"Mute, Report, Block.": Dissonance in Moderating *Overwatch*

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This research project 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.

In 2018, Xbox (Microsoft), Activision Blizzard, Riot Games, Twitch and a variety of other games companies joined to form the FPA (Fair Play Alliance), announced at GDC 2018 (Game Developers Conference), as an industry-wide collective effort to combat "toxicity" (Lajeunesse, 2018) and make games safer and more enjoyable spaces for players. In keeping with this effort, moderation has been a key strategy in managing player behaviour in online multiplayer games. From AI chat bots detecting bad language, to player reporting systems, moderation tactics have developed alongside the games industry. These moderation tactics can come from systems both inside and outside of the game. Likewise, they are both developer-implemented, such as "report player", or player-implemented, by introducing expectations of behaviour through in-game voice chat and forum posts. With online games becoming widely available, these spaces have become increasingly "toxic" and players have demanded better moderation to make their experience more enjoyable.

While community input on moderation, the corporate rhetoric embedded within ToS (Terms of Service) and EULAs (End User License Agreements), and self-moderation have been researched (Busch et al., 2015; Kou and Nardi, 2014), attention has not been paid to the array of moderation tactics operating at one time, and how they have been implemented – either as a response to the community, or through the developer's own choice. The feedback in community forums, mapped alongside the developer's moderation tactics, can provide a clear image of what impact the community has, how developers decide what moderation tactics to implement, and what values are embedded in these decisions. Do they respond to the community, and does the community have any real sway on what moderation tactics Blizzard decides to implement? Considering that *Overwatch* was released May 2016 and after constant requests from the player community, only in August 2017 was a reporting system added to the console version. The reason behind this was not to do with the developers not responding, but rather their technical struggle integrating the in-game

client onto Microsoft and Sony's systems (Kaplan, 2017). This example indicates the conflict between providing players with the best gameplay experience, and the technical difficulties developers face in doing so. On top of this, games such as *Overwatch* operate both as a game and a live service, consistently updated by developers to generate renewed interest, and fixes, month to month. Within this framework there are noticeable similarities between moderation issues on social media platforms and game platforms. The concept of patchwork platform governance (Duguay et al., 2018) can help us better understand the complexities in place for developers designing and implementing these tactics, when users bring their own expectations and dominant values to the tactics, often abusing them and rendering them useless. Similarly, TL Taylor notes the importance of participatory governance in *EverQuest* in order to aid formal moderation systems to adapt to nuanced player behaviour in online spaces (TL Taylor, 2006).

This research project uses textual analysis (McKee, 2003) on *Overwatch's* community forums (both Battle.net and their newer Blizzard forums) and the developer's responses within these forums as a case study to understand how players and developers respond to calls for moderation. The data scope spans between June 2016 to March 2019, to include the first competitive season and subsequent seasons, plus the launch of Overwatch League (the official *Overwatch* eSports league) in November 2016. Additionally, analysing developer-initiated forum threads and official developer YouTube updates highlights what values are embedded in the moderation tactics integrated into the game. Combining these two data sets generates a timeline to map and analyse the community and developer discourses surrounding the implementation of moderation tactics, how they are received, and how they are altered (if at all) over time. I argue that there is dissonance in the values embedded in the developer's responses to the community and moderation tactics implemented, resulting in the moderation tactics having minimal impact on community satisfaction. In the end, the corporate side of development will continue to grapple with the emotional investment of players in their game. There are multiple stakeholders present in one game, and all pull it in different directions.

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