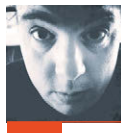

Overwatch and the return of the trolls

“We often talk about ways to punish players who are behaving poorly, and it’s not very exciting to a lot of us. I think, more often than not, players are behaving in awesome ways in *Overwatch*, and we just don’t recognise them enough.”

Designer Jeff Kaplan offered this rosy take on the *Overwatch* community in 2018 as he introduced the game’s new endorsement system, intended to reward players for sportsmanship, teamwork, and leadership on the virtual battlefields of Blizzard’s popular shooter. After matches, players could now vote to endorse one another; a steady stream of endorsements would earn occasional loot boxes and shiny badges indicating their status as worthy teammates. If bans existed to punish disruptive behaviour, this new system commodified and incentivised positive interactions. After all, the world could always use more heroes.

Flash forward to 2020. *Overwatch 2* is in the works with no official release date announced, and development of new content for the original *Overwatch* has slowed to a crawl. While fresh character skins appear with seasonal events and the perpetual cycle of gameplay balancing continues unrelentingly, *Overwatch* has stagnated, and its player base is restless. In the absence of new heroes, maps, and modes, a growing number of players have leaned hard into toxicity to keep themselves amused.

As a die-hard *Overwatch* player, I’ve observed a considerable up-tick in abusive chat, gameplay sabotage, and other forms of disruptive behaviour. These problems aren’t new or unique to *Overwatch*, but they’re increasingly becoming the norm rather than the exception. While a certain percentage of the player base has presumably drifted away to other games as development on *Overwatch* has wound down, certain



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stalwarts who remain have resorted to trolling out of sheer boredom.

Blizzard has long emphasised the motto “play nice, play fair” among its core values, and *Overwatch*’s endorsement system seemed to embrace this ethos. Why has it failed to rein in a community increasingly intent on acting out? I argue that *Overwatch*’s endorsements created a form of performative sportsmanship. It’s the promise of extrinsic rewards – rather than an intrinsic sense of fair play – that motivates players to mimic behaviours associated with good sportsmanship. With the endorsement system, Blizzard gamified the social interactions that happen around *Overwatch* with points, ranks, badges, and rewards. Now, in addition to competing over a control point or payload, players can compete over who’s nicest.

So, what’s the big deal? Is ‘fake niceness’ functionally different than genuine human decency in the context of an online game? While players bashing out ‘gg’ on their keyboards after a match instead of ‘gg ez’ is arguably a step in the right direction, performative sportsmanship remains, at best, superficial. In the absence of meaningful options to sway the hearts and minds of toxic players, performative sportsmanship simply isn’t durable. It lasts until it doesn’t anymore, and then the trolling commences anew.

Perhaps the recent release of Echo, *Overwatch*’s 32nd – and presumably final – hero, will shake things up a bit and reverse this backslide. If recent history has taught us anything, though, it’s that Echo will only be a temporary fix. Once the newness wears off, bored players will fall back on bad habits, and it’s going to take a whole lot more than the occasional loot box to calm the toxic discontent bubbling under the surface of a game Wired once hailed as the rare example of a “troll-free online shooter.”

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