

3rd Place Essay - How do we promote passion for esports while standing against toxic behaviour within esports communities?

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Introduction

In this essay I will discuss the close relationship between passion and toxicity in esports, and therefore how we may be able to reduce the incidence of toxic behaviour without damaging players' existing passion, as well as how their, as well as new players', passion could be promoted to a further degree. I will refer primarily the second most popular esport by viewership (Esports Charts, 2019), Counter Strike: Global Offensive, as a case study.

How are passion & toxicity related?

In order to understand the relationship between passion and toxicity in esports, it is important to understand that toxicity has, from my experience, two primary sources: there is 'trolling', defined as "to harass, criticize, or antagonize (someone) especially by provocatively disparaging or mocking public statements, postings, or acts" (Merriam-Webster, 2020), to which the logical and virtually universal response is banning and/or muting the offender, and there is the more complicated matter of 'tilters', which I will define for the purposes of this essay as "people who exhibit toxic behaviour when they, their team, or someone/thing they believe in experiences poor results, is treated without respect, or is discussed in a negative light". 'Tilters' can be found across the internet in various forms, and are not strictly limited to gaming or esports, but they are particularly prevalent in these contexts. I concede that this definition is rather broad, and that it encompasses a diverse group of people and motives, and as such I note that this definition, and the term related, can be improved, however it will suffice for the purposes of this essay. To clarify, the key difference between a troll and a tilter is that a troll will harass and antagonize people for reasons such as gender, race, or simply for the sake of doing so, whereas a tilter may appear, and be, perfectly reasonable and pleasant in most situations, but after, for example, his favourite team loses a match they ought to have won, become what is referred to in CS: GO as tilted – they become angry and upset, and proceed to lash out at anyone within reach.

The most common reason for this, in my experience, is that the person cares. They have genuine passion for the game and/or team, and as such a loss affects them emotionally in a way that it would not someone who supports neither team. Where

trolls are an inevitability of the internet, tilts are a form of toxicity that particularly affect esports, and that in turn have the potential to negatively affect the industry by driving new players and spectators away, as well as worsening the reputation of the associated community.

How do we tackle toxicity without precluding passion?

The problem that arises from this connection between passion and toxicity is that by taking punitive action such as permanent bans or mutes against tilted players, you are pushing some of the players who are most passionate about the esports away. So, there are a few options that should be considered. Firstly, we may be able to positively change these people's personalities: by strongly promoting ideals such as respect, as has been seen in football in the UK (The FA, 2020), we may be able to discourage this type of behaviour, and provide a chance for players to think carefully about their actions and their consequences. This could be implemented further, for example, by forcing players to earn a certain number of commendations for being a good teammate in casual games to remove their competitive bans rather than making them progressively longer in duration. By placing positive reinforcement of these ideals in game, in streams, and on forums, offending players and spectators would be given the chance to think about their actions in a way they may never have considered before – rather than spiralling further into a tilted state upon receiving a ban, this should be seen as an opportunity for growth, and for maturity to develop.

This approach, while I believe it would be worthwhile, certainly would not work in every case, for a huge variety of reasons, not least because many players would see these measures simply as an obstacle, and would find workarounds to avoid 'wasting' their time – giving people a chance does not provide any kind of guarantee they will take it. As such, more concrete measures would be required alongside these, the first of which would be to change the 'environment' surrounding the game and the esports to be less tolerant of such behaviour. In many facets of esports and gaming, toxicity has seemingly become the 'norm'; while I was unable to find any formal statistics on the subject, in my hundreds of solo-queue matchmaking games in CS: GO I am certain I could count on one hand the number of times I have had a full team of cooperative players throughout. In fact, I have seen dozens of players throw around racial slurs as insults and receive no punishment as a result, despite my apparently futile reports. It is important to note that my experiences are purely anecdotal, however from my research they seem to resonate with a large proportion of the CS: GO community. As a potential solution to this problem, game developers, tournament organisers and forum moderators should make it very clear to players where the line is drawn with regard to this kind of behaviour, and should be ready to act swiftly and decisively in situations where this line is crossed. It may also be helpful to make examples of these cases (anonymously) in order to educate people on what is and isn't considered OK. These steps would help not only to make the environment less hospitable to toxic behaviour, they would also help deliver clarity

on what toxicity is, and potentially help players to know when they are seeing, or even exhibiting, toxicity.

Conclusion

Toxicity is a very real issue across all of esports and gaming, and there does not seem to be a perfect solution. In this regard, more formal research into the psychology of toxic behaviour in gaming would be hugely useful. Even without such insight, however, we are able to identify a clear link between passion and toxic behaviour in esports. This relationship suggests that the most effective way to combat toxicity is in most cases (there are, of course, exceptions) not to punish, but to educate – toxic players are usually not intrinsically bad, they are simply immature. Where promotion of passion seems a relatively simple exercise (given a fun, skill-based game), standing against toxicity is a far more delicate and difficult process.

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