

## 4<sup>th</sup> Place Essay (Joint) - How do we promote passion for esports while standing against toxic behaviour within esports communities?

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### Introduction

As a relatively young industry, esports has the opportunity to define itself before current perceptions are set in stone - and those current perceptions leave all but the critics wanting. Esports is viewed as a toxic industry, a trend borne in part by the gaming industry in general. Video games are consistently demonized as a hotbed of violence and toxicity. For esports to redevelop its image and create a positive environment for players, audiences, and bystanders alike, the burgeoning industry must wield its influence to change the environment of gaming itself. Traditional methods of handling toxicity have failed the esports and gaming communities, creating a gap in confidence and efficacy that threatens to cement both environments as negative spaces. With new investments by game developers, however, there is an opportunity for esports to jump in and invest time, effort, and money into solving the roots, rather than the stems, of the problem. This essay will explore the roots of toxicity to better understand the problem and how it extends into esports. It will follow by examining new developments in gaming for handling toxicity, and will conclude by distilling these into a set of principles that any franchise or developer can use for future investment into mitigating toxicity. Both industries have a stake in solving toxicity at its base to create a healthy and positive environment for players.

### The Roots of Toxicity

To handle toxicity, one first must look to its roots. Toxicity can come in any number of forms, from any number of people, and can be caused by a variety of factors which create a high-stress environment ripe for competitive toxicity. This portion of the essay will address these areas and elaborate on how they form high-stress environments.

Forms of toxicity are manifold, and can find their targets in anyone and for any reason. The most common form is negative chat messages, which can be in a generalized or identity-focused form. 53% of gamers have experienced identity-centered harassment. 30% of gamers of color report race- and ethnicity-based harassment, while 35% of LGBTQ+ gamers report harassment based on their gender identity and sexual

orientation (Anti-Defamation League 2019). 38% of women report gender-based harassment, and many elements of gaming culture - such as the term “grill” or stereotypes such as oversexualization and poor performance - are normalized (McLean and Griffiths 2019). These direct forms of discrimination are problematic, but are rarer than generalized toxicity. 74% of adults who play online games reported some form of harassment (Anti-Defamation League 2019). Generalized and discriminatory forms of harassment in online games can promote toxic environments which bleed into the competitive esports scene.

One widespread myth in gaming and esports is that most toxicity comes from a small group of players. While this is reflective of similar and verifiable effects outside of gaming, it is untrue in the industry itself. Instead, research into toxicity in League of Legends found that only 1% of players were consistently toxic, and these players produced 5% of toxicity. Instead, “the vast majority [of toxic messages] was from the average person just having a bad day” (Maher 2016). This is a direct contradiction of the traditional methods of mitigating toxicity, which have tended to focus on removing consistently toxic players from the game.

A variety of factors form the high-stress environments from which toxicity stems. In game design, elements such as competition and team play foster stressful environments. The high stakes created by a ranked system and a team-based game offer players more opportunities to blame teammates for problems that might not have been in direct control. On the player side, the psychological factors of an online environment reduce barriers to toxicity. Available research has narrowed this down to several factors: dissociative anonymity, perceived invisibility, and asynchronicity. Dissociative anonymity is the process by which a player thinks themselves to be untraceable in online environments, which has the effect of lowering possible repercussions. Perceived invisibility is a similar effect. Players are able to unconsciously justify toxicity because of the lack of a face-to-face interaction; they are environments where the respectability of an in-person conversation is one step removed. Finally, asynchronicity plays a large role in toxicity. Research compares asynchronicity to “...speaking to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and returning to the conversation when one is willing and able to hear the response” (Fu, n.d.). The factor which drives dissociation the most, however, is a lack of repercussions and transparency. Current systems of punishment are unclear and inconsistent in applying penalties to toxicity, and as such normalize the “anonymous and toxic” stereotype.

The sources, causes, and forms of toxicity are many and varied. The average toxic message comes from a standard player who simply has a bad day. Toxicity can come in any number of forms, and can be generalized or discriminatory based on identity. The

causes of toxicity are similarly varied - on the game side, high-stakes environments are borne out of game design. From players, the psychology of online environments offer effects which allow players to disassociate from other players and personal wrongdoing. Unclear repercussions drive home that toxicity is a welcome part of gaming culture. All of these problems in gaming are ones which bleed into esports, and must be addressed to mitigate toxicity in both industries.

### **New Approaches to Toxicity in Gaming**

The traditional mitigation of gaming toxicity is failing. Instead, proactive approaches have begun to emerge as new methods to handle toxicity. Developers such as Ubisoft, Blizzard, and Riot have funded research teams, increased their work with players, and offered transparency as refreshing challenges to the culture of toxicity which persists in gaming communities. This section of the paper will explore the new methods proactive developers have offered, and will distil them into principles that can be applied by developers and franchises to tackle toxicity in gaming and esports.

One method of handling toxicity that has been applied in a wide variety of games is a commendation system. Blizzard introduced the system in their game Overwatch, which allows players to endorse others after the game for playing well, being friendly, or similar positive game impacts. Blizzard reported 15-30% decreases in abuse chat behavior (Castello 2018). Hi-Rez introduced commendations to their premier games with similar success (Harradence 2020). Commendations are a small but effective way to turn ambivalent team relationships into positive ones.

Another practice developers have pursued to reduce toxicity is increased transparency. Ubisoft overhauled their punitive system and announced clear penalties for toxicity: a half-hour suspension for a first offense, two hour suspension for a second, and an investigation and possible permanent ban for a third. This system reduces the opacity that allows the psychological effects of online gaming to thrive. Riot has seen similar changes through transparency through a different route. Their Tribunal system, lauded as an effective new approach, is player-centered. On appeal of a penalty, 100-150 players are incentivized to review the game in question. A majority vote is taken on whether the player should be punished or pardoned, and that stands as the final ruling. Riot has seen massive success with this system: they report up to 70% reform rates in those whose cases are heard by Tribunal (Maher 2016).

The Tribunal offers insight into different methods of mitigating toxicity. It was formed by a fully-funded research team, a practice other developers have mimicked. This drives forward research into gaming toxicity, which leads to Riot's second innovation - information-sharing. Riot offers researchers access to their toxicity and Tribunal

databases, which has spawned a number of academic papers into the topic (Kwak, Blackburn, and Han 2015).

In sum, the new approaches to toxicity offer several principles which can be applied universally to reduce toxicity in gaming. Systems centered on increasing positive player interactions are successful and easy to implement. Transparent, player-centered, or static punitive models offer clear checks on player toxicity, and allow players to define abusive behavior. Finally, research teams and information-sharing are vital to encouraging discussions around toxicity. Each of these principles are an opportunity to, often at low-cost, create significantly more positive environments.

### **Conclusion**

To address toxicity in esports, it is vital to address toxicity in gaming. The audiences of esports are made up almost entirely by people who play the games, and as such they bring the toxicity of the gaming environment with them. This paper addressed the roots of toxicity and the new methods of handling them, and distilled these into principles which can be applied by game developers, but also by esports franchises. As many games rely on an esports scene to garner new fans and greater influence, franchises have the opportunity to sway developers into rethinking and redeveloping their punitive systems. By banding together, esports franchises can influence gaming culture and encourage greater transparency, dedicated research, information-sharing, and positive messaging. To retain passion in esports, franchises and developers alike must target the real problems of toxicity that stem from the base level of gaming, online environments, and player psychology.

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