

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

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There is no doubt that there is an extreme amount of passion within the esports industry, but as with all great things, there is negativity alongside it. The prevalence of toxicity within esports has grown massively as the industry has become more mainstream in recent years. Whilst things have been put in place (such as creator pledges and more vigilant guidelines for players) to lower and eliminate the presence of toxic behaviour within communities, a lot of work can be done to maintain and promote passion within the esports realm.

The exact definition of toxicity (or toxic behaviour) is rather vague, but the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “*the quality of being very harmful or unpleasant in a pervasive or insidious way*” (Lexico, 2020). It can include things such as racism, sexism, homophobia, aggression, or even just straight up nastiness. However, in some extreme cases, people have sent death and rape threats – which would easily be considered a form of toxicity. Competitive gaming allows many openings for people to exhibit toxic behaviour, and the professional esports scene is no exception to this. But although these behaviours are the most prominent in the esports industry, measures have been put into place to make sure that almost all cases of toxic behaviour have repercussions.

The definition of passion is much easier to understand – being defined as “*an intense desire or enthusiasm for something*” (Lexico, 2020). Jessica Formosa created a study to look into ‘The Impacts of Passion for Esports on Wellbeing’, where she outlines that the Dualistic Model of Passion (DMP) places passion into two categories: harmonious passion (HP) and obsessive passion (OP). “*Research has shown that both harmonious and obsessive passions for videogame play result from an individuals’ ability to meet their basic psychological needs,*” (Formosa, 2018). So in theory, if an individual has harmonious passion for esports, they will choose to engage in the activity because it meets their enjoyment needs, whereas having an obsessive passion for it will mean they feel obliged to engage in the activity. The vaguely distinctive difference between the two begins to blur the lines between passion and toxicity within esports communities, as having an obsessive passion can be a gateway into toxic behaviour.

Linking to this notion of psychological needs in competitive gaming, enjoyment levels

for both players and communities are key to ensure toxicity can be reduced. It has been said that *“toxicity can create barriers to players achieving high performance and can reduce players' enjoyment which may cause them to leave the game,”* (Adinolf & Turkey, 2018) – this notion supports the idea of ‘obsessive passion’, and how esports would not meet the psychological needs of the player in toxic circumstances. These behaviours can be very damaging to esports players and their passion for gaming, but as measures are being put into place online, the positivity can be focused on. People in the industry with a ‘harmonious passion’ for esports can be pushed into the category of obsessive because of toxic behaviour. However, this is normally the case when the toxicity comes from the community rather than players – so filtering methods are used to reduce the toxic behaviour from chats and social media and put passion in the forefront.

An example of obsessive passion in the esports industry comes straight from the Overwatch League back in 2018; when ex-Dallas Fuel’s Felix ‘XQC’ Lengyel got himself suspended for being homophobic towards another player after a League match. Following the 4:0 victory for the Houston Outlaws against Dallas Fuel, Austin ‘Muma’ Wilmot (who is openly gay) *“parodied one of Lengyel’s catch phrases following Houston’s triumph”* (Good, 2018). This led to XQC making some very offensive and toxic comments in response and facing a stage one suspension from the League.

It has been argued that toxic behaviours exhibited are direct responses to someone’s passion coming into question. Whilst most people believe this is false, it would explain how devotion to a game or esports can easily slide into the realm of toxicity. If someone were incredibly passionate about a game and their passion was undermined by a competitor or viewer, it would be assumed that the toxic behaviour that comes as a response, is because of how devoted they are to the game. But being passionate for esports is certainly not an excuse to exhibit toxic behaviours. Paul ‘Redeye’ Chaloner stated that *“hatred and competition spill over from one title to another, making blood feuds out of regular old conflict,”* (Chaloner, P139, 2020) – which is incredibly telling of how toxicity normally begins with a player dispute and spirals out of control from there.

Going back to the example of XQC, it would probably be argued that he expressed these incredibly toxic behaviours because of almost being taunted after his team lost the match – and thus could be justified as coming from a place of passion. However, as he is known by the community as being quite negative on his Twitch streams, it becomes hard to justify this toxicity as being derived from a place of passion.

In another sector of the Overwatch scene, Kristen Connelly (Senior Director of

Marketing at Blizzard Entertainment for the Overwatch League), is incredibly passionate about her work and esports as a whole. She began gaining an interest through working in traditional sports, but this translated into the gaming scene. She told the 'Esports Observer' – *“the more mainstream both the Overwatch League and esports as a whole become, the more it validates that we are creating something special”* (Connelly, 2019). Within the media, genuine passion, and intrigue for gaming and esports is not really addressed and has become overruled by toxicity and the negative behaviours within communities. There are several individuals across the entire esports industry that share this passion for esports and help to create a much nicer environment within communities.

Whilst toxicity and negativity within the esports industry is incredibly prevalent in the media, the genuine passion that a lot of people hold in these communities normally goes unheard of. Galtung and Ruge's theory of 'News Values' can be transferred into this idea of toxicity overbearing the passion – mainly the notion of negativity. They established 12 values that are considered to make a story 'newsworthy', and one of those is the 'reference to something negative'. They state that *“bad news is more exciting than good news...bad news stories are more likely to be reported than good news because they are more likely to score high on the other news values,”* (Galtung & Ruge, P71, 1965). Whilst this theory was written to be relevant to print journalism, it can easily be transferred into this idea of toxicity; mainly because people find toxic behaviour has a higher entertainment value. One of the most notorious professional players for toxicity is Tyler1, and how he took advantage of his toxic behaviours because it drew him in more views. Tyler was renowned for his bad temper and throwing his League of Legends matches to purposefully cause toxicity – this eventually led to a ban, but memes remain prominent to use his behaviour as entertainment. Most of the content coming out of the industry features toxicity because people find it entertaining, and thus toxicity puts itself in the forefront of esports rather than the positive aspects.

Furthermore, procedures have been put in place across all esports platforms to ensure that toxicity is kept to a minimum and the passion shines through. An example of something that has been put into place is the 'Twitch Safety Advisory Council' in April 2020 – where they aim to create and maintain a positive environment in streams, and in the chat. Streamers such as MitchJones, Destiny, TrainWrecksTV, Aqualadora, and many others have all been involved in toxicity in one way or another, and thus breaching the regulations put out by Twitch. This new council works to ensure that both esports players and fans are keeping within the guidelines and encourage passion over toxicity. As well as this, the organisation 'Anykey' created the 'GLHF Pledge', for players, fans, and members of the industry to sign to support the ways of which

toxicity is trying to be tackled in esports. The pledge covers seven points of sportsmanship and preventing harmful behaviour within the community, and actively promotes passion within communities. This is a crucial step in players uniting to combat toxic behaviours in the industry, whilst also pushing positivity into the forefront of the esports industry.

In conclusion, the way of which to tackle toxicity within the industry is simple – promoting passion. By letting these toxic behaviours take over the realm of esports and overshadow the passion, it leaves more room for communities to become overrun by toxicity. Yes, toxic behaviour is without a doubt going to exist in every aspect of esports, in some form; but it can be minimised by platforms and communities. Therefore, the actions in place thus far to prevent this behaviour are effective, however, more plans need to happen to ensure the industry puts passion before anything else.

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