of the typical format (like reducing the game's gravity).

discussing competitive matches. It is regularly pointed out that people who don't want to take the game seriously or are toxic should "just play quickplay", yet this shifting of traffic creates issues in the more "casual" mode of play. If a player is not interested in playing for ranks, but solely playing matches without the stakes, why should their gameplay experience be seconded to those in competitive mode? Equally, moving the disruptive competitive population to quickplay will add to the already existing disruptive population in quickplay.

The general response to this thread is that the mute function is enough and expecting Blizzard to spend millions of dollars to create a voice chat moderation system is not feasible or fair. The players disagreeing with SFJake find that the player is responsible for muting and reporting the players abusing voice chat, even though it may not strike at the heart of the issue it can at least prevent the player from hearing the voice chat. Dibbell argues that "gagging" players in LambdaMOO instead of actioning them only prevents the intended victim from seeing what is being said, there are still witnesses who can see the violation occurring (Julian Dibbell, 1998, p. 7). These witnesses could easily be just as impacted by the attack as the victim. Alongside this, the players in favour of muting don't believe the report system is so nuanced that voice chat evidence would be required, but rather the volume of reports is what results in players receiving repercussions rather than the exact details of the player's behaviour.

These repeated threads demonstrate that there is a sense of futility from players around the moderation of toxic players, that they won't really learn to behave themselves by being banned only temporarily, so why bother in the first place. Similar issues regarding Xbox Live's voice chat prompted similar concerns about not properly punishing this behaviour from the outset. Xbox Live's report systems were fostering no fear, so players would wait out their ban and then continue their prior behaviour. The bigger issue of abusive voice chat is that it's lack of moderation does not protect marginalised groups, where particular slurs are more damaging to them than others in the team chat, so the suggestion of turning off voice chat entirely comes with more damaging consequences for those not offending than those who are. Using voice chat at all places marginalised players at risk for racial discrimination (Nakamura, 2012). Gray explains how voice chat is a form of "synchronous communication", providing a space for real-time anonymous toxic chat (Gray, 2012), meaning that marginalised players cannot pre-emptively

mute offensive players and are consistently at risk for verbal abuse. The presence of abusive players and their chat in *Overwatch* is a direct result of the game developers not supporting a more positive social space, and allowing these players to continue to behave the way they do to this point in *Overwatch's* development (2017). Additionally, these problematic players are not situated in either camp of leisure or competitive players, rather they are prevalent across the game.

JUNE 5th, 2017 "COMMUNITY MODERATION SYSTEM"

This particular post (there were no replies) supports the idea of community sourced moderation and labour to ease the amount of reports and issues Blizzard's customer support department has to deal with on a daily basis by implementing player moderators – similar to what Twitch streamers use to moderate their stream chat room. The poster, Dag, believes that Blizzard's customer support department is unable to manage the sheer mass of reported accounts, which slows down the process of actioning reported players and that this could be offset by using the community to moderate – making reference to two other prominent online multiplayer games "CS:GO" (*Counterstrike: Global Offensive*) and "League" (*League of Legends*) (Dag, 2017). Dag doesn't specify what *CS:GO* and *League of Legends* do that they want Blizzard to emulate, and it isn't clear whether they are referring to community self-moderation or report system feedback – especially since these two communities have a formidable reputation for toxic communities. Kou and Nardi's study on player tribunals in *League of Legends* revealed that although a hybrid system theoretically could combine both player and developer expectations of "good" behaviour, the implementation of such a system was not able to handle the mass of reports that needed judgement on a daily basis (Kou and Nardi, 2014; Lin, 2014). Therefore, the alluded solution offered by Dag has not worked out as of yet, but it does again show that players are conscious of the labour behind moderation systems and want to provide assistance to make their gameplay experience better.

JULY 4th, 2017 "ONE YEAR – STILL NO MODERATION OR REPORTING ON CONSOLE"

One of the most flagrant examples of bias attached to moderation tactics is the lack of a report system for console players. Xbox One and PS4 both have their own reporting systems through

Microsoft and Sony, that are embedded in the console systems, but they require a multitude of steps in order to file reports, where PC players have an in-game drop-down menu providing a two-click process for reporting a player. Additionally, most individual console games also have a dedicated report system to deal with toxic players. Forum user Climb plays *Overwatch* on their PS4 and recounts that they experience disruptive players daily with no way to report them (Climb, 2017). Climb further states: "I know console players aren't a high priority." They believe that the developers are prioritising PC players over console players because of the lack of Blizzard report system on console. A cynical viewpoint for the reasoning behind this is that the game's professional competitive mode is only available to PC players (and not console players) through *Overwatch's* "Open Division"[11] (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019a). So, Climb highlights, Blizzard may not prioritise console issues when it doesn't have an economic drive behind it like the eSports league that is limited to PC players, who are seemingly content with competing only via PC.

Overwatch developer Jeff Kaplan himself explained in other forum threads voicing concerns over this was that it was due to navigating Microsoft and Sony's client code:

> "The system is extremely challenging from a technical standpoint because it goes beyond a simple change to the Overwatch Game Client. We have the OW team and the Battle.net team working to integrate this into both Sony and Microsoft's existing architecture." (Kaplan, 2017a)

If Xbox and Sony have to moderate this game and all the others on their platforms, one can only assume there would be a significant delay in repercussions from the sheer volume of reports they would receive hourly, let alone daily. This leaves console players feeling less important compared to PC players and means that players associate Blizzard's priorities to places where money can be made (such as through eSports), rather than bettering the community. Blizzard's priority is also seen once again in the maintenance and success of competitive play over casual play.

[11] "Open Division" is the league where aspiring Master ranked players can play against other top-ranked players. The top 4 teams in the league move up to the "Contenders" league – the next step towards being scouted for professional teams.

DECEMBER 1st, 2017 "TOXICITY/MISOGYNY/RACISM IN THE OVERWATCH COMMUNITY"

Combatting toxicity in online multiplayers was never going to happen overnight, and so forum threads on the toxicity of the community consistently popped up during my forum analysis. However, this particular thread on toxicity came with a request for a more nuanced and impactful report system. It also received a "highly rated" badge at the top of the thread as a result of 52 players liking the topic, a signal that many agree with the player YJG's suggestions and insight. The poster identifies himself as an African American male in sophomore year of university, playing at GM (Grandmaster) rank. Their own summary of the longer forum post suggests reporting systems should give "precedence" to investigating and punishing behaviours such as racial slurs and hate speech over generic chat abuse reports, such as screaming or swearing into voice chat. Discussed in previous threads, the "muting" of toxic players has been the repeatedly suggested route to deal with the lack of a better report system. In this case, YJG brings to light how muting toxic players has resulted in being reported for **"throwing"** matches – and without hard evidence supporting the reasons behind muting (as YJG is requesting to be part of the system) those victim to the toxic players can end up receiving undue penalties and punishments for using the only tool that immediately works.

This is a holistic issue; the discriminatory practices are not tied to either leisure or competitive players. YJG provides a solution to deal with the conflict by focusing on the fact that this conflict is a form of cyberbullying, and not the result of players getting upset about losing an important match (such as one to increase a player's rank or deciding their placement in the competitive tiers), but direct attacks on other players for taking up space. By prioritising this behaviour over general nuisance (shouting or swearing at teammates) YJG wants Blizzard to have clear evidence of racist/sexist reports in order to have more effective punishments for players who participate in this behaviour. This distinction is important as it does not allow the lumping together of those who discriminate versus those who are angered by a bad match outcome as both "disruptive", when one is outright discrimination and deserves such a distinction.

Peppered in amongst players who agreed with YJG were players who stated that they should "Toughen up" or "this is the internet", and some responses had been removed by moderators.

These negative responses also received significant dislikes, causing them to be greyed out, meaning if I wanted to see the content I had to click on their post. An overwhelming number of responses called out muting as having no impact on player attitudes. One response to this thread discusses how banning players seems to be mainly focused on high volumes of reports or high-profile players who are in the spotlight and therefore open to more scrutiny than others.

A player's overall notoriety or obscurity appears to be a key issue that players notice when discussing Blizzard's general moderation practices. Blizzard's approach to banning high profile toxic players, what players can be punished for and when more nuanced report systems will be implemented are all components of moderation tactics that are debated, because there is no clarity or explanation from the developers. In response, players have taken it upon themselves to figure out processes to aid Blizzard in moderating the community. Equally, without being able to clearly see results from the moderation tactics in place, there is a resounding sense of futility and lack of faith in the official systems from the player base.

JANUARY 29th, 2019 "PLAYER MODERATORS?"

About 18 months later, a similar post crops up, quoting the pop-up players receive after reporting a player: "thank you for your report. players who violate our policies disrupt *Overwatch* games for everyone…" (chipmunk, 2019). Chipmunk offers a solution, with restrictions, expectations and countermeasures for a player moderator system, similar to GMs (games masters) who watch over players in LARPing (Live Action Role Playing games) to ensure rules are followed. They do make a point that the report system does function, but not as effectively as player moderators could. Due to the length of time taken for actioning players and the lack of faith in the report system, Chipmunk simply suggests that player moderators would be more effective in addition to the report system claiming: "these player moderators would halt any abusive behavior/deter this behavior" (chipmunk, 2019) . What is immediately flagged as an issue from reading this post is the form of payment, because on the one hand it is important to reward this level of labour, but what would stop players from reporting unnecessarily and receiving loot boxes? While there is a code of conduct in place, there is still a distinct layer of subjectivity and debate in what players define as toxic play versus how developers define it, in online multiplayer games in general (Lajeunesse, 2018). This subjectivity, the chance for rewards, and potential abuse of power are all

called out in the responses to this thread. A significant 17 responses more than the previous thread on community moderators, perhaps the increase in toxicity over time has resulted in players looking extensively for other solutions to the poorly functioning report system. One player refers to the idea as "vigilante justice" and suggests that Blizzard should be the only people to handle toxic players, in order to avoid any discrepancies in how reported players feel they've been handled.

Chess's response brings me to part of my main argument – conflicting values are embedded in moderation tactics, and the community forums' response to them. This response suggests that Blizzard would want to protect streamers and professional (paid) players of their game who "aren't the most appropriate individuals" (Chess, 2019) from being exposed to more reports than they might currently receive. Additionally, these high-profile streamers and professional players are often role models for the community on how to play, with competitive players copying particular hero choices and compositions in matches (BernieSander, 2018). When a professional player behaves inappropriately multiple times or in one fell swoop they often receive a match ban, a fine, or in more extreme circumstances a loss of contract as punishment (Alexander, 2018; Marshall, 2018; McWhertor, 2018a; Starkey, 2018). Similarly, Blizzard began scraping YouTube and Twitch accounts in 2018 for "toxic behaviour" and warning players when they log back into the game that they are at risk of account action for their behaviour (McWhertor, 2018b). So, players streaming *Overwatch* content, whether Blizzard approved or not, were under Blizzard's watchful eye. The idea that Blizzard protects their economic interests in place of actually punishing toxic high-profile players isn't entirely true if they are handing out punishments to these misbehaving professional players, but the fact that this expectation is playing through the forums suggests that players believe that these individuals might get away with more bad behaviour than regular players would.

Although the community has the tools to mute, block and report players, these limited – and sometimes exploited- functions leave little room for any impactful moderation on their end, and when the moderation ball is in Blizzard's court, it takes a high volume of reports for an account to be actioned. As players explain, muting offensive players results in being reported for lack of communication, so using the tool provided results in a player being wrongly reported and

actioned. This shows that Blizzard are holding accountable those who do not co-operate with how the game needs to be played (with communication) equally to players who are abusive to their teammates. While Blizzard have publicly punished their pro-players and streamers when they behave poorly in public and Blizzard represented spaces (such as tournaments and Twitch) the community understanding is that professional players can get away with poor behaviour, and often these instances of punishment are due to the extremeness of the offending professional players actions. Consalvo writes in her book "Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames" that players who felt cheaters were going unpunished by game companies, lost trust in the companies and participated less in the game itself (Consalvo, 2009, p. 144). In addition, the missing console report system placed PC players, and therefore competitive players, at a higher priority than console players. While Blizzard has so far claimed that they do not sanction disruptive behaviour, it appears that they have been selective in who they punish.

AVOID THIS PLAYER (removed June 2016)

FEB 25th, 2017 "AVOID AS TEAMMATE"

This post came well over a year before the official AaT tactic was introduced by Blizzard. For regular players, it was widely believed that avoiding opposition players is what contributed to the breaking down of AtP, as it allowed players to curate who they played against – making matches and therefore climbing up the competitive tiers significantly easier. In response Glede posts a suggestion for a new version of the AtP tactic that could be "vastly less susceptible to abuse" (Glede, 2017) – almost identical to the one Blizzard implemented, using the same term and mechanical basis of what is now the official AaT tactic. Glede's post received 19 likes, suggesting it was a popular idea with players who read the thread. Glede addresses each of the issues that arose with AtP, such as the avoided players struggling to find matches being resolved by a "griefer pool", similar to the Low Priority Queue in *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013), where toxic players end up matched against and with each other as a form of punishment. An issue that immediately arose from this in the responses was the criteria for which players can be justly "avoided" stretches beyond more than just trolling in game – disliking particular heroes (Widowmaker, Symmetra and Torbjorn are a selection that are regularly called out on forum

posts), or particular play styles (one tricks[12]) are examples of players who would be subject to avoidance. This is reflected in one of the replies discussing players who play **"off meta[13]"**, where players might not play what is considered the optimal composition of heroes.

Player "Asyram" finds the system that previously existed and the one being suggested both inherently flawed, explaining "the community would have a field day avoiding everyone who plays off meta, till off meta mains would start getting longer queue times" (Asyram, 2017). In response 13 other players liked their comment, agreeing with this stance. Another player argued that if a theoretical player A (someone with unattainably high expectations of play) mass avoided all players they did not like for whatever reason, it would result in a "pool of perfect players" for player A to play easy matches against, but would result in all the undeservedly avoided players being put into longer queue times because they have been avoided. The player continues to point out that this could instead be done through "**partying up**" rather than ruining other player's queue times and skewing the player pool in competitive. However, this didn't stop interested participants from working out the kinks and upholding the suggested solution of "avoid as teammate" that Asyram proposes in their post.

Another player "IceQueen" disagrees with Asyram's comment, stating that being avoided *by* the disruptive players for not doing what they wanted meant disruptive players would never have to lift a finger for "great games on the regular" (IceQueen, 2017). Due to the fact players have to queue into matches (known as the "lobby"), a key way to punish players, (or for players to feel punished) is to have them wait longer for matches. But if long queue times are a by-product of being unfairly "avoided" rather than as an official punishment, the delay doesn't work as a moderation tactic – instead you simply end up with angry players. However, what IceQueen later highlights is that being avoided by "ragers and crybabys" actually resulted in having consistently better games, and s/he was not avoided so much as to be restricted in queue times. In response to

[12] "One tricks" are a player who only plays one hero, regardless of the situation a team might be in such as needing a healer, one tricks do not switch to other heroes. They play solely as one hero throughout.
[13] "Off meta" – meta stands for "most effective tactic available", in *Overwatch* it circulates the best composition of heroes in a team. Players will look to what team compositions professional players use and emulate this in their own teams. However, not all players will pick heroes "on meta" – angering teammates who want to play particular team compositions.

the issue of wrongly avoiding players, another player on the forum suggested restricting the number of slots a player can have to avoid players (which is what Blizzard did).

In this instance, AtP originally failed due to competitive players using it to change who they had to play with or against. They were able to skew the difficulty of their matches and could avoid professional players to prevent any chance of dropping down the competitive tiers. Avoiding players was intended to be for all players to remove disruptive players from any matches, but it was instead weaponised by competitive players to diminish the population they had to play against. If these aspirational players, with their extensive "avoid" lists, were to enter quickplay matches they would likely continue to avoid players and drastically impact the casual players' queue time for matches, punishing them for not playing like a professional as the matchmaking in quickplay ignores a player's competitive ranks when establishing teams. High ranked individuals encountering those who play for leisure have conflicting play style expectations, and so the casual players are at risk for being unfairly avoided due to a flawed moderation tactic.

AVOID AS TEAMMATE (released April 2018)

MARCH 25th, 2018 "AVOID AS TEAMMATE GRIEFING UNPOPULAR HEROES"

At this point, the development team had just announced AaT in a YouTube video "Developer Update – Avoid as Teammate" featuring Jeff Kaplan (PlayOverwatch, 2018a). This thread was a response and discussion around the potential impacts it might have. Interestingly, it was immediately flagged as a potential "griefing" tool by the player, Zeron, trying to explain that AaT's functionality provides no protection for players choosing to play "off meta". In their post, Zeron states that:

> "The new "avoid teammate" feature you are proposing will in most part **actually be abused by toxic people on players who may use unpopular heros, more than its intended use.** This will affect those honest players more so than anything else. Sure, theres a limit of two. But even then, it may accumulate on a player, even when the target player is not being abusive, or maybe did the best on the team. Sure, one can say that the honest player can use it to avoid the toxic people who may throw only because of that players choice to be vengeful. (which happens a lot, and most of the time the true reason for the loss)" (Zeron, 2018)

Zeron predicts that AaT will be used to avoid off meta players since players have ostensibly already been throwing matches[14] because a teammate selected an unpopular hero, with the avoid tactic gone, and no other way to exercise their dislike for off meta players. Zeron's stance is that "meta" players are likely going to use AaT to punish players who are not playing the "meta" heroes. Zeron then clarifies the issue - an "honest" player (off meta) would avoid two toxic (strictly meta) players, where ten toxic meta players would avoid the one honest player – causing the honest player longer queue times, simply for playing their own gameplay style. Zeron's point is not that playing on meta makes a player toxic, but rather forcing players to play on meta is the toxic behaviour. Additionally, meta play, optimising one's team composition according to how professionals play, is more important to the competitive players in competitive play than others. Casual players are generally less concerned about playing meta heroes and so these concerns are focal to competitive players. This places casual players not interested in using meta heroes at risk of being avoided when competitive players mix with casual players in quickplay mode.

The discussions in this thread around the AaT tactic opens up a larger debate on what is right to avoid, when the direct impact will be longer queue times. In the video, which will be discussed further in the following chapter, Jeff states that players can avoid others for any reason they see fit – it is not solely for toxic players. While the report system is still in place, it seems that the developers are allowing off meta players to be punished for their play styles. As previously mentioned, in a lobby game, the most effective form of punishment (other than banning a player from the game entirely) is to increase the time a player has to wait to get back into a match. Because the average queue time can vary as a result of off peak/on peak times for different regions or certain ranks in competitive play having higher or lower populations, it is difficult to discern the exact queue times players have faced since the addition of AaT. These "avoided" players do received a pop up warning when avoided by "a considerable number of players" that they may encounter longer queue times (WyomingMyst, 2018b). It is unclear whether or not this is the developers taking a stance on play styles, but it can certainly be inferred that there is a very real possibility that off meta players will face undue punishment. Casual/leisure players, who may be completely uninformed about meta play, are at risk of punishment by meta players who

[14] Throwing matches – players allow the enemy team to win either to troll, or to cut a game short without receiving a leave penalty (punishment for abandoning games early).

wish to set themselves apart from (and usually above) casual players, wanting to be the most informed and optimal player compared to others. As a result, meta players are more frequently found in competitive mode, using their meta knowledge to climb the competitive ranks. Where off meta players will use AaT to avoid disruptive players, on meta players are able to use AaT to avoid off meta players and disruptive players.

The use of AaT is not restricted to competitive mode, where off meta play may be more scrutinised as the less optimal form of play - it can be used in all other game modes, where off-meta play does not necessarily matter. I make this argument because quickplay is regarded as the "casual" mode of *Overwatch* and the potential for players uninterested in meta play being punished with longer queue times seems pertinent. Although quickplay and competitive have separate matchmaking systems, queue times could still be affected with enough avoidance occurring on one player – like Zeron suggests. However, as previously mentioned there is a restriction on the number of players that can be avoided, so this countermeasure could prevent such an occurrence. If multiple meta players are coming across the same off meta player in the same week, the off meta player may be subject to these meta players adding the off meta player to their "avoid" list. This would result in the system recognising a high amount of avoids on one player, sending them a warning, and potentially placing them in longer queue times. Or, if multiple meta players specifically targeted one off meta player, this could result in the same outcome.

Furthermore, these labels of "off meta", "on meta" and "one tricks" have been created by the player community – not the developers. A player's gameplay styles will always differ due to the variance of player types in any one game, and in this case, it always ends up being a conflict between leisure and competitive players. These demands for a particular play style that is supposedly the "optimal" way to play *Overwatch* is a form of gatekeeping – according to "on meta" players if you can't/don't play this way then you are not a true *Overwatch* player and should be avoided. Christopher Paul writes on "theorycrafting", a practice in World of Warcraft (WoW) where players analysed the world's underlying mathematics to find the optimal way to play. This shifted play styles in WoW, and theorycrafting became synonymous with "good" WoW players (Paul, 2011). Theorycrafting and meta play are used within the games' sub-

communities to self-define what makes "serious" or "good" players of the game, but there is resistance to this "optimisation of play" as restrictive (Paul, 2011). While the game mechanics may afford the space for all these different play styles, the clash between players debating what is the "right" way to play the game is down to the players. The player "Practicing" in this thread suggests that Blizzard provide spaces for both on and off meta players, while not having to interact with each other, in an effort to reduce toxicity. Zeron makes a point that no one should dictate how others play, and in response Practicing makes the claim that the developers have made a distinction on how the game should be played (with no evidence to support that statement) and that being able to avoid "selfish one tricks" is a good thing (Practicing, 2018). This discrepancy over play styles, especially one tricks, is present throughout most discussion topics on the forums, and it doesn't seem to be being resolved during the period under analysis.

As a casual player of *Overwatch* myself, I have never been invested in playing a particular way. Choosing a team composition when playing with friends in quickplay was often down to who wanted to play what hero. Even playing some competitive matches, we often played the same team composition from quickplay, resulting in mixed outcomes depending on how good our opposition were – there were no arguments over what heroes should be played. It seems that meta play is a way for a player to prove their level of knowledge on *Overwatch* over other players, plus meta play is supposed to result in more wins as the optimal way to play, so it is understandable that competitive players want to use this play style, even in quick play matches with casual players.

APRIL 12th, 2018 "AVOID TEAMMATE LITERALLY DOES NOTHING"

Another consistent theme in forums post-release of AaT is the demand for more than two "avoid teammate" slots. There are multiple mentions of needing more slots in the titles of threads analysed, as players find two isn't enough compared to how many toxic/non-playstyle friendly players one might encounter over a series of matches. This forum thread opens with such a request. However, it swiftly diverts into the wider discussion of the "correct" use of AaT, and who the intended targets of the tactic are supposed to be. The majority believe the addition of AaT was to quell "one trick" players, instead of reporting them via the report system. AaT could provide a different way for players to prevent their gameplay being negatively impacted, leaving

actual "toxic" gameplay to the report system, and lessening the volume of reports the system received for one trick players.

However, some players rebut this, stating that the targets of AaT were never specified as one trick or low skilled players, and that using it in this manner is somewhat elitist. They view this tool as equal to the report system, as a way to avoid players being toxic in chat more readily than waiting for the report system to take action. This is understandable considering the previous threads complaining about how ineffective and lacking in nuance the report system is for some players, so those wanting an instantaneous removal of a toxic player could use AaT for this purpose. If players are using AaT for both of these purposes, only having two slots is equally ineffective, as many report in forum threads (well beyond this one) that they encounter a multitude of problematic players within the scope of a few matches, and without avoiding them, they are likely to appear in the next match.

APRIL 13th, 2018 "THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS 'ABUSING' AVOID TEAMMATE"

A counterargument to concerns around "abusing" the system appeared shortly after the previous thread on AaT being used to abuse off meta players. The player "Nebbyindabag" sets out to clarify the purpose of AaT, explaining that any players negatively impacting one's gameplay are allowed to be avoided without it being marked as "abuse" or "cyberbullying". Nebbyindabag states: "It is not cyber bullying if they dislike your performance or character choice and decide not to play with you". It reframes the difference in play styles as more of a holistic issue that can be avoided via AaT, rather than targeted at specific players as suggested in the previous thread. This seems to be the main contention around AaT, even though players refer to the developer update video as gospel for how the function is supposed to be used, some players find that it is unfair on how they want to play the game. It acts as a preventative method and over time, if a player is avoided by multiple others, it has punishing outcomes, but only with high volumes of avoidance – it does not have an instantaneous impact on the avoided players and provides an immediate effect for the player using the AaT.

However, player "Sofrito" brings to light an issue on how *many* players actually benefit from AaT, explaining they do not want it to be: "another feature that will only benefit the top 15% of

OW players, (which includes most OW content creators), like they did with the removal of PBSR" (Sofrito, 2018) – receiving three likes on their comment. Using the example of removing **PBSR (performance-based season rank)**, this player believes that these tactics are not made with the benefit of the many in mind. They make the point that within the top 15% of players, a high proportion are "OW content creators" – likely referring to streamers, pro players and YouTubers who promote and play the game. As mentioned throughout this chapter, there is wavering understanding as to whether these individuals are receiving harsh or lenient treatment when it comes to moderation. In this case, the player believes that those with Blizzard's vested interest are receiving tactics tailored to them rather than tactics tailored to the majority of players. I infer from wanting the developers to "expand" AaT and the replies from others on the thread, that they mean wanting more slots to avoid players – the recurring request in nearly every forum thread on AaT.

From the forums, it is evident that players liked the functionality of avoiding players they didn't enjoy matching with, whether it was due to inappropriate chat, hero choice or gameplay style. Intertwined with the game's core mechanics, social system, player expectations and agreements about what is considered acceptable play, avoid as teammate is deeply entrenched in how the community decides who is an "avoidable player". From listening to feedback from the community, the implementation of the AaT tactic does not seem to have managed to bridge the gap between a formal system and nuanced player practices (TL Taylor, 2006a), and no significant adjustments have been made to reflect this[15]. The discrepancy over off/on meta play arises from competitive players in competitive mode, seeping over into quickplay and causal competitive player spaces, generating this conflict in player expectations.

ENDORSEMENTS – released June 26th, 2018

JULY 1st, 2018 "FLAWS IN THE ENDORSEMENT SYSTEM"

On the Blizzard forums this particular thread spanned several months on the "flaws" in the system between July 2018 – April 2019. Player "Sunbrain" begins their post praising the

[15] The number of slots was increased from 2 to 3 in August 2018, but no other changes or comments have been made in conjunction with the AaT system.

endorsement system, how it has improved their opinion of quickplay in comparison to competitive play, but then proceeds to pull apart all of the endorsement system's issues. To sum up the lengthy post, Sunbrain highlights how the system is counterintuitive to increasing a player's endorsement level through different restrictions. For example, you can only endorse a player once every 12 hours, so Sunbrain points out that there is no reason to stay in a group once all six teammates have endorsed you if you want to prevent your endorsement level "decaying" over time. "Decaying" refers to a time period where a player receives no endorsements, either through not playing matches or simply not receiving them from other players, and the endorsement level declines over time – the rate at which is not disclosed by the developers to avoid players gaming the system.

Sunbrain's main complaint is not being able to endorse friends. While understanding how easily endorsing friends could break the purpose of the system, meaning players could have high endorsement levels with enough friends, they suggest having the friend's endorsement value be a fraction of a regular endorsement (e.g. a regular endorsement is 1, a friend's endorsement is 0.1). Since successful competitive play requires a team of six players, Sunbrain points out not being able to endorse friends made over time through forming a group seems to punish playing the game in an optimal manner, in the same way limited endorsements in six stacks of strangers does not incentivise a player to stick with the group.

During the first set of forum responses between July and August 2018, the endorsement system is relatively new and while there are issues, players seem to agree that even the "fake nice" players looking to increase their endorsement level have made the game considerably less toxic. However, the majority feeling is that the endorsements system is somewhat counterintuitive to the most optimal way to play, and it lacks credibility. Many state that endorsements they've received don't actually match how they played, an example being someone without a microphone receiving a "shot caller" endorsement, and are being given purely so the player can max out the XP they are able to receive (XP leads to free loot boxes containing cosmetics and in-game currency). Others concur that as a result it exists as a blanket "you did good", rather than being specific, while some players found that the different types of endorsement have levels of rarity, with "shot caller" being the rarest and more sought after.

In the AaT section of this chapter, the player Sofrito was concerned that the tool could only be effective for the top 15% of OW players (Sofrito, 2018). This concern is echoed once again in regard to the endorsement tool. One player highlights that proportional to the amount of time playing, one will receive more endorsements, meaning that those dedicating their time to *Overwatch* can go through the ranks and maintain their level easier than those who might play a couple hours a night, for example (Deus, 2018). This dedicated demographic is linked to streamers and semi-professional/professional players, so, once again the content creators for *Overwatch* benefit greatly from the system where others do not. It may not be intentional on the developer's behalf, but it weighs in the favour of the few once more. A month later, a player describes that the "shiny has worn off" (Truen, 2018) the endorsements, and players solely endorse to gain an extra 150XP, which multiple players agree with when replying to Truen's post. By endorsing without reason to gain the maximum amount of XP per match, these players are gaming the system to their advantage, rather than its intended purpose.

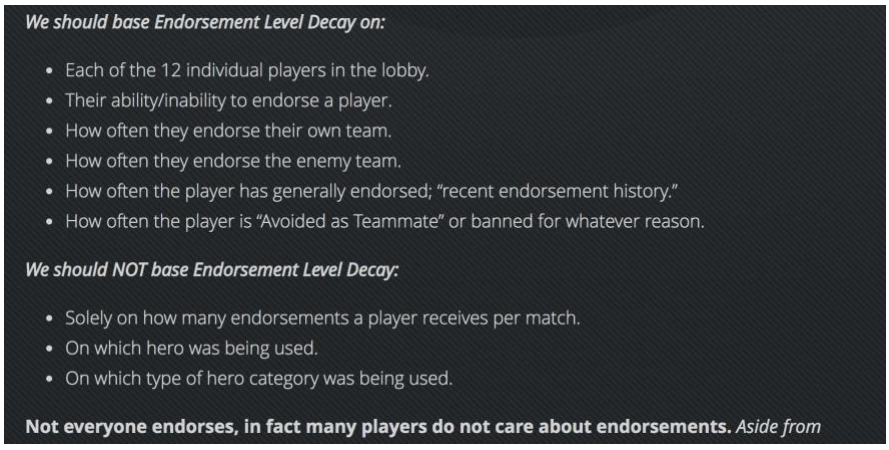
The next responses to the thread come over the months of October and November. In this section of the thread it becomes clearer how opinion on the endorsement system has shifted, as it has been around for three months at this point. The player "Saphle" responds to the thread highlighting where endorsements are more easily received, and voices concern over how difficult it is to maintain a high endorsement level. The decay level of endorsements has frustrated a majority of players. They receive an endorsement from another player and go back to the main menu after the match to find they have dropped an endorsement level regardless. Working to maintain a positive attitude with players to find that their endorsement level has dropped anyway is demotivational and counterproductive for a tactic added with the intention to foster a positive environment in games. If players feel that their consistent behaviour is not being rewarded, they are more likely to slip into bad habits, and if enough players feel this way then the entire endorsement system will become moot. Similar to the report system not being feared, the endorsement system could fall to the same fate as it appears to be inconsistent with upholding player behaviour. Players have no insight into the numbers operating within the endorsement system, like the report system, so that it cannot be gamed by players, but what this also means is that it appears entirely nonsensical to players who drop an endorsement rank randomly. Saphle

also points out that endorsements occur more frequently when a team has won, meaning when a team loses, players are not acknowledging any potential good players, due to a loss. This suggests that the encouragement of positive behaviour via endorsements stops when a match is lost, going against the intention of the endorsement system. Both teams may play incredibly well, and losing out on endorsements due to bad player attitudes adds to the precarity of the endorsement system.

All of this suggests there are significant flaws in the system that are not being addressed by the developers. Players are clearly keen to keep their endorsement level high as it ties into making groups via LFG, and how they will be perceived by other players in matches (level 1 will be recognised as a toxic player not worth interacting with), but they do not feel supported in how to maintain the level when it seems to drop without warning. By extension, toxicity will eventually creep back up as the endorsement levels begin to represent very little, working against the reason it was implemented in the first place.

DECEMBER 6th, 2018 "ENDORSEMENT OVERHAUL? (DECAY, LEVELS, TYPES)"

A more negative stance on the system arises in this thread, where Galadyn sets out to entirely revamp the system (Fig 4.):


We should base Endorsement Level Decay on:

- Each of the 12 individual players in the lobby.
- Their ability/inability to endorse a player.
- How often they endorse their own team.
- How often they endorse the enemy team.
- How often the player has generally endorsed; "recent endorsement history."
- How often the player is "Avoided as Teammate" or banned for whatever reason.

We should NOT base Endorsement Level Decay:

- Solely on how many endorsements a player receives per match.
- On which hero was being used.
- On which type of hero category was being used.

Not everyone endorses, in fact many players do not care about endorsements. *Aside from*

Fig 4. Endorsement System Overhaul (Galadyn, 2018)

This is a section of a more detailed post to give a sense of what Galadyn is advocating for in redoing the endorsement system. Towards the end of the previous thread, players noted that the amount of endorsements being given had declined. This newer thread highlights that due to the reduced volume of endorsements given, endorsement levels had become even harder to maintain,

thus Galadyn is appealing for a proportional endorsement system taking more factors into account in order to balance the drop off of endorsements being given. They identify complaints present in the previous thread, such as support heroes receiving more endorsements, and offers the solution that the hero types should not be part of what impacts endorsement level decay. Similarly, if a player never gives endorsements, they should not impact a player's endorsement level decay. They even provide options for additional endorsement types, "endorse team" for example, where it doesn't add to a teammate's endorsement level, but protects them all from level decay and can be used once every 24 hours.

These solutions are detailed, and extensive. The amount of time taken to compile all this information and solutions shows the consistent effort on players' behalf to help provide solutions to issues they've identified through playing the game and interacting with these moderation tactics. Here we see the active participation in governance from users/players that seeks to improve the systems they are a part of, an integral component to the operation of the system (Duguay et al., 2018; Kou and Nardi, 2014; TL Taylor, 2006a). They want to fix the things they believe are broken in the game in order to make gameplay a more rewarding experience and uphold the developer's intentions behind the moderation tactics they put in place. This extends well beyond the endorsement system to all the other moderation tactics discussed in this chapter. Repeatedly players are found to be sometimes disagreeing with developer choices, spotting where the system is not functioning as it should or in the most optimal manner and requesting fixes and providing solutions to do so. Just as much as the developers claim to be playing *Overwatch* and being a part of the greater community, on the other side, the players want to help the developers by fixing the tactics they have been given. John Banks discusses the tensions between developers and community members surrounding the co-creation of games during his time consulting for Australian game company Auran (Banks, 2009). The development for Auran's game *Fury* used a mixture of developers and community testers, but in the final months there were multiple disagreements about the game's design between "the expertise and creative control" from Auran and "the collective intelligence" from the game's community (Banks, 2009, p. 80). *Fury* flopped, and the senior developers not responding to critical feedback coming from the community was highlighted as part of the reason for its failure. However, the lead designers and producers believed that it was marketing that had let them down. While players want to step in and fix

issues that they have intimate knowledge on, developers take a step back and look at these issues within the greater tapestry of the game.

The contention in this system is less focused on competitive versus casual players and is another holistic player issue. On the one hand, it was put in place to prevent and reduce toxicity and encourage more positivity in the game. On the other, the system lacks impact due to the fact it works against the intention of fostering a positive game environment by dropping player endorsement rank and having categories that are debated and misinterpreted or ignored entirely. With the amount of subjectivity and discrepancy around the report system in the first section of this chapter, it would hypothetically be very easy to drop a player's endorsement level to 1 by falsely reporting them for voice chat abuse, band together enough of your team to do the same and there's a whole new way to troll in the game. These moderation tactics seem to be implemented with ideas of managing the community, and then left alone, with no new iterations or feedback coming from developers. The forums are abundant with suggested solutions and highlighting the issues they face with the tactics, and yet the developers – as far as this forum analysis shows – do not respond. By default, slowly players begin to care less about the tactics, until they are rendered meaningless, and understood to be lacking impact in dealing with disruptive players that are not simply "abusive" in the conventional sense. Players who enter the game environment demanding a particular play style, or that players change their heroes are equally disruptive, in a different way to abusive players.

LOOKING FOR GROUP – released June 26th, 2018

The final moderation tactic mentioned on forums was the LFG tactic. Players in forum threads have used the phrase "partying up" to indicate forming a group to play with. On the Battle.net forums players attempted to use the forum space as a makeshift group finder, and the developers set up official threads on the Blizzard forums, as the LFG function wasn't launched until June 2018. The fact that players were using the forums and other third-party sites to do this makes it surprising that a function wasn't in-game sooner. That being said, developing these tools take time, but Blizzard's other games have similar functions in them (clans/guilds in *World of Warcraft* for example). The idea behind partying up in multiplayer games is that you know who is in your team, how they play, and players are able to establish a strong connection with their

teammates leading to good dynamics and coordination in matches – necessary when playing in competitive mode. On top of this, players are able to ensure their team is balanced in terms of hero choices and play styles, equally as important for effective and successful gameplay. In modes like quickplay, finding a group means not being placed with random players via a matchmaking system, and potentially meet new players to join up with on a more regular basis.

NOVEMBER 23rd, 2018 "CONTROL FREAK LFG LEADERS REALLY KILLED LFG"

A general issue with LFG that cropped up in the forum threads was that following LFG's implementation, players using it became fixated on player statistics, including the number of hours they have on specific heroes and classes (support, tank, attack), their highest damage, most healing and top hero picks to name a few. This was due to LFG leaders demanding that joining players needed particular statistics to prove their worth as a teammate. Cecilia D'Anastasio wrote a piece for Kotaku on her experience using LFG, describing it as the "Mean Girls of competitive play" (D'Anastasio, 2018a). D'Anastasio's opinion of competitive LFG is less than glowing. She recounts the amount of time sunk into compiling a "superhero" team, only to have the group disband after one loss – something that is referenced in most of the forum threads on competitive LFG, and the frustration that is coupled with it. The naming of groups is also highlighted as an indicator to the kinds of player expectations, the example D'Anastasio gives is: "GOLD COMP / MICS ONLY / PLZ BE GOOD AT YOUR ROLE" (D'Anastasio, 2018a), clear evidence of what is expected of a player joining the group.

The demanding nature of LFG leaders is suggested to be more toxic than players solo queuing into competitive matches. Leaders are also able to remove players that don't fit the dynamic before queuing into a match. Phantomsky describes how the leader of a group "rapid-fire barrages me with questions" (Phantomsky, 2018) the moment they entered the group's voice chat. The tone of this suggests that these questions were not asked politely, or in an approachable manner, but rather to determine whether or not to keep the player in the team. In addition, player profiles are surveyed by LFG leaders to determine a potential player joining the team, which has resulted in the new practice of players hiding their profiles. This is in part done to prevent enemy

players from reading their statistics, but mostly to stop being under the unfair scrutiny of LFG leaders (Presley5, 2018). This intense surveillance is similar to the effects of the CTRA (CTRaidAssist) UI (user interface) mod from *World of Warcraft*, studied by TL Taylor (2006b). While the CTRA mod allowed for quick and easy access to important information by raid leaders, it was also used to call out players and surveil how they played (TL Taylor, 2006b). Similarly, Taylor covers how guild applications in *WoW* are extensive forms that are filled out. What I am interested in about these forms is that *WoW* is another Blizzard game where some players have exhibited the same high level of demand for specific player qualities and do so through a pseudo-job interview. Player profiles in *Overwatch* can help LFG leaders see a player's strengths, but can also be used to gatekeep players from entering LFG teams, requiring a player to have a set amount of hours on a hero or Skill Rating to even be considered for a spot in their team.

This thread marks the return of "meta play" as a necessity in competitive, where many competitive players believe there is an optimal composition of heroes that will result in more effective game play, and easier wins. Leaders pick players specifically for these roles in order to achieve this meta play, but one player in the forum thread described leaders as "crazy control freaks that think micromanaging… will get them ranked up" (SleepyB34r, 2018). Overall, the responses in the thread disagree with the high demand and forced roles coming from LFG leaders. One player specifically states that LFG failing has nothing to do with Blizzard, which leads me to believe this issue is the result of competitive players trying to rank up quicker off of the backs of better competitive players, by compiling a perfect team to carry them to victory. Blizzard have not stated, as far as I am aware, that there is a perfect team composition to guarantee wins every game, yet because OWL and other professional players use particular team compositions, those looking to raise their season ranks only want to play the same way as the professionals and emulate their success in league matches. Similarly, playing in a "**six stack**" emulates how professional teams are set up, as a consistent six player team, with the whole team knowing each other's play styles and preferred heroes (D'Anastasio, 2018b). This is the fantasy surrounding LFG, but when groups disband after one loss, there is no way to build a strong team relationship similar to professional teams.

FEB 24th, 2019 "LFG FAILED BECAUSE WE'RE HYPOCRITES"

This post is also happy to point the blame at the players rather than Blizzard. Fritz takes the stance that Blizzard made LFG to solve the issue of bad teammates (for whatever reason they might be "bad") but players "care more about winning than the actual quality of their games. They'd rather have toxic teammates and win than nice teammates and lose" (Fritz, 2019). This post received 129 "likes" and 127 replies. The responses to this post were a mixture of agreement and disagreement, some claiming the developers were still at fault, while others agreed and continued that LFG leaders were the focal point of why LFG was struggling to function.

Fritz points out that if players are in a six stack (full team) from LFG they are more likely to be playing against other six stacks, as the matchmaking system tries to pair stacks of similar sizes together in order to avoid a non-coordinated solo group of six playing against a clearly coordinated six stack (Mercer, 2018c). This, by default, makes the matches more arduous to play, and the players who disagreed with Fritz seem to really want to play against solo queued player for easier wins, but blame the developers for putting six stacks against other six stacks claiming developers make it "punishing to play in big groups" (Avian, 2019).

However, there is some proof of six stack teams struggling to win games more often than when the individual players use solo queue. For example, some players in the thread explain that their six stack is being pitted against higher ranked six stacks due to the fact that there are not as many six stacks as solo players, making the games unreasonably punishing for using the function in place to supposedly, in their minds, help them climb through the competitive tiers. Similarly, six stacks claim to be facing longer queue times into matches, for the same reason as being matched against higher ranked stacks – low six stack population. The solution to this from the forum? More players need to use LFG. Players need to be incentivised to use LFG, playing consistently harder matches, and dealing with picky leaders of groups. Again, concerns around LFG comes from competitive players, and not leisure players as the focus on creating a six stack team is mostly important for playing competitive mode, not quick play. While these threads were in the "general discussion" category, the concerned responses to them were players looking to go up competitive ranks and find a consistent non-toxic team to play competitive with, and other threads concerned with what would happen to competitive play if LFG became redundant

(Fondue, 2019; JaneM, 2019). Plus, on the opposite end to using LFG to win games, players in the thread report that some LFG teams collaborate to "derank" by intentionally throwing games in order to go down to a lower competitive tier. This is done either to join friends of a similar rank, or to get easier matches (Nishimba, 2017). Often the players doing this use "smurf" accounts – accounts that are secondary to their main account, either to practice in lower ranks or if they were banned from their main account.

This problematic mindset of winning regardless of toxic teammates is emulated in another response to this thread, where player LokeTi states: "If you want to have fun go play a single player game PvP is serious stuff and people need to get their head in the game" (LokeTi, 2019). LokeTi also comments straight after this post that they leave quickplay matches when players don't play properly. For this individual, winning is the only priority, and there is no room for people complaining about how leaders of groups are ruining the game for them. Also, quickplay again, the "casual" play mode, is being berated by a player who takes the game very seriously, with clear aspirations to win, and berates the players in this mode for not playing to their competitive standards. LokeTi is immediately called out as being toxic by players on the thread, but the point remains that LokeTi throws matches they see as beneath them to play, and casual players are equally beneath them.

Of the responses to Fritz's post that are opposed, some blame the developers for LFG being a "chore to use" (DVS, 2019), where others blame the players for not taking advantage of LFG and causing the low volume of LFG teams to select from. The player "Zence" points out that the insistent need to win, and people taking the game too seriously is a big part of what has ruined the experience for people – and another player responds that non-serious play is for quickplay and arcade, and players blaming people taking the game too seriously are saying this as a defence mechanism because they cannot climb rank anymore. This highlights the great conflict at the heart of *Overwatch,* which is that those taking the game incredibly seriously, those who want to be professional players, are in the same matches as those who might be playing competitive, but do not give the wins or losses anywhere near as much weight as those needing to get to the higher tiers to be considered for the professional scene.

While the implementation of LFG was intended to provide a space for players to easily party up with others and form a strong coordinated team with higher chances to win, it is apparent that this idea was quelled by unattainably high expectations within these groups, and players subverting the tactic to serve their own needs for deranking, or forcing roles within the team composition. It became a gatekeeping tool for players wanting to climb up the competitive tiers quickly, and when these players could climb quick enough, they abandoned the tool. It certainly stands out as the tactic with the most potential for damaging gameplay, but has also been praised for providing the space to coordinate successful teams, by rare LFG leaders who are not so demanding.

CONCLUSIONS

All these moderation tactics are closely linked to one an another, a tight knit social system with overlaps and conflicts between themselves with no fixes on the immediate horizon. Each seems to be stuck in a place of precarity, with no concrete faith by the larger player base in any of the moderation systems currently situated in *Overwatch.* Each moderation tactic seems to have been subverted by players, and weaponised against players who do not meet the high standards of competitive players. Some players decode the developers supposed "intentions" behind the tactics at face value, mirroring the favoured competitive players discourse provided by the developers, and turning it into social practice (Hall, 1999). This distinction between "on meta" and "off meta" competitive players and casual players is to set up precedence that there is a "proper" way for the game to be played and can then be enforced through subverting the tactics. Some players decode the developer's intentions in order to find a way to game the system. While *Overwatch* should be able to exist as a game that can both be mastered and played leisurely, the enforcement of meta play through the weaponisation of the AaT and LFG systems highlights how competitive players do not want their play style to be diminished. Much like *Guitar Hero* pros' disdain toward the "no fail" mode, aspiring professional players show disdain towards those who play "off meta" (Juul, 2012).

This chapter has also shown how many players do extensive research to supply well-articulated solutions to fix moderation tactics that do not function to their best ability. These players providing solutions understand the nuance needed to navigate emerging player practices while also cracking down on those trying to ruin the game for other players (Kou and Nardi, 2014; TL

Taylor, 2006a). In addition, there is consistent evidence in the forum analysis that shows Blizzard's perceived bias towards competitive players, with the console report feature missing being the glaring example, but also how the top ranked players in *Overwatch* are also some of the key content creators for *Overwatch* content on Twitch and YouTube, meaning Blizzard have vested interest in keeping them content with the game.

While there has been the holistic impact of an apparent "40% decrease in toxicity" (Grayson, 2019) it is evident that these systems are not flawless, not that anyone can expect a "perfect" system, but if these issues are being clearly pointed out on the forums, which the developers do interact on, why has there been no conversation or fixes made? These overarching issues are partly a product of conflicting player expectations within the competitive community (the great on/off meta debate), significantly impacting the negotiated perception of how the game should be played overall, trickling down into quickplay mode where winning or losing changes very little in the greater scheme of things for casual players.

"Play Nice, Play Fair"

Community-developer relations have never been perfect. Highlighted in the previous chapter, players will push back against "social features" they don't find to be useful, whether the feature is being abused (false reporting) or simply not functioning the way it was intended. This push back is not always directed at developers, sometimes disagreements occur between players within the community when negotiating the expectations and behaviours – leading to greater conflicts seen on player-player interactions on forum threads. This over time, can grow to critical mass, with layers and layers of conflict on different topics making the community "toxic". With online multiplayers consisting of millions of players, managing this conflict as a development team is a monumental task, and *Overwatch* is one of many games with a toxic community issue. Thus, the FPA (Fair Play Alliance) was formed. A large organisation of game studios, all with the same goal – to reduce toxicity in games. But while initially "toxicity" was the focus, in recent months the FPA has moved away from the term, recognising its ambiguity, and instead looked to discuss encouraging positive player behaviours and mechanics to support this (Fair Play Alliance, 2019). Blizzard has been one of the main active participants since the FPA launched in 2018, and their push for social features to promote positive player behaviour in *Overwatch* is a clear sign that this is no corporate lip service.

In March 2018, Blizzard was one of the founding game development studios involved in the formation of the FPA, alongside Twitch and Xbox at the initial launch. A year later, Blizzard revealed statistics that showed a significant decrease in toxicity in *Overwatch,* a 40% drop in disruptive behaviours, as the proof of impact that their new social systems (Endorsements and LFG) had on the game's social environment. While this statistic is impressive, what is not clear is what the developers consider "disruptive behaviour", how much of a decline in each area (such as abusive chat, trolling and so on) there has been, whether it is an average decline in each of these areas or more specific responses to the new moderation tactics. This chapter focuses on the developer side of implementing moderation tactics, how Blizzard announces the tactics, discusses the tactics, and interacts with the *Overwatch* community about them. To determine that I watched all the "Developer Update" YouTube videos from June 2016 until March 2019 (PlayOverwatch, 2019), noting any mentions of moderation tactics, reasons behind their implementation and

discussion of the community in conjunction with the tactics. About a third of the 40 videos were relevant to moderation tactics and the competitive/casual community split, where the rest covered new heroes, technical details of bandwidth or competitive seasons, and seasonal events. I re-watched the relevant eight videos and took notes on how the community was discussed, how any moderation tactics were discussed or referred to and whether any forums or players were indicated as part of the reasoning behind the tactics.

Following this, I searched for developer initiated threads on the Blizzard forums, and developer responses to player initiated forums via the "Dev Tracker" on the Blizzard forums and the Battle.net archives and topic specific threads compiled by the forum user "WyomingMyst" (WyomingMyst, 2018a). Again, within these forums I looked specifically for mentions of moderation tactics, the competitive/casual community split and any other significant interactions between the development team and players. A vast majority of these developer interactions were dealing with bugs and glitches in the Public Test Realm/Region[16], and so they were disregarded, but I read all other relevant threads. There was also a distinction made between developers and community managers on the new Blizzard forums but for the purposes of this thesis I have not made a distinction between these interactions in my data collection, as the players are still interacting with members of the *Overwatch* team, regardless of the specific department they work in.

This chapter is split into the recurrent themes that appeared in the developer update videos and forum posts: formal systems (terms of service and legal agreements), professional players being prioritised over casual players, and a closer analysis on how the developers discuss the different moderation tactics. While I watched all 40 developer videos available on PlayOverwatch's YouTube channel, 7 contained relevant discussions on moderation and developer approaches to moderating the community. Some developer update videos were specifically released to inform the community about upcoming or changing moderation tactics and are discussed in the corresponding moderation tactic sections, where other videos had more general messages and are discussed throughout this chapter. Similarly, some forum threads were specifically for announcing and informing players about moderation tactics, often acting as a written version of

[16] A space to test new versions of a game before they are released to the general community via a patch update.

the developer update. I will discuss the "values" embedded in the moderation tactics by the developers, and how the players understanding and engagement with the tactics either upholds or shifts the values at play (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014).

FORMAL SYSTEMS

While Blizzard may be a member of the FPA, how do they interact with their own player community as a corporate body? How do they lay out the formal rules and social systems in order to manage their community? To start, there is the overarching legal agreement in Blizzard's EULA (End User Licence Agreement). Loaded with legal language and clauses, it acts as the most formal display of rules attached to Blizzard's product. Mostly, the EULA acts to protect Blizzard from copyright infringement, hacks and third-party applications - a legal agreement between user and platform. Some sections, such as "cheats" are written candidly, making it clear to the user what falls under the category, where other sections use more complex language. The EULA covers the legal expectations and definitions of interacting with the platform, and it only nods to the social expectations in "user content/user uploads" in which the user should: "not use or contribute User Content that is unlawful, tortious, defamatory, obscene, invasive of the privacy of another person, threatening, harassing, abusive, hateful, racist or otherwise objectionable or inappropriate" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2018b). It does not, however, set up a precedence for player behaviour and expectations. This is where the Code of Conduct comes in.

The more accessible manner in which Blizzard communicates with their player base is through their community guidelines, or the Code of Conduct (CoC). Interestingly, the language used is candid, compared to some more jovial or witty codes of conduct (e.g. Flickr telling users "Don't be that guy" (Flickr, 2018)), using the space to establish both the principles and the "attitude" of the company behind them (Gillespie, 2018). Blizzard's CoC is significantly shorter in length compared to the EULA. Both the EULA and the CoC is used as an umbrella policy over all games published via Blizzard's client, even if they are not the developers of the game[17]. The CoC is the community guidelines, where player behaviour, communication, naming and cheating is addressed and outlined. These community guidelines have gone through multiple iterations,

[17] including Destiny 2, for example, developed by Bungie but accessed through Battle.net client.

much like the EULA (updated in June 2018), in order to include all emergent player practices and use broad terms in order to encapsulate all derivative practices that try to side step being caught out. An example of this in *Overwatch* would be "boosting" where players increase their SR (Skill Rating), but not by playing themselves. There are two ways that players do this: first, high SR players would create a secondary account (not a violation) in order to play with a friend at a lower SR (you can't play with others 500SR below you) and because they are a highly ranked player they are able to pull you up through the ranks through winning multiple matches, even though you are not a good player – changing your **MMR (Match Making Rating)** artificially. The second way is through third party sites, where players pay a fee depending on how many ranks they want to go up, and a highly skilled player goes on their account, wins multiple matches, and artificially increases the player's SR and MMR in turn[18]. Essentially the goal of "boosting" is to increase one's SR to play in the game's higher tiers and gain the better rewards at the end of a competitive season when they are not good enough to organically reach that tier. The CoC has to be able to include all of this as not allowed under the phrasing of "cheating" as "any activity that grants an unfair advantage" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019c). Equally, "throwing" (intentionally losing games) is covered in the "behaviour" section of the CoC.

Even as a more accessible form of guidelines, the CoC is still a formal, non-negotiable set of rules set out by Blizzard. There are no community-developer interactions surrounding the guidelines, beyond community managers citing them when players take to the forums to circumvent and dispute a game ban (Powers, 2018). The *Overwatch* forums are the only space where players can have something that resembles a conversation with the developers, and the developer updates on YouTube do have a comment section – but no conversation emerges from there. As a result, this chapter's analysis and discussion on them needs to be separated as they represent two distinctly different ways that the developers interact and communicate with their community.

The community assumes again the role of active participants, but with little to no impact on the details and implementation of the moderation tactics, as also exhibited in the previous chapter.

[18] This is not a new phenomenon, with "power levelling" in MMOs (Everquest, World of Warcraft) being used to increase a low level player's level either within a guild or paid third party.

But, the positionality of the developers is important to understand when looking at the conflict in community-developer relations. Through both the developer updates and forum interactions, the development team position themselves as both developers *and* players (Kaplan, 2019; PlayOverwatch, 2016). Actively participating via play and contributing to the product's creation and refinement complicates the power relations usually present in community-developer relations. The attempted participatory design process involved in creating social features through community feedback (TL Taylor, 2006a), filtering through the developers who are also implicating themselves as part of the greater community and not just the game's developers, makes it a unique scenario compared to other game development teams. That is not to say that game developers in general do not play their own game, but they do not put hard statistics out on forums, such as a live operations member of the *Overwatch* team clocking "700 hours" on a particulars hero character (Kaplan, 2019) to back up their legitimacy as a player of the game, but also having opinions on specific elements of the game. An equally big developer Riot Games, developer of the popular MOBA *League of Legends* (2009), has in their company manifesto that they play games on a daily basis and identify themselves as gamers, wanting to be player focused in design (Fandom, 2019) – and Riot expects their developers to regularly play *League of Legends* in their down time. However, the *Overwatch* development team have a considerably higher presence in their forums, talking about the game's lore, answering player's questions and queries. Taking part in the community so visibly compared to other games developers in addition to playing *Overwatch* makes them appear more invested in their game as both players and developers.

However, if we view the *Overwatch* community as a convergence of stakeholders including competitive players, professional players, and non-professional players, the developers should not inhabit the same space as these other groups because their stakes in the matter are not the same as those for regular players. Developers, for the most part, are aware of what features and updates are coming up in the pipeline, whereas regular players are not. Even fiscally they are separate from professional players. The developers occupy a myriad of roles, as "gods" (Bartle, 2006), "custodians" (Gillespie, 2018; PlayOverwatch, 2017a), and a corporate entity (Busch et al., 2015). They are both accountable and responsible for the game. So, it is unsurprising that

there is meaning, and value attached to what they produce. Most notably, their distinct approaches to discussions around quickplay (QP) and competitive mode.

PRIORITISING THE "PRO"

Frequently on the forums, players have aired their complaints that competitive mode and professional players of any capacity, be it international tournament level or newly starting out, are the developer's priority. Even within the subset of professional players, those tied to Blizzard economically as content creators are deemed to receive more favourable treatment and are considered more when big development choices are made (such as the removal of the Performance Based Ranking System discussed in the forum chapter). There is a certain gravitas given to the competitive mode by the developers due to its link with professional players, and quickplay is short-changed as a "casual" mode (also by developers), not to be taken seriously for lacking the ambition seemingly displayed in competitive mode.

From the start, in the first developer update video "Developer Update – Let's Talk Competitive Play" dated June 17th 2016, Lead Designer Jeff Kaplan makes a clear distinction between the two modes, describing quickplay (QP) as the easy and casual way to get into a match of *Overwatch* and "play the game however you want to play", and competitive as taking the game "a little bit more seriously" - a more focused gameplay mode (PlayOverwatch, 2016). This is already a loaded differentiation between their two core gameplay modes. Any time a **competitive season** has significant changes made, a specific developer update video is released, giving meticulous detail on the changes, or additions to competitive mode, with quickplay being very rarely referenced except as a counterpart to competitive mode.

In the developer update introducing deathmatch[19] to **Arcade mode** (a play mode separate from Quickplay and Competitive for seasonal events, exclusive maps and winning matches earns players loot boxes), Kaplan describes Arcade mode as a place to either warm up for, or wind down from, competitive matches (PlayOverwatch, 2017b). Perhaps Arcade mode is used to prevent competitive players going into quickplay hot-headed or continuing to expect a

[19] A 6v6 mode where when a player is killed, they are permanently knocked out of the round.

competitive level of play after playing a series of competitive matches, as Kaplan's comments are aimed specifically at dedicated competitive players. But this rhetoric just shifts this expectation for competitive play to a different gameplay mode, amongst a different population of players. In fact, some modes in Arcade have become limited competitive seasons for special events – such as "Lùcio Ball"[20] during the "Summer Games" event. As a result of the competitive players using the arcade mode, the space becomes competitive and no longer a place to just "blow off steam" as Kaplan suggests (PlayOverwatch, 2017b). It is then likely that players will use the non-competitive versions of the arcade to practice, much as they might still do in quickplay, because there is no risk of dropping their Skill Rating if they lose. Further, it is promoted as a valid practice by Kaplan, not just as a player but in his official capacity as a designer.

Overall, competitive players seem to be the most vocal members of the *Overwatch* community. Or rather, Kaplan draws that conclusion from reading forums and social media that a "top complaint" was how SR decay[21] worked for Diamond tier players and above. Statistics from February 2019 reveal that 14% of competitive players are in Diamond, Master and Grandmaster (Milella, 2019). If a top complaint means that it originates from 14% of a subset of players, when a significant amount of forum posts have been addressing social issues on the platform, it appears that the response by developers is to specifically pick the issues they wish to deal with and address. Similar to what TL Taylor points out elsewhere, developers are using forums for "cherry picking" issues to be handled (TL Taylor, 2006a), making an appearance to be addressing issues arising from the community when they are in fact purposefully selected. When concluding this developer update video Kaplan states:

> "We know that it's [competitive play] an extremely important part of the game, if not the most important part of the game, where players feel like they can find the truest, most honest competitive matches and we want to keep evolving over time" (PlayOverwatch, 2017b).

[20] A 3v3 mode where players use the hero Lùcio to knock a ball into a net – similar to the game Rocket League.
[21] If highly ranked players do not play often enough their SR declines in order to make space for active players in the rank.

This reveals a clear placement of competitive play as a top priority for the development team, placing competitive players, and more importantly the high-ranking competitive players voices above the rest of the community. This seems surprising when the apparent guiding principle at the core of Blizzard is "play nice, play fair", yet the principle appears only once in the developer update videos, when the community reaches peak toxicity, then it is addressed as a whole – no specific player demographics are addressed as main contributors to the toxicity. Competitive play is the only mode referenced for statistics of reduced toxicity[22], but not placed within the greater rhetoric as the epicentre of disruptive behaviour, when the forums show that the high stakes in place and taking the game so seriously is the part of the main contribution to poor player behaviour as discussed in the forum chapter.

Even when discussing the social features in updates, competitive players' potential concerns and impacts are addressed, rather than casual/quickplay players' potential concerns. In the "Avoid as Teammate" (AaT) developer update, Kaplan covers the details of what AaT is and how it works, making no remarks about the old Avoid this Player tactic that was removed. Opening the developer update, Kaplan comments on how the developers needed to give the players "more ways to craft your own gameplay" (PlayOverwatch, 2018c), suggesting that the addition of AaT was a way to customise the player's experience. He continues, making clear to the community that avoiding players is to be done for offences that are not necessarily reportable. Kaplan's words seem to address the general *Overwatch* community. Even when addressing the potential issue of one player being avoided by multiple people, he does not draw a distinction or assumption to which subset of players the offender may belong to. However, when covering side effects of AaT, Kaplan highlights how AaT might specifically impact competitive player's queue times getting into matches, yet he doesn't make clear if it will impact players in quickplay as they operate with different matchmaking systems. But he does highlight the queue time impact on the different competitive tiers. This suggests that Blizzard is more concerned over queue times for the competitive players than QP players, which contradicts one of the essential qualities of QP (and highlighted in the name itself): to get in and out of matches quickly (@playoverwatch, 2018).

[22] Abusive chat down 17% in competitive play (PlayOverwatch, 2018b)

While the forums and developer updates seemingly address the community as a whole, competitive players here receive more detailed information and are perceived as taking the game more seriously than the rest of the player base in the eyes of the developers. They are a distinguished sub-community within the wider player base. A key value attached to how developers talk to the community and engage in conversations surrounding social features and game updates is the precedent that competitive players are somehow engaged more seriously compared to non-competitive players. There is not necessarily a disregard toward non-competitive players, but rather a blind spot, a non-discussion on how features impact players beyond competitive mode.

This favourability is not necessarily an embedded "value" (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014), but it is present in what the developers communicate, and contributes to how they create their moderation tactics, as it permeates much of their communications with the community. So what values are embedded in the social features' announcements and evolutions in the developer updates? The developer's stance on the community is a distinction of competitive players over casual players, whether subconscious or not. The discourse around each social feature should reveal values embedded in the way the developers have chosen to moderate the community.

REPORT SYSTEM BLUES

The first social feature to enter the game was the report system – available at the game's launch for PC players only. Most games contain a report system to manage player complaints and discrepancies, and as previously mentioned Overwatch did not have a console report system until 18 months after the initial release. Reporting puts the issue of bad behaviour into the player's hands, as they decide what they believe is a reportable offence, guided by the foundational guidelines discussed above. But players also must rely on their own personal experience and nuance for what they set out and expect is proper behaviour in an online multiplayer game. This nuance is important to the management of players as some experiences may not be considered an issue to others, such as the recurrent conflict surrounding "one trick" players.

Alongside developer update videos, I also searched for community-developer interactions via developer forum posts and developer responses to player-initiated forum posts. One particular

player-initiated forum thread from August 2017 encapsulates the early sentiment surrounding the report system in Overwatch – that it was the only way to deal with disruptive players, most of the time it did not work, and it was not very efficient at doing so when it did follow up with reports. The user "Roaming" states that: "no one fears the system" and only those with the most egregious behaviour are being punished, and even then, the punishments last a week at most (Kaplan, 2017b). This sentiment is reflected in the other player-initiated posts in the previous chapter, where players disinterested in those complaining about the system provided the "mute, block, report" approach without considering the greater issue of the report system not working. However, the previous forum threads did not garner a developer's response - this one gained the attention of Jeff Kaplan.

Kaplan responding to this thread is not an outlier. The continuation of this chapter will show many threads where Kaplan has replied to the original poster. Kaplan's long response breaking down the short, medium- and long-term approaches to social issues in *Overwatch* is mirrored in the developer update, suggesting that Kaplan has responded to this now that the official "game-plan" as it were, has been set out by the team. It is key to point out that he's not reaching out to the individual for feedback like is so often requested at the end of the developer updates, but instead laying down the already established plan for the foreseeable future. As far as I can tell, Kaplan's "game plan" is almost verbatim what the development team has implemented over time. But this "game plan" also lacks enough specific details for me to assume that they had the "avoid as teammate" or "endorsements" moderation tactics fully planned out this far back in the development cycle, only just over a year since launch.

This forum thread is significant however, as it ties closely in time with the "Play Nice, Play Fair" developer update. The "Play Nice, Play Fair" developer update video is the first one where Kaplan outright addresses the social problems within the *Overwatch* community. The first topic Kaplan covers is the report system. Echoing the forum post claiming the report system does not do anything, Kaplan gives hard numbers to explain that out of 480,000 accounts that had received punishments, 340,000 were a "direct result of players using the report system" - seeking to reinstate faith in the report system (PlayOverwatch, 2017c). Kaplan makes clear the philosophy of the development team in dealing with "bad people" in *Overwatch,* which is that they "don't

want those people in Overwatch", and do not intend to create areas just for the bad people. Additionally, Kaplan highlights that developers do not want to spend time making social systems to deal with disruptive players, instead wanting to create new maps and heroes for the game stating: "The bad behaviour is not just ruining the experience for one another, but the bad behaviour is actually making the game progress, in terms of development, at a slower rate" (PlayOverwatch, 2017c) – the tone of this statement suggests that the game's development is being significantly hindered by disruptive players. Similar to the forum response, a plan of action is laid out, but the onus is placed on the community, providing ways they can behave better, rather than systems to enforce it. No distinction is made between whether competitive or quickplay players are the source of these disruptive players – Kaplan seems to be holding the community as a whole accountable, reminding viewers at the close of the video that "we're all here to have fun" (PlayOverwatch, 2017c).

The closing remarks in Kaplan's forum reply and similar comments in the developer update video highlight the first values that Blizzard has embedded through a moderation tool, which are *accountability* and *responsibility* for both developers and players. Kaplan closes the forum reply with: "Like it or not, this is an "us the Overwatch community problem" and not just an "Overwatch team problem". For better or for worse, we're in this together" (Kaplan, 2017b), and also states in the "Play Nice, Play Fair developer video: "we need the community to own up to their part in the accountability that they have for really creating a great game space" (PlayOverwatch, 2017c). This establishes the issue of moderation as a joint effort, but not in terms of community feedback contributing to the creation of moderation tools, it is not co-moderation (Duguay et al., 2018). In the forums and developer updates, Kaplan places the Overwatch development team within the player community, yet here it appears that there is a conscious separation when it comes down to who is accountable for the game having a positive gameplay experience. He wants the players to be accountable for their own behaviour, rather than shifting responsibility – and accountability - onto developers for preventing or punishing such behaviour after the fact.

Kaplan does, however, assume responsibility on behalf of the development team to create better systems to improve behaviour and the overall experience in Overwatch (PlayOverwatch, 2017c).

In the same way, the report system acts to both hold players accountable for their actions, while simultaneously making them responsible to highlight which players are being disruptive. That is on the player side of the system. On the developer side, they are responsible for managing these disruptive players being brought forward, so when no one fears punishment in this system, it lacks impact. Furthermore, when two populations of players (Xbox and PlayStation) are not being held accountable by the system, it is no wonder that console players consider it superfluous. Perhaps even more egregiously, in the "Play Nice, Play Fair" developer update Kaplan argues that the time spent on implementing a report system onto console could have been used to create other functions, like a replay system[23], creating significant dissonance between what the developer team wants to dedicate their time to and what the community needs to reduce disruptive players. As this forum reply and developer update allegedly set out to restore faith in the report system, the indifference towards adding a console report system in the "Play Nice, Play Fair" developer update is at conflict with the greater discourse that the report system is imperative to deal with disruptive players. Plus, it places the console players at a greater chance of experiencing disruption in matches than PC players – further splintering Overwatch's player base into the preferred category of competitive PC players as the target audience for features and updates.

While values are "the positive ends" that society upholds (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 7) the friction between the *accountability* and *responsibility* exhibited in the discourse surrounding the report system itself results in greater conflict and a moderation tactic that lacks follow through. However, in a developer update four months later in January 2018 titled "Popular Community Topics" the report system is brought back up again – specifically the impact of the console report system once it was implemented in August 2017. Kaplan highlights that instances of "abusive chat are now down 17%" in competitive play, and player reporting had increased by 20% (PlayOverwatch, 2018b). Players actively using the report system, and being responsible for reporting disruptive players, even when it seemed to be unimpactful, shows they do respond to developer intervention. Kaplan continues that players received feedback when an action was taken on a reported player, which likely contributed to restoring faith in the report system and

[23] A system where players can replay their favourite moments and best plays, store the video clips, and share them.

encourages *accountability,* by directly informing the players when their report has been followed up on.

"VOID" AS TEAMMATE

The next social feature to be added was the Avoid as Teammate function - a reiterated version of Avoid this Player discussed heavily in the previous chapter. The new AaT tactic removed the opportunity for players to avoid highly ranked players as opposition and therefore force easier matches at the competitive level by reducing the number of slots, and only allowing "avoid" to be targeted toward one's teammates. The tactic was introduced in a developer update titled "Avoid as Teammate" in March 2018 and a forum post that acted as a detailed write up of the video (Mercer, 2018a; PlayOverwatch, 2018c). In the video, Kaplan describes the addition of AaT as a response to "give you [the player] more ways to craft your own gameplay experience" (PlayOverwatch, 2018c), enabling players to customise who ends up on their team via the matchmaker. By proxy, it also allows players to set up a personal, yet limited, expectation of who they wish to play alongside. As Kaplan clarifies later in the video, AaT can be used on players who act in a non-reportable manner, whether it is a conflict in play styles, or a disagreement over hero choices.

Avoid as Teammate acts as a self-governing moderation tactic, because, while limited to two slots, a player can choose who they do not wish to have on their team, without having to go through a formal channel, such as the report system – they can make the choice themselves. Unlike the report system where a player must select a category in which a disruptive player falls under, AaT is literally a button click away. A player selects a teammate, goes to the options menu and chooses "avoid as teammate" and it is done. The teammate is avoided for the next seven days, with space to be refreshed if the player sees fit. There is no requirement to justify their reasoning. Thus, it establishes the value of *autonomy* in allowing the player to customise and decide their gameplay experience. Kaplan also suggests that AaT could be used for immediate action against someone a player has reported, while they wait for an outcome for their report ticket. This adds an additional layer to the *autonomy* as a player has the option to entirely avoid (as blocking does not guarantee this) a problematic player from appearing in their matches until they receive information on whether the offending account has been actioned.

Additionally, AaT is limited in order to prevent the core game from breaking: if the matchmaker cannot establish matches, then no teams can be made and in turn the game will have no teams or matches going, causing it to stop working entirely (Mercer, 2018d). That being said, it is clear from the volume of complaints surrounding AaT from the player threads on the forums, as reported from the forum chapter, that many players encounter more than two disruptive players over a series of matches, and this is not being addressed by developers either in the developer updates or developer-initiated threads. It is not clear if the developers are putting considerable stock into the AaT tactic in hopes of encouraging disruptive players to reflect on their behaviours, resulting in less disruptive players and, as a result, no real need for more slots to be added to AaT. Kaplan does suggest that players subject to multiple avoids[24] will recognise that they are "doing things that other players aren't crazy about" and change their ways – but this is an optimistic mindset with no real data to back it up from the development team[25]. However, with the autonomous decisions of multiple players being utilised to punish a player, it is clear that a pseudo-*democracy* is taking place. Players subject to multiple avoids will experience longer queue times[26], which is the more subtle form of punishment in an online game, as players want to be getting into matches quickly to optimise their time playing the game. In order to prevent this, the player would need to reduce the possibility of being avoided – by changing how they behave in matches. AaT provides an intervention into player behaviour without direct action, a subtle persuasion through autonomous decisions toward a more likeable behaviour in matches.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

The last social features to be implemented during the period examined in this thesis were the endorsement system and looking for group (LFG) system, introduced together in the "Upcoming Social Features" developer update in June 2018 (PlayOverwatch, 2018d). These two tactics stand out compared to the previous ones, as they utilise positive reinforcement as a way to encourage

[24] Players are notified if this is the case.

[25] In fact, the slot amount was increased to three around five months after the launch of AaT (Mercer, 2018d).

[26] Time taken to get into a match (average 1-2 minutes).

better player behaviour, in place of the usual punishments (silences or bans). This positive encouragement resonates with the rhetoric surrounding the FPA's manifesto to make game spaces contain more "productive" interactions (Fair Play Alliance, 2019), which is unsurprising as Blizzard is one of the key AAA studio members of the FPA, leading keynotes at GDC 2019 (Game Developer Conference) (Miller, 2019). This shift to a positive approach ties closely with the formation of the FPA and has been maintained throughout further iterations of the social features, including rejecting a highly requested "role queue" system that would force players into advance selection of certain hero types. The "role queue" system has not been implemented, with Kaplan making it clear that the developers do not want to implement anything that will take away player agency, and that a good teammate will switch heroes as required (Kaplan, 2019).

The endorsement system lets players rank other players from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Ratings result in ranks, which require maintenance (consistently playing and being endorsed) in order to keep, or increase, the level. The ranks are visible publicly next to the player's icon, meaning players will know a fellow teammates' endorsement rank without having to search their profile. Players are given three different 'endorsements' to give their teammate/opponent at the end of the match: *shot caller* (teammate only, a good leader), *good teammate* (teammate only, effective and good communicator), and *sportsmanship* (teammate or opponent, positive influence and respectful). These endorsements label how a player believes another player performed, and what endorsement they have earned. With this, the value of *respect* is embedded into the endorsement system. Both endorsing players, and being endorsed, generates a sense of *respect* for fellow teammates. Even the categories reflect this – sportsmanship, good teammate, or shot caller are used to cover a broad range of positive play behaviours. This way players are aware that if they fulfil these categories, they could receive an endorsement, adding to or improving their rank. Similarly, giving endorsements provides a small amount of XP for the endorsing player to add to their level[27], adding further encouragement for players to endorse one another. Plus, if a player receives an endorsement from someone, they are likely to reciprocate – at least in theory. In the previous chapter, forums warned that players were

[27] At the end of each level a player receives a "loot box" with cosmetic rewards ranging in rarity in it – the only other way to obtain these is by purchasing them.

endorsing without thought, simply to collect the maximum XP from each match before moving onto the next group of people.

The endorsement ranks also feed into the LFG system, helping players choose who they want on their team prior to matches being held, so a low endorsement ranked player will not likely be picked to join an LFG team. Similar to the subtle AaT tactic resulting in longer queue times, a low endorsement rank will make it harder for disruptive players to enter LFG teams. LFG teams are ideal for going up tiers in competitive as the win rates for a six stack average at 52.88% compared to groups and solo players in a stack at 49.98% (Mercer, 2018c). So, it is up to the low endorsement ranked player to adjust their behaviour in order to increase both their skill rating and endorsement rank accordingly. Endorsements seem to be a holistically useful tactic for the community. While a higher endorsement level makes it easier to join competitive LFG teams, it is not the sole purpose of endorsements to aid competitive players, but instead acts as a decency marker for all players in *Overwatch*.

The *respect* value in the endorsement tactic goes well beyond just being embedded in the game's social features, as it is present in how the developers interact with rude players on the forums, who often claim that they have been wrongly banned or punished by the systems in place. By "respect" in this instance, I mean that the developers respect their non-disruptive players and proves to them that they take player complaints seriously, and crack down on those who do not respect others in game. An example would be from a thread in 2017 titled "Lol I [was] just game banned for a week on my main [account] in quickplay", where player "Ceaya" posted: "'disruptive gameplay'. In quickplay. What." in disbelief that one could be disruptive in quickplay, arguing they should not be banned, clearly taking the stance that quickplay shouldn't be taken seriously as either a play or social space. Kaplan responds shortly after the thread was initiated, giving the specific details on how many complaints the banned account had received (2247), how many hours it had been silenced (9216) and suggests that "someone from your IP has been a less-than-ideal OW citizen" (Kaplan, 2017c). What follows is a rally of players enjoying the view of the game director candidly laying down the law so publicly for this

particular player. It reinforces the ability of the report system too, and how the endorsement system would be quick to highlight a player such as this as a less than ideal teammate[28].

In searching for more ideal teammates, to avoid players like Ceaya, LFG provides a ready-made roster of groups looking for like-minded teammates, giving players greater control over who they play with. LFG allows players to meet new players and set up team dynamics to suit their play style, whether this is through hero composition, placing teammates in certain roles, or making voice chat compulsory, all can contribute to a more positive play experience. A separate menu lists all available groups, each named usually with the requirements, or what the group is setting out to achieve. What is key here is *cooperation* at the heart of LFG. Akin to AaT, LFG ostensibly places control over the gameplay experience in the hands of the player. Yet there is the additional layer, compared to AaT, where players must negotiate with others to create an ideal group to play with that is beyond the control of the developers (without inconceivable levels of micro-management). For the team to function well as a unit *cooperation* is crucial, it is the emphasis on this value that makes LFG a successful tactic in managing the player community. One player took to the forums to thank the developers for LFG specifically, explaining that LFG fixed one tricks, throwers, teammates switching heroes, and so on. Kaplan responds informing players that the team "poured their hearts into it" and that further improvements for the system are coming in due course (Kaplan, 2018a). The positive feedback and system clearly being popular, with a huge spike in groups being formed for placement matches when the tactic released (Kaplan, 2018b), suggesting that players resonate with the *cooperation* embedded in the LFG system. As a team game, *cooperation* is key, and more importantly so in competitive matches. LFG can be used to form quickplay teams, but Kaplan highlighting LFG's popularity by looking at placement matches for the competitive season following LFG's addition once again shows who the moderation tactic is meant to be targeted towards.

On the other hand, LFG teams have been reported on the forums for having unreasonably high expectations and requirements in order to join. Whether this is a small population of LFG teams is unclear, but the sentiment is still just as damaging to the developer's version of *cooperation* and *respect* initially attached to the system. These "high expectation" type players adjust the

[28] When a player is actioned their endorsement level immediately goes back to 1.

values to fit their own expectations of what *cooperation* is – in this case, having open player profiles, certain hours on heroes a joining member might suggest they wish to play and specific stats on these heroes, in order to be let into the group.

CONCLUSIONS

A closer analysis of the community-developer relations has shown that developers are visibly active on the game's forums and YouTube channel. The developers, mainly Kaplan, use the platforms to speak to the players and constantly remind them of the impact they have on *Overwatch* and the development team. The developers provide formal systems and therefore non-negotiable messages in order to not be vague. However, the developers are selectively transparent with the community, meaning the developers are selective in what the encode and make available to the player base to then decode. For example, they posted a video and forum post with full details on AaT, but when it comes to crucial adjustments later, such as adding an extra slot to AaT, they become opaque. In part this is done to prevent any false hope, like Kaplan announcing a third social feature too early and having to take it back because it was not ready (PlayOverwatch, 2018d). The developers also place themselves within the community as both developers and players, but their stakes in the game are vastly different to those of the players. They will always hold some level of authority over players, even if they wish to appear as an average "gamer" amongst the community.

After having released four moderation tactics into *Overwatch,* the developers seem to feel that the onus is on the community to manage their gameplay experience, and less so on the developers. The developers have provided the tools for the players to make their gameplay experience their own, and to take charge of who they interact with to prevent conflict between players. From the discussion in this chapter we can see the various tactics (avoid as teammate, looking for group, and endorsements) placed in the hands of the players, which do not filter through community managers like the report system, and it is left to the players to decide how they want to interact with these tactics. Yet there is a continued skew towards competitive players behind the implementation of these tactics, such as LFG being primarily used for competitive play in placement matches, even though it can also be used by non-competitive groups to meet new players and play at a more leisurely pace. Within the forums and developer videos there is a

cultivated sense of shared responsibility between the community and developers to manage disruptive players. The developers provide the tools, and the players make the best use of them. However, when these tools are not consistently maintained and updated, the community loses faith in the tools they are given to supposedly improve their gameplay experience, and so in turn lose faith in the developers.

The values embedded in the moderation tactics have shifted over the course of the game's development. Since the creation of the FPA, and Blizzard joining it, the moderation tactics added to *Overwatch* have changed from punishing bad behaviour to encouraging and maintaining good behaviour – fitting closely with the rhetoric of the FPA to manage "disruptive" (instead of "toxic") players. What has not shifted over time is the focus on competitive players. Priding themselves on listening to and taking on board player feedback, the most vocal players on the forums are competitive players, yet developers address the community as a whole when interacting with the competitive players on forums, as though competitive players represent the whole community. Developers also "encode" their videos and forum posts with the notion of reducing toxicity (Hall, 1999), and players read these messages as such. However, their understanding of reducing toxicity has involved the subversion of the moderation tactics to tailor who they play with and how, customising their gameplay in such a way that they don't experience toxicity – but are in fact the source of it.

This chapter has shown that while there is a mix of both political and ethical values embedded in the moderation tactics and developer-community interactions on the forums, there is dissonance between the implementation and execution. When placed in the hands of the players, the systems are renegotiated through their own play experience and expectations of player behaviours, and while the value may still remain, the meaning behind it shifts. Without a follow up response from the developers each time to redirect the course of the tactic, it is left to open interpretation on why and how it should be used by a player, leading to the conflict evident on the forums trying to justify actions and processes involving the moderation tactics.

CONCLUSION

In chapter one, the forum analysis highlighted that the moderation tactics in Blizzard's online multiplayer game Overwatch are linked and overlap to form a greater structure of player governance, in need of constant maintenance and fixes for the multitude of issues that players point out on multiple occasions. An example of this would be players needing better ways to report toxic voice chat with evidence in order prevent recurring disruptive chat in matches. This is a regular issue that appeared in the forums, and a wider issue for online multiplayers overall. Players used the forums to voice concerns and issues they experience in matches, sometimes looking for solutions or coming up with their own through meticulous research. Players also noted developer bias towards competitive players, with the top 15% of competitive players also being key content creators on Twitch or YouTube, players identified the vested interest Blizzard had in keeping them satisfied compared to other players.

The issues that arose from the implementation of moderation tactics therefore can be separated into two key conflicts:

1. Players felt that the tactics were being weaponised and subverted to serve competitive players who wanted to enforce a "meta" play style by punishing those who played "off meta". By enforcing meta play over other play styles via use of moderation tools to punish nonconforming players, competitive players wanted their play style to be the dominant approach to play – the only "true" way to play the game.

2. The tactics were not capable of managing the nuanced nature behind ever-changing player behaviours, such as LFG teams becoming an intimidating process to get into as players felt team leaders had become too demanding.

In chapter two the analysis of developer-community interactions and developer videos provided insight on the other side of *Overwatch*. The developers actively encourage players to give them feedback in their forum posts and in response to their update videos, but it is often ignored, and when feedback is referenced it is vague and often attached to pre-determined plans. Additionally,

while seemingly intent on player feedback, even in their own posts and videos, the developers reference competitive players when discussing the moderation tactics and other game features being added, covering how they may be impacted or encouraged by the additions.

In the discourses examined, the developers often positioned themselves as both players and "custodians" (PlayOverwatch, 2017a) of *Overwatch,* but then disassociated themselves as players when the community was accused of being toxic. At that point the accountability was solely placed on the players, and the responsibility to manage this toxicity started with the players taking responsibility to correct their behaviour – the tactics came second. Their developer updates and forum posts also act as vehicles in an attempt to reinstate lost faith in the player base, by directly responding to player-initiated forum threads with their opinions and further details to provide insight on the issue at hand.

Overall, Blizzard have created tools that allow players the illusion of self-governance, when in fact the players are, and will always be, restricted by the developers who set the parameters of the tools. Players also have to wait on the developers for adjustments and improvements to the social systems and are therefore at the developer's mercy for the optimal use of the moderation tactics in place. The moderation tactics are precarious. Waiting lengths of time for crucial improvements to their functionality, with no updates or information from the developers in the meantime, means the tactics can lack impact for these stretches of time. During this time, players subvert and weaponise the tactics to suit their play style and ideas of expected player behaviour, in which lies the key conflict at the heart of the *Overwatch* community – the casual/competitive play style divide and disagreement over the uses for the moderation tactics.

Players appreciate transparency from the developers on the finer details of the social systems they implement, replying positively to developers responding to their forum threads. Open conversation with the community via developer-initiated forum posts, responding to player-initiated forum threads, and posting regular developer update videos have all contributed to highlighting the development team's efforts to be more transparent with their community. However, by striving to be candid and clear with their community, if the developers are not consistent in these efforts, the developers are more likely to be called out as being too quiet.

Equally, if there are particular details that are not shared, or elements of *Overwatch* and its community are ignored on these open forums, players begin to note where the greater priorities lie for the developers.

The *Overwatch* developers clearly prioritise their competitive players over other players. Both chapter one and two have shown that players recognise this bias, and developers will address competitive players specifically when covering new moderation tactics. While competitive players are the more vocal members on the forums, there are casual players who also have opinions worth listening to, plus using more than forums as avenues for player feedback could result in more nuanced feedback for the developers to read.

AN AWARD FOR PARTICIPATION

One of the key concepts highlighted in chapter 1 was the notion of participatory governance, or "co-moderation", where developers and users/players worked together to create a governing system that suited all who operated within its confines (Duguay et al., 2018; TL Taylor, 2006a). From chapter 2 it can be argued that the players used the forums as a meaningful space to air their concerns and share ideas to improve the game's social systems. The developer update videos, analysed in chapter 3, consistently concluded with thanking the players for all their feedback, and requesting further feedback from players to help them make the game better.

Yet, the data collected over the course of this study shows no clear link between what players have written on forums and the moderation tactics that Blizzard released. There were some instances where comments on forums would be mentioned in passing by the developers, such as the lost faith in the report system (Kaplan, 2017b; Mercer, 2018b; PlayOverwatch, 2018b). But no suggestions from the forums were specifically addressed and then later implemented as a moderation tactic, like player RATSTAB's proposed "tagging" system to flag players using disruptive voice chat (RATSTAB, 2017). The illusion Blizzard provides is that the feedback matters, and perhaps it does somewhere amongst the black box data at Blizzard HQ, but for helping moderation this study does not add to the notion of players and developers working together to create solutions to in-game social conflicts. The opinions of developers and players

are at odds with one another, meaning that the attempt to co-create fails on both sides (Banks, 2009).

Bartle's work on developers taking the position of gods or governments is troubled in this thesis (Bartle, 2006). As seen in chapter 3 the *Overwatch* developers consider themselves as custodians and players of the game, but I disagreed that they could straddle these two roles, as the stakes invested as developers were significantly different to those of the players. The term "custodian" seems more suitable than a deity or governing body, as the developers are responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the game world and community – much like a landlord. While they may be able to change reality and hold the ability to ban players, they do not act upon these abilities without informing players beforehand – either as a warning message following too many reports, or a set of patch notes to clarify any major game changes afoot. Bartle makes the point that developers have a sovereignty over the virtual world they create, so they do not necessarily have to inform players of their decisions beforehand, but they do (Bartle, 2006). Though, this is likely to avoid bad press or losing players from the game.

Additionally, the layers of legal protection that Blizzard enforces via the ToS and EULA over the top of these picturesque grounds means that the developers are not exempt from being considered a governing body. I, therefore, suggest further research into disentangling these terms, or form a potential hybrid term, but this would require an examination of other developers' approach to moderating and conversing with their communities.

This research did not investigate how successful these moderation tactics were at reducing toxic behaviours in *Overwatch*, but rather the reactions to the tactics. Further research on moderating online communities could track how successful in reducing disruptive behaviours a moderation tactic is, alongside the general response from players to show if the responses are still negative if the tactic is working at it is supposed to be.

ALL THINGS IN MODERATION

In terms of toxicity, both on the forums and from the developers there are reports of *Overwatch* being a significantly more enjoyable experience since the addition of the different moderation

tactics (Grayson, 2019; Kaplan, 2018a). Steps have been taken by Blizzard to address the holistic issues of disruptive players and there have been positive results from these efforts. The practices deemed "toxic" by players continue to reflect the idea that toxicity is something perceived as bad by players, and player expectations feed into the perception of what is the right and wrong way to play (Kou and Nardi, 2014; Lajeunesse, 2018; TL Taylor, 2006a). Even within these player expectations there are conflicts, like the debate of "meta play", so these expectations can fluctuate depending on which player behaviour is being used as the litmus paper for right and wrong - as exhibited in the intense debates on the forums.

This research has highlighted that reducing "toxicity" needs an even more nuanced approach when it covers everything from hero choices to racial slurs and further emergent player practices that have not arisen yet (TL Taylor, 2006a). It goes without saying that these are two very different instances of disruptive play and need different courses of action to be dealt with accordingly. Player SFJake in the forums makes a poignant point that at the heart of toxicity is the attacking of minorities, and this problem should be prioritised in the report system over more mild name calling and trash talk (SFJake, 2017). For further research, the study of a system using priority reporting and the general feedback from the player base could provide insight into the potential impact on the more vitriolic toxicity present in online games.

THE COMPETITIVE NATURE OF IT ALL

A gap I noted in the literature was the discussion of professional/competitive players playing the game outside of tournaments/private practice and using the amateur spaces that exist within it. I initially argued that the expectation of certain kinds of play from competitive players had impacted the casual play space in quick play mode. In chapter 2, the forum discussions repeatedly threw up the phrase "meta play", meaning the optimised team composition, the use of which supposedly assured the team using that "meta play" a victory. Competitive players used the game's moderation tactics to shun other players into playing in this format, or face consequences such as being "avoided" by multiple players or misreported – a genuine concern on the forums. Competitive players did not do this merely in competitive play modes- instead they attempted to claim all spaces of the game, expecting all players to be knowledgeable about the game's "meta" and operate at the same level of play found in competitive matches. Those who do not comply

with these expectations are then positioned and labelled as disruptive players, and the supplied moderation tactics are used against them.

In addition to the problematic interactions between competitive and casual players, there are subtle yet troubling exchanges occurring between competitive players and the developers. In chapter 2, player Sofrito explained that the top 15% of competitive players were also mostly *Overwatch* streamers and content creators, and that they were the only ones to benefit from new features added to the game (Sofrito, 2018). This was due to them being fiscally connected to Blizzard, producing content to promote *Overwatch* by streaming their top-ranking play on Twitch or YouTube, some of whom are paid professional *Overwatch* players. I believe that this study has shown that the vested interest of developers can impact their approaches to moderating and managing a community, and what they add to the game.

Most moderation tactics added to the game are done so with the focus being on competitive players. For example, returning to debates around "meta play", Kaplan explained that Avoid as Teammate could be used to avoid someone if a player disliked their play style or hero choice. In multiple developer update videos and developer forum posts competitive players are the focus audience – there are no instances of the developers solely addressing those who use quick play or those who play *Overwatch* more casually (unless in conjunction with competitive players).

From this I can discern that competitive players have a significant impact on the casual player base, ramping up the intensity of play to match the competitiveness they seek when playing *Overwatch.* Equally, they are prioritised over casual players by the developers due to vested interest in the competitive players potentially feeding into their "road to pro" program for OWL (Overwatch, 2018). While eSports itself may not be the element impacting the decisions behind moderation tactics, the competitive players certainly are, and the mix of competitive and casual players is a site of conflict worth researching in other online multiplayers.

ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS

My first research question asked, how has player moderation tactics changed since the introduction of ranked, and professional matches? Thus, I note the significant skewing of favour

from developers towards competitive players. These tactics have allowed competitive players to enforce their stance on off meta players. Though the tactics have not necessarily "changed" from the introduction of ranked and professional play, they have certainly been impacted by this subset of players. Competitive players are not the only factor that has changed moderation tactics in *Overwatch*. Blizzard creating the FPA shifted their approach to moderation from punishing disruptive behaviour to encouraging good behaviour, through the endorsements system. Toxicity did rise months after *Overwatch's* release, and Blizzard had to step in to tackle it, but there was no clear evidence to support that it was solely competitive players that contributed to this.

The second question asked what values are embedded in the moderation tactics and how is that playing out in the forums? I noted in the "Play Nice, Play Fair" chapter that *cooperation, respect, democracy,* and *autonomy* were the key values present in *Overwatch's* moderation tactics. They also seeped over into how they were implemented, showing that these values were not just embedded into the tactics, but into the developers as well in some cases. It is evident in the forums that the players try to emulate these values. *Autonomy* is shown by players telling others to use the tactics in place first before raising issues on the forums or suggesting they could have the ability to moderate the community as a "player moderator". These values are not necessarily consistent in places, such as *cooperation* being a value embedded in LFG. Players felt the leaders of LFG teams were too demanding, not emulating *cooperation*, and instead gatekeeping the space entirely.

The third question asked what data is Blizzard using to inform the design choices of moderation tactics? From this research I can discern that player feedback is a key component informing their design choices, but it is not hugely impactful. Take the increasing of "avoid" slots for Avoid as Teammate. Players consistently requested more slots to help them avoid disruptive players or players that they did not enjoy playing with. But the slots were only increased by one five months after AaT was released, and no more added since, with players still calling for more slots (Mooshi, 2019). There is also internal data collected that Blizzard alludes to but does not divulge any specifics in order to prevent players from gaming the system.

THE FUTURE OF MODERATION?

The direction that Blizzard takes moderating *Overwatch* in the future will likely set examples for other game development companies creating and maintaining similar games. In July 2019, a brand-new moderation tactic was announced – Role Queue (Overwatch, 2019). This new system will allow players to specifically pick which hero type (tank, damage, support) they want to play before even entering the match and queue into matches. All teams will now be two of each hero type, in both competitive and quickplay mode. But does moderating a game's community mean having to prescribe how they should play to avoid any conflicts between players deeming what is the "correct" way to play? Will moderation matter if the game is entirely prescribed to players, and will prescriptive play impact emergent player practices?

This topic requires further work in order to understand the additional influences within the development of moderation tactics. Now that each of the moderation tactics have been analysed, a closer look into the layers within the community would contribute to better understanding when moderation is needed and how it should be implemented. Interviewing those who have worked on designing the systems would give first-hand accounts on how impactful the developers think the tactics will be for managing the players. Talking to players who do not post on forums, the less vocal members of the *Overwatch* community, would provide insight to the demographic not targeted by the developers and highlight potentially divergent opinions compared to the dominant opinions seen in the analyses so far. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the opinions between developers, casual players and competitive players would add greater depth to the findings in this thesis.

Moderating a community can be done in a variety of ways, and the shift towards encouraging good behaviour in place of punishing bad behaviour could remove career trolls from games with no shocking ban statistics to chase after. However, there still needs to be an authoritative presence for players to rely on, in order to protect minorities from hate speech – a prevalent and continuous issue in the gaming community. For now, the efforts made by Blizzard to manage and converse openly with their community is worth emulating, even if it appears to be lip-service at times, as player feedback and respecting the player's opinions helps build a strong understanding

of the game's community. Players may set the expectations, but it is down to the developers to clarify and guide them.

GLOSSARY

WORD	DEFINITION
Arcade Mode	One of *Overwatch's* game modes. A more free-from style of play, with custom games and limited-edition modes. Players can only earn XP from Arcade matches.
Competitive Play Mode	One of *Overwatch's* game modes. This mode is split into "seasons" (typically a season lasts two months). At the beginning of each season players must play 10 "placement matches" to receive their season's starting Skill Rating (SR) and placing them in the corresponding competitive rank. Winning competitive matches increases a player's SR.
Competitive Ranks	This is the ranking system used in competitive play. The tiers are: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, Grandmaster – and Top 500 for their region. These ranks have Skill Rating (SR) brackets, for example, Silver Rank is 1500-1999 SR. To go up a rank, players must increase their SR by winning competitive matches.
Competitive Season	A competitive season in *Overwatch* is typically a two-month time period in which players strive to achieve the highest SR. Each season comes with its own rewards at the conclusion, such as limited-edition player icons or skins.

ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board)	A body that supplies the age limits on games, checking the game's content for gambling, sex references, drug references as examples.
EULA (End User License Agreement)	A legal agreement that players must sign before being allowed to play a game. These agreements contain articles on copyright infringement, creating cheat systems, and hacking.
Experience Points (XP)	Points given to a player for completing any kind of match -more is given if the player's team wins than loses. The XP increases the player level.
MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game)	An online game with significantly large populations and simultaneous play.
MMR (Match Making Rating)	The hidden internal algorithm that takes into account a player's SR to match them with similarly rated players in order to assure fair matches.
MOBA (Multiplayer/Massive Online Battle Arena)	A game genre present in games such as *League of Legends* and *Dota 2*. Two teams fight to kill each other while gaining resources to help win their objective. The space is restricted, hence the "arena" in the acronym.
Muting	When a player silences another player's microphone in chat so they no longer can hear their voice chat.
Off Meta	A play style that does not use the discovered optimal way to play the game. Particular line ups of heroes are deemed "meta", if a

	player does not pick one of these heroes then they are considered to be playing off meta.
Partying Up	An informal phrase for creating a team, usually with voice chat, either in game or on party chat applications.
Patch	When developers update or fix bugs in a game's content, they release it as a "patch".
PBSR (Performance Based Season Rank)	For competitive seasons 1 and 2 in *Overwatch* a player's SR was determined solely by how they performed in placement matches. Since season 3 a player's SR is determined by their performance in placement matches and their previous SR.
Player Level	A level is attributed to a player after gaining a certain amount of XP. After reaching level 100, players are "promoted" and start back at level 1 but receive a portrait frame around their hero icon in matches. As players are promoted more and more, the portraits become grander and grander.
Quick Play Mode	One of *Overwatch's* game modes. Matches are shorter and do not affect a player's competitive ranking. They do, however, give players XP towards their player level.
Six stack	A team of six players who have not "solo queued" into a match.
Skill Rating (SR)	A rating between 1-5000 determined by the player's performance in competitive matches in *Overwatch.* A player's starting SR in a new competitive season is a

	combination of the previous season's SR and the player's performance in placement matches. SR of players in Diamond, Master, Grandmaster, and Top 500 are subject to decaying over time. This means that a player's SR will reduce over time if competitive matches are not consistently played.
Solo queue	Queuing up for a match by oneself.
Throwing	Intentionally losing matches by playing poorly, or helping the enemy team.

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APPENDICES

OVERWATCH MODERATION TIMELINE		
Month	Media	Details
2016		
MAY	• *Overwatch* launches on PC, Xbox One and PS4.	
JUNE	• *Developer Update* – "Let's Talk Competitive Play".	• Distinction made between QP and competitive as easy/serious gameplay modes.
	• *AtP (Avoid this Player)* removed by developers in response to players mass avoiding one pro player.	• Players weaponizing moderation tactic to make game play and matches easier for them.
JULY - NOVEMBER	N/A	N/A
DECEMBER	• *Player Forum Post* - "Voice Chat Moderation".	• Players able to get away with toxic voice chat as it is harder to provide evidence in reports. • Players muted for playing unpopular heroes – once again weaponizing the tactic

		to reinforce certain player behaviours as unpopular.
2017		
JANUARY	N/A	N/A
FEBRUARY	• *Player Forum Post* – "Avoid as Teammate"	• Player offering solution to *Avoid this Player* issues as a similar moderation tactic. • "Off meta" players being avoided by "meta" players – further distinction between play styles within the competitive community.
MARCH	• *Player Forum Post* – "Moderation of in game voice comms".	• Player wanting to tag disruptive players for game authorities to spot better. • Player solutions taking pressure off of developer resources and using community labour instead.
APRIL	• *Player Forum Post* – "Voice Chat Moderation Needs to Become a Thing"	• Report system unequipped to deal with voice chat.

		• Accountability placed on Blizzard, not the players to sort the issue. • Competitive mode should not allow disruptive players.
MAY	• *Developer Update* – "Happy First Anniversary"	• Kaplan refers to developers as the "custodians" of *Overwatch* – the players are the ones in control of the experience.
JUNE	• *Player Forum Post* – "Community Moderation System"	• Players believe Blizzard is unable to handle the volume of reports and moderators chosen from within the community could offset the workload. • Players are aware of labour behind moderation systems when human intervention is involved.
JULY	• *Player Forum Post* – "One Year – Still No Moderation or Reporting on Console"	• Console players feeling ignored by developers.

		• Toxicity on console has grown exponentially due to the lack of *Overwatch* dedicated report system.
	• *Player Forum Post, Developer Reply* – "Daily Reminder for the Console Report System".	• Player posts every day to remind developers that there is no report system on console, trying to catch their attention and hoping the issue will be addressed. • Kaplan explains technical issues behind implementing the report system onto console and thanks players for being patient.
AUGUST	• Report system added to Xbox One and PS4.	
	• *Developer Update* – "Deathmatch".	• "Deathmatch" match mode added to Arcade game mode. • Kaplan describes it as a place for competitive players to warm up or wind down

		from competitive matches to keep a level head.
	• *Player Forum Post, Developer Reply* – "lol I just game banned for a week on my main in quickplay"	• Kaplan shuts down a disruptive player claiming that quickplay should not have as much scrutiny for their play style due to it being a "casual" mode.
	• *Player Forum Post, Developer Reply* – "Report system is a failure"	• Player believes that no one fears the report system anymore because the week bans lack any impact on disruptive players – receives "highly rated" badge for 501 likes. • Kaplan responds with a full "game-plan" setting out the upcoming systems and ideas in place for the future moderation of *Overwatch.*
SEPTEMBER	• *Developer Update* – "Play Nice, Play Fair"	• Kaplan officially addresses the greater issue of toxicity in the *Overwatch* community

		and puts the responsibility on the players to own up to their behaviours and try to adjust them to make the experience better for all, and to allow the developers to focus on content instead of punishing players.
OCTOBER-NOVEMBER	N/A	N/A
DECEMBER	• *Player Forum Post* – "Toxicity/Misogyny/Racism in the OW Community"	• Highly rated post about toxic players attacking minorities in *Overwatch.* • Looking for the report system to take precedence in dealing with slurs and hate speech over general disruptive voice chat.
2018		
JANUARY	• *Developer Update* – "Popular Community Topics"	• Kaplan addresses the impact of the console report system – looking to restore faith in

		the report system's impact across all platforms.
	• *Blizzard uses YouTube and Twitch to catch toxic Overwatch players.*	• Circumventing formal moderation tactics to warn disruptive players of their behaviour, and the consequences they may face if they continue.
FEBRUARY	• Forum host change from Battle.net to Blizzard forums.	
MARCH	• *Blizzard joins the FPA (Fair Play Alliance) to combat disruptive players in the gaming community.*	• Setting up precedence that Blizzard will be more focused on dealing with the social issues in the community.
	• *Developer Update* – "Avoid as Teammate"	• Introduction of AaT to the game, explaining how it works and the restrictions on it to prevent any abuse of the system. • Concept of "tailoring" one's gameplay experience begins with this developer update.

	• *Developer Forum Post* – "Updated Player Experience Tools for 1.22"	• Mercer highlights an increase in player reports, thanking players for using the system and helping developers pinpoint disruptive players. • Clarification of what each report category means, what they do not apply to. • Repeating the details for AaT, linking the developer update in the post.
	• *Player Forum Post* – "Avoid as Teammate Griefing Unpopular Heroes"	• Player voices concern that AaT might be used to abuse unpopular hero choices, and "avoids" could accumulate on these players even with the two avoid limit. • Concern AaT could be used to reinforce meta play as the best way to play, with any deviation being punished via avoiding/muting the player.

APRIL	• *Avoid as Teammate released.*	
	• *Player Forum Post* – "Avoid as Teammate Literally Does Nothing"	• Player explains that the low number of avoid slots means that it has little to no impact on who they come across in their matches.
	• *Player Forum Post* – "There's No Such Thing as 'Abusing' Avoid Teammate"	• Issues of conflicting play styles arises again, with the player explaining that it is not "abuse" to be avoided for not playing how others prefer to play. • Claims that top 15% of players are the only ones to benefit from the social systems to tailor their gameplay further.
MAY	• 'Gameplay Sabotage' replaces 'Poor Teamwork' and 'Griefing' categories in the report system.	• Developers trying to further clarify what falls into the different report categories to prevent misreporting (accidental) and false reporting (intentional).

JUNE	• *Developer Update* – "Upcoming Social Features"	• Kaplan introduces Looking for Group and Endorsement systems. • Shift in social features from punishing players to encouraging good behaviour. • LFG allows further tailoring of one's gameplay experience.
	• *LFG and Endorsements released.*	
	• *Developer Forum Post* – "Groups and Matchmaking in Overwatch"	• Mercer releases detailed statistics around win rates for group vs solo queue teams.
	• *Player Forum Post, Developer Reply* – "LFG is just too good"	• Player sings praises on the impact of LFG. • Kaplan thanks the player explaining that the development team worked hard on the system to get it right.

JULY	• *Player Forum Post* – "Flaws in the Endorsement System"	• Endorsement system has created "fake nice" players who want to increase and maintain their endorsement rank. • Player concerned that the more time spent in game means more endorsements – an unfair advantage over players who don't have as much spare time. This again makes clear the priority of competitive players over casual players.
	• *Developer Forum Post* – "Quick LFG Update"	• Kaplan posts a graph showing a surge of groups being created at the start of season 11 placement matches – to prove the success of LFG for competitive play. • Kaplan also states the instances of six-stacks have

		doubled since the introduction of LFG.
AUGUST	• *Avoid as Teammate "avoid" slots increased to 3.*	
SEPTEMBER	N/A	N/A
OCTOBER	• *Player Forum Post* – "Flaws in Endorsement System" (cntd.)	• Players noticing that endorsements are more easily received when playing a healer. • Maintaining endorsement level is still difficult and inconsistent with no communication from the developers on why it drops so often.
NOVEMBER	• *Player Forum Post* – "Control Freak LFG Leaders really killed LFG"	• Rising fixation from group leaders on player statistics to get into groups.

		• LFG leaders forcing meta play and specific team compositions.
DECEMBER	• *Player Forum Post* – "Endorsement System Overhaul"	• Use of endorsements dropped significantly, making it even harder to maintain endorsement level.
2019		
JANUARY	• *Player Forum Post* – "Player Moderators?"	• Player recommending player moderators to combat the still present toxicity in game. • Player moderators would have to meet certain criteria – such as hours played in order to be considered.
FEBRUARY	• *Player Forum Post* – "LFG Failed Because We're Hypocrites"	• Player believes that other players are only interested in winning, with or without disruptive teammates.