

**“It taught me to hate them all.”: Toxicity through DOTA 2’s Players, Systems, and Media Dispositive**

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## **Abstract**

“It taught me to hate them all.”: Toxicity through DOTA 2’s Players, Systems, and Media Dispositive

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‘Toxicity’ has become a pervasive term for describing and discussing online game communities, but exactly what constitutes toxicity remains loosely defined. This project seeks to uncover how toxicity is constructed and understood within a game community described from inside and out as toxic.

After situating toxicity within prior academic literature on toxicity’s constitutive elements such as griefing, trolling, flaming and racism online, this project focuses on the DOTA 2 community. It examines how the game’s culture operates throughout what Mirko Tobias Schäfer referred to as the media dispositive, or the collection of sites and discourses that the community engages with that overlap with the in-game experience. Throughout the dispositive certain voices are sanctioned by the game’s company, Valve, while others are silenced by the affordances of the dispositive’s sites and game’s culture.

The final section of this work explores the in-game experience through ethnographic, interview, and participant observation data, to uncover how players perceive toxicity in-game. This work finds that toxicity is in part reflective of and formed by the broader culture of the game as discovered through an analysis of the dispositive, but that players possess highly subjective ideas about what constitutes toxicity that they tend to universalize, which strengthens toxicity as a rhetorical rather than descriptive term. The impact of toxicity on players and community members is uneven as some players are put into conflict with others while others, particularly women, are erased from the game space and community discussions. In conclusion, this project finds that toxicity in DOTA 2 is constructed by overlapping cultural and mechanical elements and is as much about what players perceive to be toxic as it is about actual player behaviors.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to Larry, Katherine, Théo, Louise, and Helen. Without your love, support, initiative, encouragement, generosity and wisdom I would never have had the chance to write this at all. Every opportunity I have going forward comes from all of you, and there isn't a single day where I don't appreciate that. I love you all very much and I am forever grateful for everything you've done and for everything you've helped me to be. Thank you. Everyday, always, thank you.

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## **Glossary of DOTA 2 Terms**

**Heroes** – The player-controlled characters. In each match a player chooses one hero to play from the current roster of 115. Each of these heroes is suited to a particular role on a team.

**Creeps** – AI units that spawn on a set interval and run down each lane. These units provide limited offensive potential for allies but are killed by enemies for gold and experience to strengthen player-controlled heroes.

**Picks** – The heroes chosen by players in a match of DOTA 2.

**Bans** – Heroes that have been selected by the players to be unplayable during a match of DOTA 2.

**Lanes** – Three alleys where the creeps and heroes battle. Each lane needs to be occupied by heroes as to not be overwhelmed by creeps.

**Carry** – A role for heroes that begin the matches weak but scale well into the late game. These heroes often need support in the early stages of the game.

**Support** – A role with strong utility that support and protect the carry throughout the game. There are usually one or two supports per match. It is widely considered to be the least popular role.

**Roamer** – A subset of the support role that moves from lane to lane as needed.

**Offlane** – A role that typically faces off alone against the carry and supports in lane. Heroes in this role possess strong survivability which allows them to face off against multiple heroes.

**Jungle** – A part of the map with AI monsters that can be farmed for gold and experience.

**Jungler** – A role where a hero goes to the jungle rather than the lane. This can be advantageous because it can be safer to gain experience and gold in the jungle, but it is a slower progression than in lane.

**The Meta Game** – A set of shifting, informal rules that inform the choices players make in matches. For example, part of the current meta game is to not have a jungler. While it is technically possible in the coded rules of the game for a player to choose a jungling hero, doing so will often be read as a violation of rules and players will respond to that choice in a negative way. Players don't always share a unified view on the current meta game.

**The International (TI #)** – The yearly DOTA 2 premiere e-sports event. The International 2017 had a prize pool of 24,787,916 USD and had 92,683,005 total views across Twitch.tv for the duration of the event.<sup>1</sup> Specific Internationals are either referred to as The International followed by the year in which it

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<sup>1</sup> <https://esc.watch/tournaments/dota2/international-2017>



took place, or as TI followed by which iteration of the International it was. For example, The International 2017 is also referred to as TI7.

**Valve** – the company that developed and manages DOTA 2.

**Steam** – Valve’s digital distribution platform. All regions except for China must play DOTA 2 through the steam platform.

**Ping** – An in-game alt+click command that creates a visible alert on the map and mini-map. This is frequently used to grief other players because there is no limit to how frequently you can use this command. The practice of pinging a player repeatedly is referred to as ‘spam pinging.’

**Ward** – An in-game item that provides vision over a small area of the map.

**De-ward** – The process of detecting and destroying the opposing team’s wards to limit the amount of vision they have over the map.

**MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)** – The genre that DOTA 2 belongs to. Other games in this genre include League of Legends, Strife, Heroes of the Storm, and Smite.

**Server** – Games are hosted on regional servers. US East and US West are the two primary North American servers. There are 18 different regional servers around the globe. However, many players from South America play on US East and US West because even though they have their own regional servers, they have less latency and therefore better matches on the NA servers. While it is possible to play in any region, players tend to choose regions where they have the best latency.

## **Introduction - The First Taste of Toxicity**

In July 2010, I began my first foray into the MOBA genre with Riot Games' League of Legends. A few years later, after thousands of League of Legends matches, I received a beta invitation for DOTA 2, the sequel to DOTA, which originated the MOBA genre. Since 2012 I dabbled in both games before devoting an inappropriate amount of my leisure time exclusively to DOTA 2. I, like tens of millions of others, had been entranced by the unique blend of quick, strategic, competitive and cooperative gameplay that MOBAs provided. Discussions around these games among my friend group, community forums, and in games journalism were less about how fun, challenging, and rewarding they were to play, but about how negative and 'toxic' the players were. Overtime the word toxic has become a permeating descriptor of online culture, and perhaps to most frequent adjective a player can encounter when dealing with the MOBA genre. In popular media, MOBAs, MOBA players, and MOBA communities are first and foremost toxic.

This term has only become more prevalent not only within these communities, and games journalism since that time, but has also appeared in academic writing. John Suler used the term toxic to refer to the kinds of salacious behaviors users exhibited on the net as a product of anonymity. According to Suler, "We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people visit the dark underworld of the internet - places of pornography, crime, and violence," (Suler, 2004: 321). However, the role of anonymity has become less central to toxicity online. Katherine Cross notes that "Facebook is filled with millions of people, most of whom use their legal names and photos when they post things that may be considered antisocial, aggressive, prejudicial, or even harassing," (Cross, 2014: 10). In *Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture*, Mia Consalvo frames 'toxic gamer culture' as a product of at least "sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players, and fears about the changing nature of the game industry," (2012). Based on those factors, members of the gaming community have lashed out against women publicly and have created in-game environments that are unfriendly to women (among others).<sup>2</sup>

Toxicity remains an often-used catch-all term among gamers and in games journalism. This study intends to probe into a game community that has been defined as toxic from inside and out. My primary research questions are how is toxicity constructed by the players in a toxic game community?

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<sup>2</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of literature on toxicity, as this will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 1.

What does it represent for those players and how do players perceive it to be combatable? How can we define toxicity from within, in a community that continues to play in spite of this toxicity, which appears to be an overwhelmingly negative force on the players forced to engage with it? What does toxicity even mean in this context, and how can we use that knowledge going forward to analyze and combat toxicity more effectively?

My interest in DOTA 2 as a subject for this study stems from a steam review that I think encapsulates both the memetic prevalence of toxicity and its severity:



Image 0.1. A steam in-client review for DOTA 2. Screenshot from Steam.

To unpack the above review of DOTA 2, young, tech-capable players from all over the world are engaging with each other across geographic regions and linguistic barriers through a gameplay experience defined by harsh competition and ever-present toxicity. While probably an attempt at comedy, the review also indicates that players do not leave the game with a great impression of their fellow human beings. I don't wish to overstate the possible impact of this kind of interaction, but in my view a leisure activity that generates so much ill will and discontent among its participants on a scale of over 12 million players across the globe warrants analysis. Compared to its fiercest competitor in the MOBA genre, League of Legends, DOTA 2 has been substantially less a focus for study. While it has fewer players than League of Legends, the game holds an important place among MOBAs and multiplayer games.<sup>3</sup>

## **The History of DOTA 2**

DOTA began as a modded custom game mode for Blizzard Entertainment's Warcraft III in 2004, the most popular version of which was known as DOTA Allstars.<sup>4</sup> That version itself was based on a mod

<sup>3</sup> In 2016 Valve reported that DOTA 2 had over 13 million unique players per month, while at the same period League of Legends had over 67 million per month. <https://www.rifthermal.com/2016/9/13/12865314/monthly-lol-players-2016-active-worldwide> (accessed June 6th, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> [https://liquipedia.net/dota2/Dota\\_History/Part\\_1](https://liquipedia.net/dota2/Dota_History/Part_1) (accessed June 6th, 2018).

for Blizzard's original Starcraft, known as Aeon of Strife, which inspired many of the mechanics found in DOTA. Several modders collaborated on the mod until 2005, when one known as IceFrog became the primary developer of DOTA Allstars. The mod gained popularity and was spotlighted at Blizzard's own annual convention Blizzcon in 2005. After this, an independent tournament scene grew around the game. Some of the other modders on the project began their own company, Riot Games, and released League of Legends in 2009 as a spiritual successor to DOTA. At some unknown point IceFrog was approached by Valve and they began working on a direct sequel to DOTA that would run on the source engine and be distributed on the steam platform.

Before DOTA 2 was openly released it was premiered in 2011 with the first iteration of The International, a competitive tournament with the best DOTA 2 teams from around the world. The International had a \$1,600,000-dollar prize pool, which was a sizeable amount for a game that had yet to be publicly released. A tournament held this early in the game's lifetime meant that DOTA 2 was heavily branded as a competitive e-sports product. Every iteration of The International has had an increased prize pool and viewership. The most glaring jump occurred from 2013 to 2014, where the prize pool increased from a respectable \$2,874,380 to a staggering \$10,923,977.<sup>5</sup> The jump was the result of Valve's implementation of a 'compendium,' which was a buyable in-game log of tournament-related features and unlockable cosmetic items. Each compendium sold contributed to the overall prize pool.

DOTA 2 continues to have a prominent place among multiplayer games. According to steamcharts.com, DOTA 2 is consistently among the top games in terms of concurrent players.<sup>6</sup> This year's International prize pool is slightly behind last year's in terms, but by the time of the tournament it may increase as more battle passes (the contemporary equivalent of the compendium) are purchased before the tournament.<sup>7</sup> While the game's player base doesn't appear to be growing, it does have many dedicated and passionate players across the globe.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://liquipedia.net/dota2/The\\_International/2014](https://liquipedia.net/dota2/The_International/2014) (accessed June 6th, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> As of June 6<sup>th</sup>, it was number 2 with 548,337 players, and has second place for all time peak players with 1.2 million. <http://steamcharts.com/> (accessed June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> <http://dota2.prizetrac.kr/international2018> (accessed June 6th, 2018).

## Understanding a Match of DOTA 2

DOTA 2 is a competitive online multiplayer game. Over the course of a match, two teams of five players each attempt to traverse a somewhat symmetrical map with the goal of destroying their opponents' 'ancient,' which is a large structure that sits outside each team's spawn point.

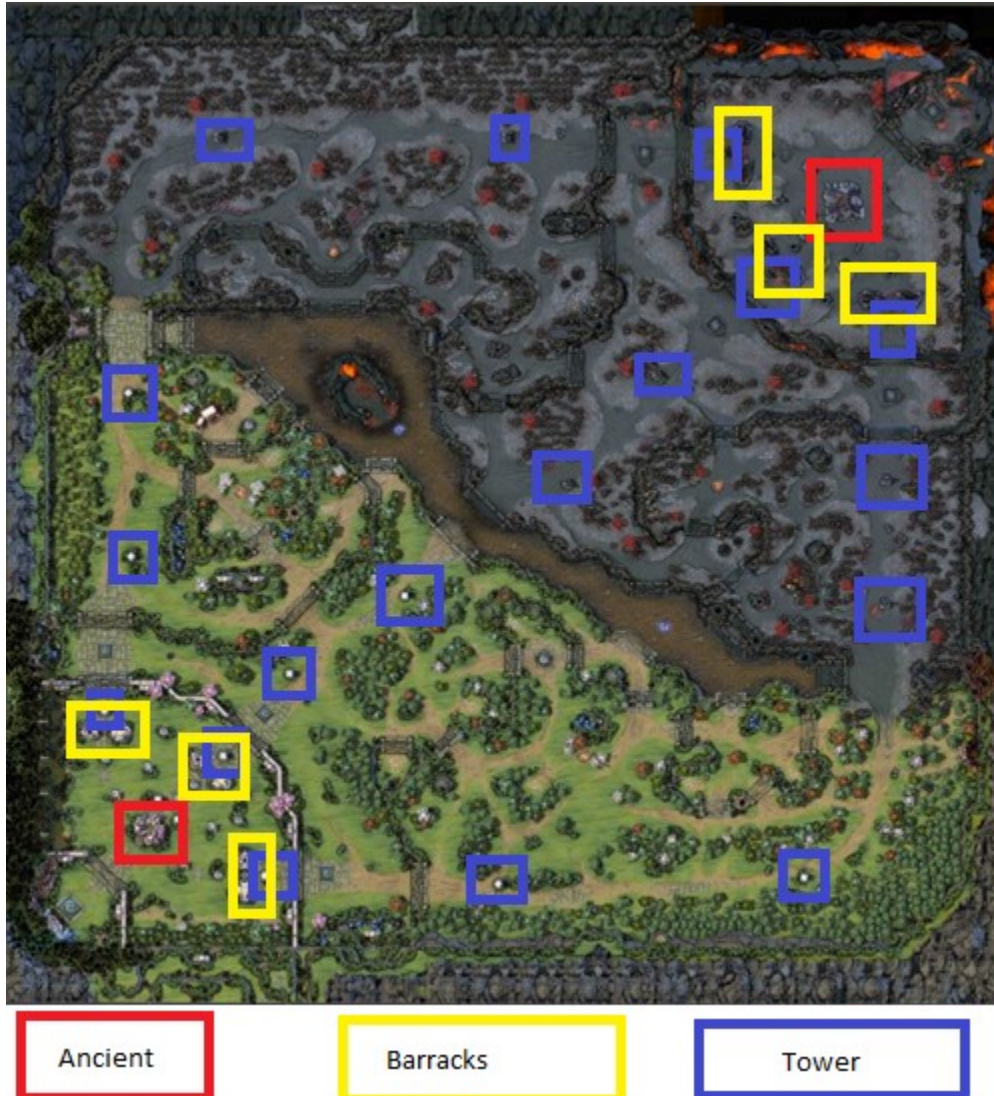


Image 0.2. The Map of DOTA 2 with objectives highlighted.<sup>8</sup>

To accomplish this, each player controls a unique hero, and with the help of a small AI army known as creeps, attempts to break down the towers that protect their opponents' side of the map. After these are destroyed, the enemies' barracks which spawn creeps are vulnerable, and destroying those

<sup>8</sup> Original taken from [https://dota2.gamepedia.com/File:Game\\_map\\_7.00.jpg](https://dota2.gamepedia.com/File:Game_map_7.00.jpg). (accessed June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

permanently strengthens allied creeps, which makes it easier to make a final push into the enemy base and destroy the opposing ancient.

While this seems simple enough, each player is constantly providing opposition against the other team. Killing enemy creeps or enemy players rewards players with gold and experience which are used to buy items and level up heroes to give players an edge in the match.



Image 0.3. An in-game screenshot of DOTA 2. Here the allied team and their creeps attempt to siege an enemy tower. UI elements are also visible. Elements of play are color coded for easy identification.

A match of DOTA 2 typically lasts between 25 and 50 minutes, but they can and frequently do run longer than an hour.

A match of DOTA 2 is highly variable. When joining a match, players have the option of playing with people from their friends list on steam, or by queuing alone and being matched with other players. To succeed in a match of DOTA 2, players must coordinate with their allies and make a staggering amount of choices regarding what items to buy, what skills to level, and where to go on the map, all the while managing their player-controlled unit. Many of these choices depend on very specific circumstances of the game, such as which ten heroes of the possible 115 make up each team, or how far ahead or behind any given player is in terms of their earned experience or gold. DOTA 2 is a deep and complex game and is often praised for that fact.

In DOTA 2, players can communicate with each other in several ways. There is a text-based chat that is visible to players before, throughout, and after a match. This chat can be used to send private messages, to chat with your team, or to chat with the opposing team. There is also an integrated voice chat so players can communicate with each other quickly and easily as the game requires. Additionally, there is a chat wheel that players can assign to a hotkey. This allows players to set up to 8 predefined quick messages such as “Careful,” “All enemy heroes missing,” or “Relax, you’re doing fine.” These communication channels are typically where vocalized and typed toxicity occur in-game, but toxicity in DOTA 2 extends far beyond these chats and the game itself.

### **Exploring Toxicity in the Context of DOTA 2**

This project is interested in how the DOTA 2 community, one which has been defined from inside and out as toxic, engages with the concept of toxicity. How is it defined among the player base, how is it enacted in game and across DOTA 2-related media, and how do players and spectators of DOTA 2 position themselves relative to that toxicity. I combined textual analysis of DOTA 2 community-based sources, participant observation data and interviews with DOTA 2 players and my own ethnographic experiences with the game over a one-year period. My methodology will be broken down further in each chapter.

In Chapter 1 I examine prior literature on toxicity, and many of the constituent elements that are frequently identified as toxic. By the end of the chapter I explore three theoretical areas: trolling, flaming, and grief play, discriminatory online culture, and participatory culture and ambivalence online. Combined, these three areas reflect a large portion of how toxicity is constructed within academic literature and how players have interpreted and engaged in these activities in other games and online communities. This provides a framework for understanding the behaviors found among the DOTA 2 community, but also reveals that prior literature on these elements of toxicity do not translate directly to DOTA 2. Therefore, the subsequent chapters deal with specific elements of the game: its systems, its management, its community, and how interactions between these elements contribute to the toxicity DOTA 2 has become known for.

Chapter 2 examines aspects surrounding the game through what Mirko Tobias Schäfer dubs the ‘media dispositive,’ (Tobias Schäfer, 2011: 15). In this case the media dispositive describes the collection of sites and discourses outside of the game where the DOTA 2 community interacts, discusses, learns and debates the game. Through a textual analysis of multiple platforms and three examples of cross-

platform interaction between DOTA 2 community members, e-sports personalities, and Valve itself, this chapter reveals that DOTA 2's in-game culture is heavily shaped by events and discourses that occur in the dispositive. This chapter also reveals that players are not always engaged with the same elements of the dispositive which leads to a wide array of subcultural groups within the DOTA 2 player base. These subcultural groups are at times delineated by linguistic and cultural barriers which are reinforced by the way Valve communicates with the DOTA 2 player base. The in-game culture is heavily tailored to players with a specific sense of humor, who are encouraged by example to interact with one another in the cultural modes established through the dispositive.

Chapter 3 dives into the in-game experience of toxicity. This chapter synthesizes an analysis of DOTA 2's gameplay systems with player interviews regarding their experiences and views on toxicity in-game. This data is supplemented with my own ethnographic data, and two participant observation studies: The first being a new player's journey through the DOTA 2 new player tutorial, and the second being a long-term observation of a returning DOTA 2 player. Through this chapter I uncovered several key elements of toxicity as it is understood in the context of DOTA 2. First, that due to the ambivalent nature of online expression toxicity is highly subjective, and players have very specific ideas of what constitutes toxicity. However, players tend to view their own interpretations of what constitutes toxicity as universal. This causes the term toxicity to be far more rhetorical than it is descriptive. Second, that players viewed the game systems as much as the player behavior as the cause of toxicity. However, players who self-identified as toxic were more likely to point to the game's systems rather than players as the root causes of toxicity. Finally, an analysis of several in-game systems supports that they do contribute to what many players identify as toxicity, but that many other instances of toxicity linked to player behavior and the game's culture would not be addressed by systems changes alone.

I conclude that toxicity is a highly descriptive term on an individual level, but when taken holistically, toxicity describes too many competing behaviors and feelings to be useful. In the context of DOTA 2, on a large scale, toxicity is a rhetorical term that masks the specificity and severity of what many players do and experience in-game. Toxicity is useful as it describes a community's discontent with aspects of itself, but it leaves us unable to address the specific issues that lead to the toxic label. I close by encouraging scholars interested in addressing toxicity to hone-in on specific in-game practices that become ill-defined and undocumented as they are subsumed into the toxicity label. Addressing and hopefully alleviating potentially negative experiences for people in online games requires us to uncover what precisely those experiences are, and more importantly to be honest about what each of us as



community members, game developers, scholars, critics, and players contribute to these online spaces that so many believe to be toxic.

## **Chapter 1 - Developing a Toxicity Framework**

There are three overlapping theoretical areas that inform and guide this project. The first area includes literature on all manner of disruptive play practices which have been given countless labels such as trolling, griefing or deviant play, among other names (Herring, et al; Phillips, Jonsson). The more recent moniker for this behavior and the one that will be used in this project, 'toxicity,' has yet to be fully explored in game studies literature, but the phenomenon of toxicity as defined by the players that experience it includes, but is not limited to, these prior labels for play that gets in the way of a positive user experience (for the players on the receiving end). Toxicity thus far is a loosely-defined buzz-word that has come to represent the overwhelming negativity and negative experiences that permeate online spaces, but it is unclear what phenomena exactly constitute toxicity for players. Because this is how communities are being defined and defining themselves, it is important to clarify how exactly this term is being constructed, by whom, and what it represents for those culturally connected with communities that are labeled or self-identify as toxic. Before diving into a close look at toxicity, where it comes from online, and what it means specifically within the context of this project, a basic concept of toxicity online and within games will be developed first through prior literature.

The second area is that of racialized online culture and stereotyping. Identity play is complicated online, and although the net and online games afford some anonymity, race and racism permeate online spaces. The types of toxic behaviors mentioned above often include racialized language that affects the people who are subjected to it. Because racialization in-game is linked to lingual queues, this theoretical area also includes prior work on cross-language play in other online games.

The third area focuses on the technical, social, and cultural shaping of online spaces and includes concepts such as participatory culture (Jenkins; Tobias Schäfer), platform-based and algorithmic discrimination, and the player/provider dynamic. These forces are all at play in the shaping and reshaping of online spaces and inform a great deal of the interactions that players experience in any online community, including that of DOTA 2. Toxicity and racialized play in any space are directly informed by the specific ways these concepts are played out over time in a given online space.

## **The Pillars of Toxicity**

The foundational elements of toxicity are rooted in the concepts of trolling, flaming and grieving. Trolling behaviors have been the subject of study since the earliest days of the internet. While not explicitly called trolling, Allucqère Roseanne Stone details one of the earliest examples of trolling behaviors online when the CommuniTree online bulletin board service conference was breached by several high school students. According to Stone, CommuniTree was a California-based online bulletin-board system where tech-capable industry insiders would conference online about 'technospiritual' matters in the early days of online connectivity (Stone, 1996: 108-110). At the same time this conference was underway, Apple computers began to enter schools across the United States and by 1992 some of those computers were connected to the internet (Stone: 112). A number of high school-aged students logged into the CommuniTree, and as Stone describes, "Quite Suddenly, there in the middle of one of the ongoing discussions of the nature of human society and religion was a brief message: 'JAMIE YOU SHITHEAD HAHAAHAHAHAHA,'" (Stone: 113). The messages caused more than hurt feelings, as they arrived in such frequency that the early technology of the CommuniTree system was unable to deal with the onslaught of trollish messages and eventually collapsed as a result of the CommuniTree operators' attempts to manage the messages (Stone: 114-116). The result was a difficult lesson about the possibilities of an open, connected, and un-protected space that the CommuniTree developers carried forward to other projects with more capabilities to deal with spam messages and undesirable content (Stone, 117).

Another early example of early trolling is the story of Mr. Bungle and his victims as recounted in Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace." The events took place in a MOO, an early virtual world, which according to Dibbell "...was a kind of database especially designed to give users the vivid impression of moving through a physical space that in reality exists only as words filed away on a hard drive," (Dibbell, 1998). In this MOO, one evening a user named Mr. Bungle committed "ghostly sexual violence" against numerous users by using a subprogram called a "voodoo doll" to wrest away control of other users' characters (Dibbell, 1998). Despite the actions being carried out online, many of the victims of Mr. Bungle's actions felt violated by what he had done, but because there had been no precedent for managing these types of behaviors in the MOO, the community was forced to engage in a discussion about how to punish Mr. Bungle's behaviors, which had implications for the overall freedom of expression within and identity of the MOO (Dibbell, 1998). As Dibbell notes, "And thus, as if against its

will, the question of what to do about Mr. Bungle began to shape itself into a sort of referendum on the political future of the MOO,” (Dibbel, 1998). While Mr. Bungle was eventually deleted by a Wizard, a kind of moderator with the power to ban users, the effects of Mr. Bungle’s actions had altered the MOO’s community perception of itself and its approach to community governance (Dibbel, 1998). Following these events, Mr. Bungle returned under a different name to continue his rampage, and it was later discovered that the actions of Mr. Bungle were carried out by a group of NYU students who shared the account (Dibbel, 1998). It was a communal experience for the perpetrators of the crime, and one that was impactful enough to cause real personal grief for the victims and to permanently alter their community, punishable only by an unenforceable penalty.

While these examples were not explicitly labeled as trolling at the time, they are foundational to the understanding of what trolling could be. Early definitions of trolling emphasize the linguistic aspects. Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler and Sasha Barab succinctly defined the practice, stating “Trolling entails luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions,” (Herring et al, 2002: 372). Susan Clerc identified trolls on various fandom forums as “People who post chain letters, ‘big tits’ posts and the like, solely to get a rise out of people,” (Clerc, 222: 2000). However, given the exploits of Mr. Bungle, it’s apparent trolling extends beyond the purely conversational.

Recently, Whitney Phillips best defined and provided the most comprehensive account of contemporary trolling practices in *This is Why We Can’t have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Trolling itself is described by Phillips as the intention “to disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioral tools are available,” (Phillips, 2015: 3). Phillips focuses on what she calls “sub-cultural trolls,” who engage in trolling behavior as part of their online identity (Phillips, 2015: 24). Trolling behaviors online cover a wide-range of practices from simple the name-calling of forum posters, to posting insensitive and meme content on Facebook memorial pages, to hacking into the devices of individuals to acquire and disseminate personal information. While trolling practices range in terms of severity, Phillips notes that the goal of these trolls is always meant to be taken as a source of comedy (known as ‘lulz,’ a form of lol) by the trolls themselves, while being taken as seriously as possible by the targets (Phillips, 2015: 31-33).

Trolling and the lulz it creates are effectively a community-building snowball rolling downhill through the laughter caused at the expense of others. As Phillips notes, trolling humor requires an ingroup who can find humor and social cohesion through lulz generated at the expense of the outgroup (Phillips, 2015: 31). These communities then replicate trolling behaviors in new contexts to generate more lulz at the expense of new targets which strengthens the trolling community (Phillips, 2015: 32).

Trolls and the trolling community is largely dissociative in that they separate the real-world subjects of their trolling from the lulz they generate while simultaneously believing their online trolling selves are subject to a different set of rules than their offline selves (Phillips, 2015: 34).

Trolling is also rooted in several cultural logics. There are contextual logics such as those in cases of disaster trolls creating 9/11 memes tap into U.S. news media logics that create sensationalized and dissociated responses to the events in the American news audience (Phillips 2015: 120-123). The content that trolls produce is directly informed by both the online and offline conditions precede and inform their creation. In addition to context-specific logics, there are also broader cultural logics that inform trolling behavior. Phillips notes, "Not only is trolling predicated on the 'adversary method,' Western Philosophy's dominant paradigm, it is characterized by a profound sense of technological entitlement born of normalized expansionist and colonialist ideologies," (Phillips 2015: 123). Trolling is rooted in cultural behavior and is magnified by the privilege afforded to the technologically endowed: a phenomenon exponentially magnified when these trolls are put in the context of a competitive online game like DOTA 2.

While Phillips doesn't cover trolling in online gaming spaces or the practices of 'flaming' or 'griefing,' several other works fill those gaps. MOBAs themselves have not been the subject of much academic research, but a lot of the work done on deviant play and griefing in the virtual worlds of MMOS can apply to work on MOBAs. Although there are numerous mechanical differences between the game genres, they share methods of communication such as text-based or voice-based chat and game-peripheral forums where these behaviors can be carried out, team-based player versus player game modes, and similar styles of company intervention into the game world.

Andreea Florentina Jonsson documented numerous cases of 'flaming' in the popular MMO World of Warcraft. Flaming typically constitutes obscenities being hurled at a player who has committed what other players perceive to be a transgression within a game (Jonsson, 2015: 48). These transgressions could be the result of reacting poorly or unexpectedly to game mechanics in group play, disagreeing with other players encountered in the virtual world, playing a player versus player match correctly and upsetting the opposing players, or by simply being of a racial/ethnic/social/sexual background that other players do not approve of or can tap into to cause harm (Jonsson, 2015: 48-49). In addition to typed or verbal insults being slung at players, in-game emotes such as /spit in World of Warcraft which allows one character to spit on another can be used to flame players (Jonsson, 2015: 59-60). While DOTA 2 does not possess the /spit emote, it does have other features like using pre-defined chat wheel messages that players have found creative uses for to flame others to the point that they

have become culturally understood among many DOTA 2 players as flaming, even when they are used unironically.

For example, the “Well Played” chat wheel message, while intended to be used to congratulate members of your team when they do something good in-game is more often used sarcastically against teammates when they are killed by the enemy team, or when they fail to use a skill correctly or at the right time which allows the enemy to escape. Once someone has instigated the use of the “Well Played” message sarcastically, it begins to take on new meanings. Even in a situation where things go well for your team, it is difficult to know whether a player is congratulating you for your performance or critiquing your play as sub-optimal despite the positive outcome for your team in the moment.

Similarly, the “We Need Wards” chat wheel message carries several connotations. The ‘wards’ it refers too are a limited stock item that replenishes over time that players can buy from the in-game shop. These give vision over a certain area of the map when placed by a player. These are typically bought and placed by players in the support role. While the “We Need Wards” command can be used to convey an important strategic message to your teammates, it is often sent when the maximum number of wards, as dictated by the limited supply, have been placed on the map, or when the support player, who traditionally is always short on gold, does not have the means to buy them. When a player is killed because they are in a bad position on the map, they will spam “We Need Wards” to deflect blame to the support player regardless of how well the support player is placing wards.

Jonsson identifies three typical actions that individuals take when flamed. Flamed players either attempt to use in-game functions to ignore or block the flaming users if possible in the situation, to report players to World of Warcraft’s in-game authorities in an attempt to ban the flammers, or to retaliate with their own flaming behaviors constituting what is colloquially referred to as a ‘flame war,’ (Jonsson, 2015: 62). Jonsson discovered that most players chose to either ignore or flame back, and that those who chose between those two options felt that flaming was a feature of the game (Jonsson, 2015: 59-60). Because DOTA 2 does not have its own in-game authorities to petition and features only a very basic reporting and ignore system, the options available to players leads to more instances of ‘flame war’ responses in game. Overall, what Jonsson describes for World of Warcraft is also an inescapable element of the DOTA 2 gameplay experience.

The third pillar of toxicity, ‘Griefing,’ has been the subject of more study in games than flaming and trolling. Griefing is like trolling in some respects but differs in that it directly engages with the mechanics of a game to disrupt the enjoyment of other players. A definition for griefers (the people who grief) was put forward by Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky. According to them, a griefer is “a

player who derives his/her enjoyment not from playing the game, but from performing actions that detract from the enjoyment of the game by other players,” (Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003). However, Chek Yang Foo and Elina Koivisto highlight several complications with this definition. According to Foo and Koivisto, players experience the effects of griefing even without the presence of intention, and players tend to label any behavior that disrupts their personal enjoyment of a game as griefing (Foo and Koivisto, 2004: 244-245). This is further complicated by the fact that while there are technical and mechanical rules in online games, there are also layers of social rules that supersede the mechanical rules, as David Myers discovered in his breaching experiment of the superhero MMO City of Heroes/Villains. While Myers played within the mechanical ruleset he ignored the social rules of the game and was subsequently harassed, shunned, and reported by the game community in addition to being labeled a griefer (among other things) (Myers, 2008).

Foo and Koivisto put forth a taxonomy for grief play made up of four categories: harassment, power imposition, scamming, and greed play (Foo and Koivisto, 2004: 247-250). Each of these categories includes several behaviors possible in persistent online virtual worlds, but here I will focus on only those that translate in some way to DOTA 2 and provide some examples of DOTA 2 gameplay that matches these categories. Because DOTA 2 is a competitive multiplayer game, some of these tactics can be used to your own team’s advantage without breaking the mechanical rules of the game, however in some instances these tactics can be used against or your team or violate the social etiquette of the game regardless of the team they’re used against.

Harassment includes spamming chat channels with repeated offensive or useless messages, intruding on another player’s space within the game when it is deemed to be private, or disrupting the events or plans of other players; all three of which are possible in DOTA 2. Power imposition is about demonstrating mechanical or statistical superiority over other players. In DOTA 2 the practice of ‘fountain camping’ falls into this category, where a winning team with an insurmountable advantage prolongs the loss for the losing team by ignoring the map objectives and instead walking into the opposing base and repeatedly killing the players as they respawn. Scamming includes abusing a game’s item economy or pretending to be another player. Because DOTA 2 is not an MMORPG it does not have an in-game market economy, but it does have cosmetic items that can be placed on the steam marketplace for real-world currency. Additionally, it is easy enough to change a DOTA 2 player name which could confuse players who aren’t aware of how to verify someone’s identity in game. Finally, greed play is about playing to one’s own benefit regardless of the other players in the game world, or in the case of DOTA 2, one’s teammates. Kill stealing is common complaint in DOTA 2, whereby the last-hit

(which gives more benefit than simply participating in a kill) on an opposing player is taken by a teammate and not yourself when you are in a position to get the final blow. Although designed for an MMORPG, Foo and Koivisto taxonomy provides an excellent framework for understanding what behaviors can constitute grieving in DOTA 2.

Other scholars have attempted to answer why players grieve in online games. Paul, Bowman, and Banks focus on griefers in World of Warcraft through the 'social identity model of deindividuation,' (Paul, Bowman, and Banks, 2015: 245-247). According to this model, "In conditions where disindividuating conditions of anonymity, immersion in groups and reductions in self-awareness were present, participants would behave according to the situational/group norms present more strictly," (Paul, Bowman, and Banks, 2015: 247). They found, like with trolls, that griefers grieved as a form of collective identification with other players who engage in similar behavior.

Paul, Bowman and Banks label griefers as anti-social and distinct from community-based players but considering Foo and Koivisto's definition of grieving as something that isn't necessarily intentional and therefore highly subjective, it seems likely that many griefers are in fact community-based players. However, for this project, Paul, Bowman and Banks' idea that the disindividuating conditions found in online play push players to adhering to the situational and group norms is useful. In DOTA 2 those norms are informed by the grieving behaviors that are supported by the mechanics that the developers have programmed into the game, the embedded 'flaming' that Jonsson described for World of Warcraft which has traveled across time and genre into DOTA 2, and the legions of trolls who construct meme culture on DOTA 2-related forums for the lulz that players then reference and recreate in-game. These are the conditions in which DOTA 2 players find themselves when they queue up for a match of DOTA 2, and in those conditions, anyone could be labeled a griefer at any time and flamed accordingly.

Because griefers cause grief, and grief feels bad, there are of course attempts to mitigate and cope with the effects of grieving. In the case of David Myers, the community lashed out at the offender by name calling, reporting and publicly shaming his avatar in-game and on forums (Myers, 2008: 10-18). Chesney, Coyne, Logan and Madden detail some other reactions to combat grieving in game through their study on grieving and grieving control strategies in the virtual world Second Life. Three possible approaches were outlined to combat grieving. First, the developers of the game could take more steps to control or mitigate grieving, as the developer, Linden Lab, had already set a precedent by disabling scripts that some griefers were using to crash the game (Chesney et al., 2009). Second, individuals could take it upon themselves to fight back, although all the participants in the study chose to ignore grieving behavior rather than to combat it in a 'flame war' approach (Chesney et al., 2009). Different game

communities, while having some overlap with each other, promote different social norms and afford different approaches through the game platforms themselves, and while the players of Jonsson's study on World of Warcraft believed that flaming was part of the game and therefore a more suitable approach to combatting flaming, it is possible that the Second Life community members didn't view grieving as embedded in the virtual world. Third, the community could combat the behavior by sharing information about griefers and denying their access to social spaces, or by creating a community police force to keep the Second Life community clean; a proposal which some other participants found excessive (Chesney et al., 2009).

Overall, grieving is as difficult to remedy as it is to clearly identify and define. As we will explore in the next section, many game developers prefer a hands-off approach to shaping player behavior in-game, which leaves the often-large player bases to face these experiences on an individual level and bring their own experiences and interpretations to the community at large. It is in that all-encompassing space of undefinable transgression and grassroots resistance that the concept of toxicity starts to take shape. Trolling, flaming, and grieving aren't enough on their own for one to appreciate the saturation of volatile possibilities that a player finds themselves in when playing DOTA 2. So far, toxicity in the context of DOTA 2 represents a confluence of developed, curated and incidental instigations (trolling), off the cuff actions and reactions (flaming), and mechanically informed in-game actions made with both the best and worst intentions that can be received and reacted to as if they were performed with the best or worst intentions (griefing). This concept of toxicity will be further developed in chapter 2 when the history of the term as it developed online and subsequently found itself within and surrounding DOTA 2 and the MOBA gaming community is detailed in full.

### **Discriminatory Online Space and Game Culture**

The behaviors mentioned in the previous section can often take-on racially or ethnically discriminatory forms through offensive and hurtful language, memes, and stereotyping. As previously mentioned, one aim of this project is to document toxicity as it is experienced in the cross-cultural and cross-language context of DOTA 2 which is a space where race, language, gender, and ethnicity meet with toxicity. Even without the toxic elements, the internet and online games interact with race, culture, language, and personal identity in several complex ways.

Lisa Nakamura's *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* provides a starting point for exploring how race happens in game through idea of racial cybertypes. According to



Nakamura, “The study of racial cybertypes brings together the cultural layer and the computer layer; that is to say, cyber typing is the process by which computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online interacts with the ‘cultural layer’ or ideologies regarding race that they bring with them into cyberspace,” (Nakamura, 2002, 3). Indeed, users bring culture in, and as Nakamura expands, interact collaboratively through online platforms to create new images and definitions of race (Nakamura, 2002, 5). Nakamura emphasizes that this practice reaffirms whiteness and white identity at a time while ideas about race and identity are shifting. This is one explanation for what is occurring, but DOTA 2’s global reach and cross-region matchmaking offers a more collaborative and contentious picture of what is happening online. The forced connectivity between players of different regional, cultural and linguistic backgrounds while playing DOTA 2 allows users to challenge narratives of North American dominance of online space through competitive play, communication channels within the game and on forums that relate to the game. While the collaboration or negotiation that this platform allows isn’t in the form of a sanitized discourse, it does provide the opportunity for interaction among different cultural groups at a grassroots level, for better or worse, which makes the shaping of the online space a collaborative one, if not necessarily a healthy or non-toxic one. While Nakamura might be correct about what is happening in white North America from the point of view of some white North Americans, online games and their dispersed but connected user bases offer the opportunity to complicate and complete the picture of what is happening through reciprocal cybertyping among different groups from different regions.<sup>9</sup>

Games are nevertheless racially coded and offer the opportunity to play with race for better or worse. As Nakamura notes, avatars in MMORPGs can be used to mask identities in order to fit into the game space or for some players to wear another identity during play (Nakamura, 2004: 33-44). Alexander Galloway expands on racialization in MMOs through both player avatars and NPC characters as they are coded into the game. Races in a fantasy game have appearances and traits which define specific capabilities and are then programmed for specific interaction and engagement that reaffirms “naturalized group definition and division.” (Galloway, 2012: 115-119). The fantastical game space serves as a platform where racialized ideas are programmed in by creators for play, affirmed or reaffirmed by the players who interact with those racial codes, and taken back out into the broader

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<sup>9</sup> I acknowledge that this research project contributes primarily to the North American perspective, but it does so in order to amplify voices that have so far been denied ample contribution to the discourse of the English-speaking DOTA 2 community. In order to get a broader sense of cross-language and cross-region perspectives, further studies will need to be conducted that analyze the prominent and subjugated discourses that are found in other regional and lingual groups

culture (Galloway, 2012: 118-119). Galloway cites the troll race in World of Warcraft who are tall, blue-skinned, tusked-up warriors, with an immediately recognizable Jamaican Patois which hardcodes racialized ideas into the game without depicting the people what these queues are drawn from (Galloway, 2012: 118). Galloway similarly notes that this trend happens across all popular culture, not just in games, highlighting the infamous Star Wars character Jar Jar Binks who bears similar real-world racialized cues to the World of Warcraft trolls. Of this, Galloway states, “The more one seems to extricate oneself from the mire of terrestrial stereotyping, the more free and flexible the bigotry machine becomes, able to repopulate one’s racialized imagination with ‘aliens’ but aliens that conveniently still stick to the gangly comic relief of the blackface minstrel complete with exaggerated facial features and a Jamaican accent,” (Galloway, 2012: 119). While avatar relationships are not the focus of this project, it is important to note that the cast of DOTA 2 avatars (called heroes) that players choose from in each game do have racialized or ethnic characterizations and accents, and players engage with those aspects of the characters in game and on forums. While player interaction and communication take the forefront of this ‘naturalized group definition and division’ in DOTA 2, there is still a programmed element that can reinforce racialized thinking through the character design of the game.

Galloway also brings up the codification of racial identity through the concept of the ‘Chinese Gold Farmer,’ a popular stereotype in MMORPGs. Chinese gold farmers are inhabitants of MMORPG game worlds, primarily based in China, who spend their time in-game generating currency which can then be sold for real-world money to primarily Western gamers (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2009). Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter explain that players generally have a negative view of the Chinese gold farmer because they destabilize the in-game economy and take up in-game play spaces which disrupts play; actions which also fall into the taxonomy of griefing. Galloway, in contrast frames the discontent with the Chinese gold farmer as a racialized issue. According to Galloway, those labeled as Chinese gold farmers are in effect no different than the average player since the border between work and leisure are blurred (Galloway, 2012: 120). Instead, the problem with the Chinese gold farmer is they represent a codified other, and it is more who they are believed to be by players relative to their own socio-cultural position than what they do that leads to the negative label and its prevalence in MMORPGs (Galloway, 2012: 121). This is the reason these players are referred to as ‘Chinese gold farmers’ in game rather than simply ‘gold farmers.’

This is supported by Bonnie Nardi and Yong Ming Kow’s concept of the ‘digital imaginary.’ According to Nardi and Kow, stereotypes form from some knowledge and familiarity about others,

whereas digital imaginaries form without this knowledge or experience (Nardi and Kow, 2010). The racialized constructions in DOTA 2 are a product of both stereotyping and digital imaginaries simultaneously. It's important to note that while DOTA 2 overlaps with other game genres at certain points and is informed by past trends in MMORPGs, the DOTA 2 community has its own stereotypes and digital imaginaries. The concept of the Chinese gold farmer for example doesn't translate directly to DOTA 2 but is instead replaced with the idea of 'playing Chinese DOTA.'. 'Playing Chinese DOTA' itself comes from the fact that around 2013 Chinese DOTA teams and as such, Chinese players, were perceived as playing a more conservative game than players from other regions. Their strategies relied on those players strictly farming AI creeps for gold (which was colloquially referred to as 'ricing')<sup>10</sup> for long periods of time rather than contributing to team fights between actual players for most of the game. Some players viewed Chinese DOTA as a superior way to play the game in a competitive setting, while others found it to be a boring, and cheesy strategy that ruined the excitement of the game.<sup>11</sup> In casual matches on North American servers, players would often berate playing using what appeared to be a 'Chinese DOTA' strategy. More recently, 'Chinese DOTA' has come to mean the Chinese DOTA e-sports scene, and while old stereotypes of Chinese players remain, it is very rare to hear any reference to 'ricing.' This is part of a larger trend within the DOTA 2 community to blanket players from different regions or ethnic backgrounds with their own approaches to playing the game at a fundamental level.

While gold farming itself doesn't translate directly to DOTA 2, Nick Yee's analysis of the cultural roots and logic of Chinese gold farming rhetoric carries over to the specific racialized discourses found within DOTA 2. According to Yee, Gold farming is rooted in cultural histories of racism and discrimination, and the deployment of the adjective Chinese to describe these gold farming practices relates back to the idea of economic and cultural encroachment felt by Americans at in the 19th and 20th century during the gold rush, and the subsequent racial violence both verbal and physical that was inflicted upon the Chinese. Yee States, "The contemporary narrative starts to feel too much like the historical one – Chinese immigrant workers being harassed and murdered by Westerners who feel they alone can arbitrate what constitutes acceptable labor," (Yee, 2006: 4-6). In the case of DOTA 2, those Westerners aren't just arbitrating what constitutes acceptable labor, but what constitutes acceptable play. While the rhetoric has changed, Yee's analysis demonstrates that the same logics of othering are present in-game, just in a technologically updated form. As mentioned earlier, the concept of 'ricing' to

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<sup>10</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/1lhsb1/what\\_do\\_players\\_mean\\_when\\_they\\_use\\_the\\_term\\_ricing/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/1lhsb1/what_do_players_mean_when_they_use_the_term_ricing/)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.join dota.com/en/forums/691-joindota-and-community/693-community/192141-to-the-chinese-dota-scene-why-we-hate-you-so-much&page=1>

describe what players believe to be a Chinese-originated playstyle taps into that history and those logics of racialized arbitration and gate-keeping.

However, the ways these arbitrations occur online are muddled because of the often-ambiguous nature of these online play spaces. Yee, a Chinese American, recounts an in-game experience where he attempted to farm mobs in World of Warcraft before being attacked by three other players which he narrowly managed to escape. Of the incident, Yee states, “As I recovered and pondered how to exact revenge against these 3 gold farmers, I realized that in my mind I had instinctively cast them as Chinese gold farmers. And in return, they had probably instinctively cast me as the white leisure player,” (Yee, 2006: 18). The constructions of otherness that are deployed online can pull from all aspects of cultural constructions of otherness, from the historical to the topical, but in this case are deployed primarily through expectations and associations curated within game culture.

In online games, racial or ethnic identity is concealed, but players often use language or behavior-based cues to identify and/or label players. Jonathan Clinton observed this phenomenon in DOTA 2 when he applied membership categorization analyses to the game’s European servers. According to Clinton, “The results of this study seem to suggest that when being perceived by their fellow players the physical body is still present. Actions within the game are seen as being representative of certain membership category devices such as ethnicities, (Clinton, 2014: 29). Clinton specifically notes that moments of bad in-game performance are often what lead to ethnic constructions of otherness on the European servers, where sub-par performance was attributed primarily to Russians and Filipinos (Clinton, 2014: 23-29). Similar trends are observable through casual play of DOTA 2 on North American servers.

Suely Fragoso’s study about the reputation of Brazilian players in several online games including World of Warcraft, League of Legends, and DOTA 2 demonstrates this. Brazilian players across multiple online games were attributed several characteristics and behaviors: Poor English skills, poor gameplay, aggressive attitude and begging for in-game items (Fragoso, 2015: 151). These players were also associated with a specific language cue, “HUEHUEHUE” or “HUE,” the Brazilian equivalent of “lol,” which became a standard way for non-Brazilian players to refer to whoever they thought might be Brazilian (Fragoso, 2015: 148-151). This led to the prevalence of the terms ‘HUE’ as an insult, and the use of the Brazilian nationality as an offensive term to describe any player who is playing in a way that is disagreeable to another player. However, Fragoso found that Brazilian players did not embody the characteristics associated with them in any greater amount than players of other nationalities (Fragoso, 2015: 152-160).

Similarly, Katherine Goodfellow's analysis of anti-Russian xenophobia in EVE online found that many of the characteristics applied to Russian players weren't noticeably different than for other groups playing the game. Rather, the gameplay of the labeled group, the Russian players, was being interpreted in-game and in game-related media and forums such that their actions matched the labels assigned to them. Russian players were labeled as aggressive, sneaky rule breakers who only play for personal gain, however all these traits are critical in the core gameplay of EVE online, and none of them set them apart from the average EVE player (Goodfellow, 2015: 344). Goodfellow compared Russian-language and English-language discourse regarding the gameplay of Russian players in game and found that while Russian language chat and publications focuses on how well the Russian players played, the English language discourse would focus on the damage caused to the those on the receiving end of the Russian gameplay, even though it constituted good and fair play in the context of EVE online (Goodfellow, 2015: 355).

The most important element of this article is that although the Russian players are given an unfair identity by English-speaking players through a digital imaginary, the Russian players are not sitting ducks. They respond with their own rebuttals to personal attacks, they have their own discourses about the Russian-language/English-language player divide, and they create their own digital imaginaries about the English-language players (Goodfellow, 2015: 356-360). These translates entirely to DOTA 2, as different regional, linguistic and cultural player bases are constantly engaging in this process with each other and within their own groups. Instead of stabilizing or reaffirming identities, multiple identities and power relations between groups are being negotiated within the online gaming space. The implications of this are that there are competing discourses occurring within any cross-region and cross-language online space, but those discourses are separated by a culture and language barrier that gives users the impression that the dominant discourse of their own region and language group is the dominant discourse of the entire game space. DOTA 2 is among the most important to be analyzed precisely because of how many groups are thrust into each other's play space as both adversaries and allies. The cases mentioned above represent a fraction of the interactions that occur within the game. I wouldn't dare claim that this is a healthy or effective way to work out cultural differences or move past stereotyping or digital imaginaries, but what is happening in-game and on forums is more complex than a reaffirmation of white self and identity. However, as we will discover in subsequent chapters, certain groups are positioned above others as far as community discourse is concerned.

## Negotiating, Managing, and Suffering the Play Space

The DOTA 2 community is shaped through a network of relationships between players of different backgrounds, skill levels, gameplay styles, intentions and interests. These players and their visions for what the game space should be are in states of constant contention and iteration between each other and the developer of the game, Valve software. In order to clarify how play spaces are formed and transformed online, this section highlights work done on participatory culture in building community and community standards, resistance to those standards, and the role of game developers in shaping those communities.

In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins describes convergence culture as “a moment when fans are central to how culture operates,” (Jenkins, 2006: 1). Fans are now engaged creators of the media they consume and shapers of the fandoms they move through. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins illustrates that convergence culture occurs across media platforms and is driven by both corporate interest and fan production (Jenkins, 2006: 2-18). In the case of DOTA 2, in-game culture is in part formed by both Valve and third party DOTA 2 esports scenes which generate memes which then become fan-made videos or art which are subsequently given the spotlight by Valve through community channels or even referenced in-game, which legitimizes certain fan productions over others. Indeed, the scales of cultural impact through participatory culture are often uneven.

Convergence culture in online games does not even require active company support as the present formulation of gamer culture promotes and highlights certain views within cultural spaces such as reddit, forums, or in-game chat while muting or silencing others. In “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture” Mia Consalvo identifies that in response to what they feel is an “encroachment” of women into a male-dominated space, high profile or “Alpha Fans” lead public opinion against certain issues related to women in games (Consalvo, 2012). These opinions are subsequently used by select players and fans to legitimize and justify their own opinions which then echo out on social media (Consalvo, 2012).

In the wake of #Gamergate, Adrienne Massanari also discovered that the spaces frequented by geeks and gamers such as Reddit, 4Chan, Twitter and online games encourage the harassment of others in order to win arguments and increase users’ positions within the platforms and broader communities (Massanari, 2015). Massanari points out geek culture has strong ties to white masculinity, and a common tactic to legitimize oneself on these platforms is to devalue the contributions of others by appealing to the rationale of white male geek culture that permeates those environments, (Massanari

2015: 8-10). Massanari frames this rationale as having several core ideas, such as that technological participation is a question of choice rather than access, that geek culture is not oppressive because many geeks feel marginalized themselves, that intellect is more valuable than emotional intelligence, and that women are “objects of sexual desire or unwelcome interlopers” into geek culture, among others. (Massanari, 2015: 8-10). These core ideas create a set of desired norms among the majority that can be appealed to within online spaces as a marker of community acceptance or exclusion. Using Reddit as an example, Massanari also explains that the design and policies of the platform promotes the dominant cultural standards of the platform. According to Massanari, the karma system which gives users points for popular posts encourages users to share content that would be enjoyable to the majority of reddit’s most click-happy users, while controversial content or content that goes against the values of the platform’s users are buried beyond the sight of average users (Massanari 2015: 15-19). Finally, Reddit’s stance to intervention is hands-off in the interest of maintaining neutrality, but as Massanari illustrates, that neutrality allows most users to shape the space at the expense of users who disagree or don’t play along with the design choices of the platform (Massanari 2015, 20- 23).

This hands-off approach is common among online game developers, who instead opt to govern their player bases implicitly through rhetoric or through the mechanical workings of the game. Busch, Boudreau and Consalvo uncovered that game companies often use vague, normative statements in end-user license agreements or terms of use as an attempt to get players to self-regulate based on perceived shared ideals of what good behavior should look like in a game (Busch, Boudreau and Consalvo, 2016: 178-184). These vague statements allow companies to intervene when they deem necessary, but the conditions that would necessitate an intervention are the sole knowledge of the companies themselves, not the players (Busch, et al. 2016: 179-180). The rules exist primarily to protect the companies rather than to create an agreeable and safe environment for the players. Interestingly enough, DOTA 2 itself doesn’t have its own terms of use, but instead uses that of Valve’s propriety game distribution platform, Steam, which must be used to play DOTA 2. The only line from the Steam terms of use that addresses how players should engage with one another reads “Your online conduct and interaction with other subscribers should be guided by common sense and basic etiquette.” Much like other game companies, Valve does not give much in the way of explicit guidance or expectations as to how the community should act, what behavior it will police, and how it will police it.

Players find themselves in a state of constant negotiation with each other and developer choices regarding the in-game experience. Carter, Gibbs and Arnold documented this after a major controversy in competitive EVE Online. After it was discovered that two competitive teams had colluded

in a sanctioned tournament which led to one of them throwing the final game, players entered into a debate on whether the actions were in the spirit of the game, transgressive, innovative, or worthy of punishment or praise (Carter, Gibbs and Arnold, 2015). Eventually the EVE Online developers CCP Games were forced to respond to the debate and their decision was to disqualify and ban the players from both teams, much to the ire of some and the joy of others (Carter et al. 2015). There are two important facts to take away from this example. The first is that game developers, although not prone to intervention, have the power to alter the social and game experience when they intervene. Second, the players are at the mercy of developers to intervene, and in the absence of that intervention, must rely on their own techniques for shaping the informal rules of the game. In the case of this EVE Online controversy, until CCP Games intervened, players were forced to rely on rhetorical, moral arguments about the nature of EVE Online and what the thrown game implied for what those individuals who represented only segments of the community believed EVE Online to be (Carter et al. 2015). When CCP Games did intervene, its decision officially legitimized certain interpretations of EVE Online while denying others.

However, as explained above, while game companies are eager to intervene when cheating occurs or when some definition of 'game integrity' is compromised, they tend not to intervene in social situations, which leaves players on their own to shape the spaces in which they play. This leaves players who fall outside of a majority group in a difficult situation in the highly gendered and racialized gaming culture. In "Collective Organizing, Individual Resistance, or Asshole Griefer? An Ethnographic Analysis of Women of Color in Xbox Live," Kishonna Grey outlines an example of that difficulty while introducing an alternative method of space negotiation. She followed a Spanish-language all-lesbian Call of Duty clan as they encountered racial and gendered harassment in-game and retaliated as a means of reclaiming the space. According to her research, the clan members employed standard grieving techniques common in Call of Duty, such as killing friendly teammates, as a response to oppressive acts that they encountered in-game (Grey, 2013). As opposed to negotiating with players through rhetoric on forums, the subjects of Grey's study resist through the mechanics of the game, and while that resistance was a meaningful act for marginalized players in hostile space, it is also interpreted as grieving for the players who are on the receiving end (Grey, 2013). Grey also found that while many of her subjects were given temporary bans or suspensions for their disruptive actions in-game and on forums, players who used racial slurs against Grey's subjects on forums were not punished for their behavior, which supports the idea that companies intervene based on their own internal logics that are often ambiguously communicated to the player base, (Grey, 2013).



League of Legend's now defunct tribunal system was an attempt to turn over the power of community policing and management to the players of the game. The tribunal was a forum-based system where participants were asked to review a case and to vote on whether a player who has been reported in-game should be 'punished or pardoned.'<sup>12</sup> Yubo Kou and Bonnie Nardi found that the system required a great deal of interpretation of the ambiguous rules put forth by Riot games (Kou and Nardi, 2014: 3). The tribunal itself functioned more as a springboard for forum discussion where the community and the people voting could discuss how they wanted to handle each case, thereby establishing even more informal rules about how members should act online (Kou and Nardi, 2014: 7). The result was what Kou and Nardi call 'an ecology of governance,' whereby human interaction takes precedence over technological and mechanical systems in the governance of the community (Kou and Nardi, 2014: 8). According to Nardi and Kou, the players who used the tribunal felt as though they were building the community along with Riot games through systems of norms established and reinforced by the community rather than being judged according to arbitrary rules (Kou and Nardi, 2014: 8). However, it is important to note that the tribunal was discontinued in 2014 and has yet to be re-implemented into the game. A subsequent forum discussion revealed that the community was more divided on the tribunal system than Kou and Nardi let on.<sup>13</sup> While some want it back, others are strictly against it, and in the absence of the tribunal system since 2014, it appears Riot is also supporting the idea that giving the power to ban players to the players themselves wasn't working in line with the company's goals. Without an official response from Riot Games on the state of the Tribunal or the reasoning behind its removal, players were left to theorize as to Riot's motivations and to debate the actual success of the tribunal as a community management tool.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that some game communities foster positive interactions between players. Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy documented this in the now-defunct MMO Faunasphere. The in-game culture of Faunasphere in its early stages was heavily crafted by the game's beta players. According to Consalvo and Begy, "They were committed to sharing information and help, creating a welcoming space for each other, and promoting a 'pay it forward' mentality. In doing so, they helped define what it meant to be a Faunasphere player and a valued member of the community." (Consalvo and Begy, 2015: 57) However, even these positive norms in a game community create an outgroup within the game community, as "Those who disagreed with such strictures were not 'good' Faunasphere

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<sup>12</sup> [http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Tribunal](http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/The_Tribunal)

<sup>13</sup> <https://boards.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/c/GD/pNMMyWEi7-tribunal-gone>

<sup>14</sup> <https://boards.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/c/player-behavior-moderation/vPA52XkA-why-was-the-tribunal-removed>

players – they were rude children used to the norms of Facebook gameplay,” (Consalvo and Begy, 2015: 57). Indeed, in any game community the informal rules decided upon by the group opens doors for players to play their own way, in ways that offend the norms of many players, or at least the loudest collective voice.

They also note that while the community is shaped by the players, the type of players the game attracts depends on the content of the game, stating “... the design of MMOGs influences in subtle and not-so-subtle ways who will play the game, how they will play, and why they play. Faunasphere emphasized zapping pollution, completing goals, and breeding rare types of fauna. In comparison, EVE Online emphasizes space travel, mining, the accumulation of wealth, and an ‘anything goes’ atmosphere,” (Consalvo and Begy, 2015: 56). For as much as players attempt to construct the communities they wish to play in, they are also along for the developers’ ride. For many of Faunasphere’s players, the game’s ills began when the game switched platforms from a browser-based app to a Facebook game, which brought in new types of players which destabilized the game’s community and altered the experience for many of the early players of the game (Consalvo and Begy, 2014 :61-74). Even very positive results and community interaction can be stifled by the moves developers make when designing and maintaining their games.

Because of the complex negotiations between players, developers, and platforms described above that all shape the community and culture of an online game, I turn to Mirko Tobias-Schäfer’s approach to participatory culture. He suggests looking at participation as what he calls ‘media dispositives.’ Of this approach, Tobias-Schäfer says, “Looking at participation in terms of ‘media dispositives’ means that the various aspects, both discursive and non-discursive, human or non-human, would be related to each other by power structures, knowledge about technology and its design and appropriation, the discursive representation of socio-political issues, and the transformations taking place through the interaction and relation of all participants,” (Tobias-Schäfer, 2011: 15). Given the DOTA 2 community’s complexity, I feel this approach is the correct lens through which to understand how toxicity is experienced and interpreted by players in DOTA 2. The experiences of the players in this study need to be positioned not just in the context of a few matches in the game client, but as a total experience of the DOTA 2-focused websites and forums they frequent, the communities they’re a part of,

the power relations they are coming up against, and the technological blocks and affordances they feel they are subject in relation to the overlap of those spaces. The best way to understand their experience with toxicity is to position it within that media dispositive.

As Phillips and Milner note, there is a great deal of ambivalence in the congregation of actions, interactions and reactions mentioned above. Ambivalences of intention and reception when grieving occurs, ambivalences when it comes to mediation, governance and intervention on the part of game companies into their game worlds. The entire construction of trolling and meme culture which constitutes an integral part of the way DOTA 2 players communicate with each other is founded on ambivalence, and to do justice to the experiences players face within DOTA 2.

Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner's recent work provides the best picture of how ambivalence operates online and offers a solid approach to working through it. Because individual participation online is often funneled into a community, the origins and intentions of online behavior, memes, and norms, and their remediation and remixing through online spaces, it is difficult to determine the exact reasons for any phenomena or the vast array of reactions and responses to different events online (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 1-13). Due to the myriad perspectives interacting online, satirical and serious content are one and the same once it has been posted, and people receive, react, and redistribute content based on the way they themselves interpret (or misinterpret) the messages or intentions they're experiencing.

Phillips and Milner use a now famous internet meme, the Three Wolf Moon t-shirt as an example of this phenomenon playing out online. The shirt, which depicts three majestic wolf heads under a full moon, was available on Amazon.com on 2009, and many users began posting reviews of the shirt that touted its superior quality, its function as a t-shirt that could cover a sizeable 'girth', and its ability to lead to romance in the aisles of a Wal-Mart, among other things (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 8-10). On the importance of ambivalence in understanding this phenomenon, Phillips and Milner state, "Satirical play with the Three Wolf Moon t-shirt, for example, could be read as simple collective fun. But as evidenced by Amazon Customer's initial review- and the dozens of similarly framed reviews that followed – this fun hinged on ridiculing the shirt and its buyers' presumed 'white trash' lifestyle and aesthetic. Some of these participants may have set out to sincerely mock the lives of low income white individuals. Some may have set out to celebrate these lives, or to signal what they regard as 'white trash solidarity,'" (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 11). The impact of this ambivalence goes beyond comedy, however, as this is indicative of what Phillips and Milner call "the fundamental ambivalence of digitally mediated expression," (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 12). This fundamental ambivalence is perhaps at its

most important to understand and appreciate at a time when online communities numbering in the tens of millions employ these ambivalences to create in-groups and out-groups and shape community norms, or when the leader of one of the most influential nations in the world sets the precedent of using these ambivalences in their communications with the public and other national leaders on a near-daily basis.

Phillips and Milner point out that the origin of ambivalence is that of polar contradiction; a binary feeling that any phenomenon is as it is perceived and also its opposite, or as they phrase it “both, on both sides,” (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 10). But that definition is not enough for what occurs online according to Phillips and Milner, who expand the definition of ambivalence as it relates to online culture to mean “all, on all sides,” (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 11). When taken as a collective, groups of individuals online don’t feel two ways about a given event, word, or phenomenon; they feel *all* ways. The sheer volume of content and the size of the audience create an unreasonably large web of intentions, effects, opinions, and responses. However, the binary positions that are given the most visibility conceal the spectrum of receptive responses of any given phenomenon. As Massanari made clear in her analysis of Reddit, platforms and their user bases determine to a large extent which points on a vast spectrum of experience and opinions receive the most visibility through the algorithmic and cultural biases of the platforms. This creates the appearance of consensus when in reality it is giving more visibility to the majority view of the user-base, and even in situations where the sum total of all differing voices from across a wide spectrum are greater in number than the single most up-voted comments, or the most repeated phrases or trends in online game chats, the first thing and most frequent things users see when they open a thread or queue into a game of DOTA 2 are the voices of an algorithmically and culturally-sanctioned mass.

I feel that this view of online culture is accurate and reflective of the interactions I’ve witnessed and experienced in DOTA 2. Given the seemingly infinite array of possible explanations for everything occurring online it seems that writing an academic work attempting to situate and define a phenomenon through user experience would be an impossible task since the answer would be that toxicity is everything and felt all ways, but that is exactly the approach the authors recommend. According to Phillips and Milner, “In short, the same behaviors that can wound can be harnessed for social justice. By embracing this ambivalence, essentially by saying yes to each fractured binary, one is better able to track who is pushing back against whom, and to thoughtfully consider the political and ethical stakes on a case-by-case basis. For example, who is speaking, who is listening, and who is refusing to engage?” (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 14). As such, this project is not so much about toxicity, DOTA 2, and cross-cultural and cross-language play writ large, but about the experiences for some

players who defy or are absent from the narratives describing DOTA 2's toxic community. By highlighting the dominant discourse about toxicity within the game's culture through the algorithmically and culturally curated forums and games journalism articles, then subsequently putting the spotlight on as of yet undiscovered ambivalences by talking to and playing with players who fall out of the dominant discourse on toxicity as it happens through those platforms, it is possible to open up a broader conceptualization of what a toxic community is really made up of, and what it means for those players who experience toxic play.

### **Getting the Toxic Party Started**

In summary, the four sections above can be summarized and synthesized for the rest of this project, with specific focus on how they relate to DOTA 2 as follows:

1. Former studies on virtual worlds apply in part but not entirely to MOBAs. They are good for understanding some core features of toxicity, but they do not convey the experience fully. These past studies are not tailored enough to the precise social systems of DOTA 2 and similar games to accurately reflect and explain the behaviors therein. The present terminology for these behaviors in games journalism and circulating within many game communities, especially DOTA 2 is toxicity. As seen above, many articles refer to toxicity, but none provide a solid definition of what it means for players or its place within the gaming community. The following chapter will focus on extrapolating upon the on the broader origins of toxicity while simultaneously detailing some of the grieving, trolling, and flaming practices that constitute toxicity which apply specifically to DOTA 2, throughout the DOTA 2 media dispositive. This will better define toxicity as it applies to online games and will lay the groundwork for better understand the experiences of the subjects of this study in chapter 3.
2. Race, ethnicity and gender happen online. In-game, they are interpreted through specific stereotyped behavioral markers, community built digital imaginaries and through linguistic cues. These cues become adopted by communities as folklore based on constitutive humor which unifies some individuals into groups, but also excludes others and provides content and community-specific language which can be mobilized against players through trolling,

- griefing and flaming play in the day-to-day interaction within the game. This makes up a critical part of the toxic experience. Certain behaviors are racialized and responded to in an aggressive, racialized mode as a response to prior instigations, or as meaningful resistance to the dominant culture. The mechanical systems of DOTA 2, the surrounding game and web culture, and the aloof game developer allow for and reinforce this application of racialized, ethnic and gendered identities in-game and their stereotyped behaviors.
3. In the case of many games, DOTA 2 among them, power over the game space rests firmly in control of game developers *if* they choose to exercise their power, which is rarely done explicitly to manage social interaction or to police communities. However, within game spaces, players of all types attempt to claim their play spaces as their own through behaviors that can constitute toxicity, even when trying to actively combat toxic behavior. In the absence of developer intervention, players are left to shape their own game space in a constant negotiation with other players through moral appeals to the broader community (which depend on its own oppressive norms, language, and algorithms to craft a successful appeal) or resistive gameplay. Few visible steps have been taken to mitigate toxicity in DOTA 2, although recently some improvements have been made. However, it's currently unknown which of those were intentionally designed to curb toxicity or toxic situations that arise during cross-language play. Regardless, some of these features will be addressed in the following chapters as they were implemented for a limited time during this project's period of study, and many of the players interviewed were engaging with these mechanical and social changes.
  4. Lastly, ambivalence permeates the experience for players, observers, critics and researchers of online communities. It's difficult to position, even when asking someone directly, what their intentions are when engaging in any kind of activity online. Also, it is probably unreasonable to expect individuals to consider the rippling effects of all their actions when they are acting with what they themselves perceive to be the best intentions. The ambivalent nature of studying online communities provides an opportunity to highlight the spaces between the binary points of ambivalence that are overshadowed by the dominant perspectives and voices within online communities. Ambivalence does not justify behavior, but it does complicate what happens when words or actions harm individuals online.

Nevertheless, there are negative effects on individuals because of ambivalent actions and language, and the sensible course of action given the challenge of ambivalence is to focus on player perspectives and experiences that fall outside of what has already been established and accepted as cultural fact about the toxic DOTA 2 community. By positioning new perspectives against the established rhetoric found throughout the game's media dispositive, a new understanding of what toxicity is, its effects for and on players can emerge.

## **Chapter 2 - Toxicity and the DOTA 2 Media Dispositive**

The focus of this chapter will be on situating toxicity within the broader contexts of DOTA 2, namely what Tobias-Schäfer refers to as the ‘Media Dispositive,’ (Tobias-Schäfer, 2011: 15). In the case of DOTA 2, this dispositive concerns the entire network of platforms that the DOTA 2 gaming community passes through in their fandom, participation and play. Because it would be beyond the scope of this project to outline this dispositive in full, I will provide the most attention to the platforms that overlap directly with the in-game DOTA 2 experience. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the way the online culture of the game is formed through various overlapping but at times disparate online and real-world cultures to holistically address some of the unique phenomena that constitute toxicity in the DOTA 2 community.

I will identify and detail numerous media platforms that make up the DOTA 2 media dispositive and shape the game’s culture. After detailing what I have identified to be the most impactful elements of this dispositive, I will examine 3 events that demonstrate how the in-game culture is constructed through the dispositive, by highlighting the often-ambivalent points of origin for these phenomena and tracing their flows across the numerous platforms. These phenomena then become imbued in the game as its language and culture and contribute to what the community and outsiders describe as Toxicity.

### **The Media Dispositive**

Mirko Tobias Schäfer’s concept of the Media Dispositive comes from Foucault’s concepts of the ‘apparatus’ or ‘dispositif.’ Foucault describes the dispositif as “...a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid,” (Foucault, 1980: 194). Schäfer re-focuses this concept to the media dispositive by pointing out that for any given media format, the connective platforms, their communities, their algorithmic affordances and their discourses are part of the media dispositive of that original platform (in this case, DOTA 2), and should be considered when analyzing a platform (Tobias-Schäfer, 2011: 15).

I have identified multiple platforms that after close investigation, have the largest direct impact on shaping the culture of the community and the in-game experience. While the DOTA 2 media dispositive does extend beyond the next few identified platforms, I believe there are diminishing returns on the information that can be gleaned from them when compared to the key platforms I will now



identify. The following platforms contribute to four different overlapping areas: the language and communicative practices of the game, the competitive and e-sports focus of the game, the meta game or norms of play, and community/company interaction. These four areas shape the culture of the game that is visible from within the game itself and are integral to understanding and appreciating the player perspectives I will analyze in chapter 3. My intention going forward is not to do a deep dive into the mechanical and algorithmic systems of each platform or sets of platforms, but to give a cursory explanation of each to later illustrate the way the culture of DOTA 2 is impacted by their connectedness, and tracing events that demonstrate how that connectedness enforces and reinforces DOTA 2's culture.

## Reddit

Reddit is a social aggregation website with various interest-based communities called sub-Reddits. As noted in Chapter 1, Adrienne Masanari has already established how the culture and mechanical functions of Reddit work together to create an environment that highlights and silences certain perspectives; what Massanari referred to as a 'toxic technoculture' (Massanari, 2015). Reddit itself requires the least amount of explanation in this section as Massanari has sufficiently outlined the processes and community of Reddit enough for the purposes of this project. However, it is important to note that Reddit, with all the flaws Massanari has established, has become an integral part of the DOTA 2 media dispositive, serving as the key point of contact between the players and developers of the game. Considering Massanari's analysis of the platform, it is easy to see how this could be a problematic lynchpin for an online community.

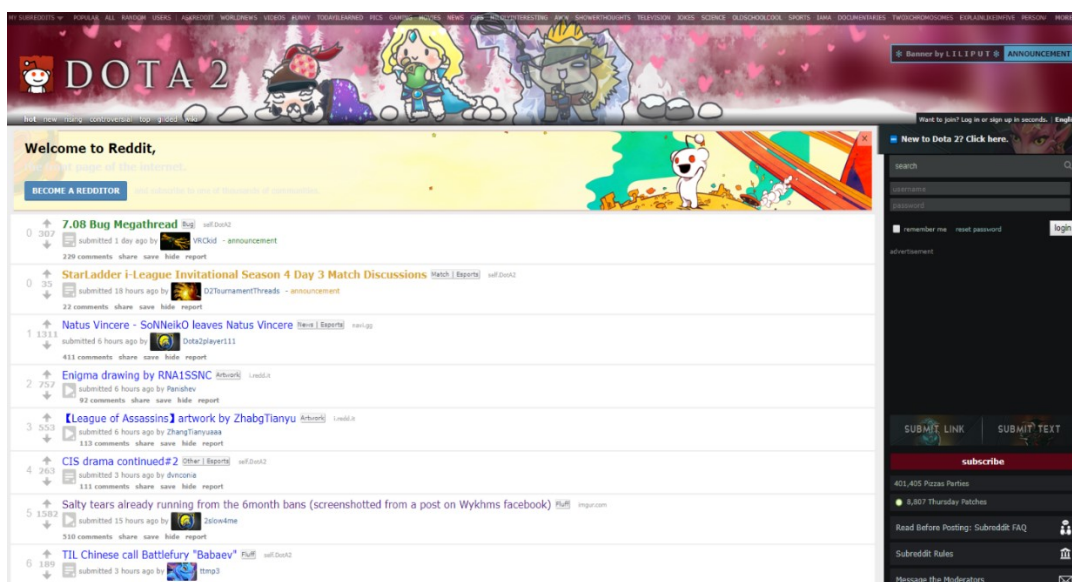


Image 2.1. The Primary DOTA 2 Subreddit. Screenshot of Reddit February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018.

While there is an official DOTA 2 forum through the Steam client, reddit has become the defacto site for discussion about the game. On any given day the subjects covered on the subreddit range from discussion about competitive matches, drama in the competitive scene, noteworthy or banal moments and trends that happen in the game or community, changes to the game, game-related media such as third-party art or videos, memes, and more. Developers, community celebrities and even the CEO of Valve, Gabe Newell, participate on the DOTA 2 sub-reddit, and it has become the most legitimized location for discussing the game and communicating with the game's developers. I will cover how this came to pass and how this impacts the culture when I explore the 3 phenomena later in this chapter, but for now it is most important to consider that, aside from the game itself, the most central meeting point for communication between players about the game is a highly problematic social aggregator.

## Twitch.Tv

Twitch.tv is a live videogame streaming service where personalities known as streamers broadcast their gameplay for a wide audience. In addition to streamers, numerous official and unofficial e-sports events are also broadcast on Twitch.tv. Twitch.tv is notorious for its chat feature where the spectators of a given channel are encouraged to participate as an active audience in response to the events being streamed. As of February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, the DOTA 2 Twitch.tv page has over 3 million followers and averages 40,000 concurrent viewers a week.<sup>15</sup> The most popular broadcasts on a given day tend to be from e-sports events, broadcasts from professional DOTA 2 e-sports players, or high-ranked players.

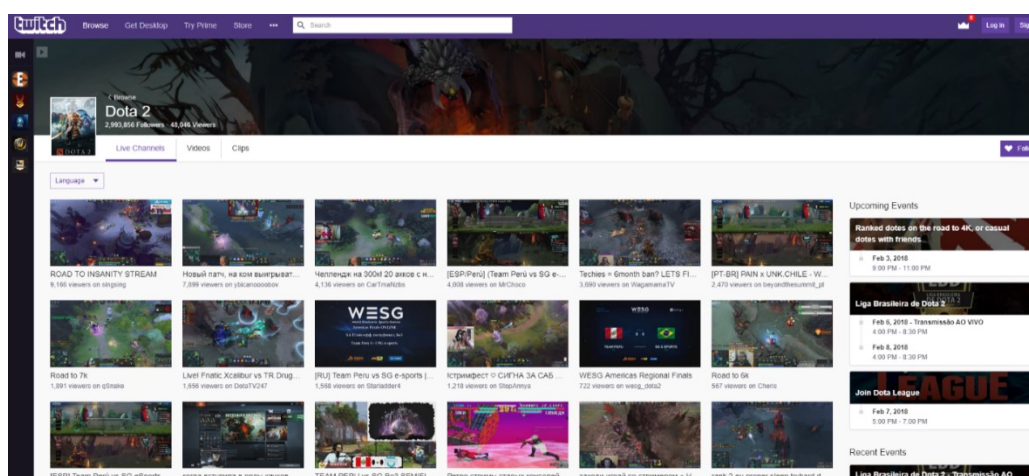


Image 2.2 Screenshot of the DOTA 2 Twitch.tv website, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Data gathered from <https://www.twitch.tv/directory/game/Dota%202> and <https://www.twitchmetrics.net/g/29595-dota-2> (accessed February 2nd 2018).

The DOTA 2 player base engages with Twitch.tv in numerous ways that intersect with the in-game experience. Chris Georgen, Sean Duncan, and Lucas Cook analyze how players engaged with the official TI4 new player stream to both learn the rules of the game and learn the rules of the community. They note, "Overall, it seems that participatory spectatorship may provide learners opportunities to assume the identities and roles of professional players, embody their actions, and understand their decision making. Moreover, this form of participation hones observation of basic activities and components of a functional game system, as well as the rules and ritual of competitive gaming communities," (Georgen, Duncan, and Cook, 2015: 4). The Twitch.tv broadcasts prime new players to the community, but also provide an important role in establishing the norms of play as newer and less skilled players attempt to emulate the item builds and gameplay strategies they see. Additionally, as we will observe through the 3 phenomena, the official e-sports broadcasts pay a lot of attention to community feedback and demand across platforms in order to create an entertaining event and build the spectator community, which legitimizes the platform and Twitch.tv chat as another point of contact between the company, the players, and DOTA 2 celebrities.

## **YouTube**

Similarly, DOTA 2 has its fair share of YouTube celebrities, many of whom have become professional or semi-professional icons within the DOTA 2 e-sports scene, giving them additional prominent and impactful positions within the community. Compared to Twitch.tv, YouTube offers content creators the opportunity to curate their content as the videos are often heavily edited, while the gameplay experiences on Twitch.tv go out live. YouTube also serves as an archive for past e-sports events and video-related DOTA 2 memes, which are frequently referenced within the community. YouTube offers a wide variety of DOTA 2 content, including in-depth gameplay guides and reports, e-sports recaps, user created animations, videos, parodies, and sanctioned DOTA 2 content. It is important to note that YouTube celebrities often crossover between YouTube, Twitch.tv and other lesser known third-party platforms, while also being brought on by Valve as commenters and analysts for their official e-sports events.

One example of this is Kevin ‘Purge’ Godec who has been producing DOTA and DOTA 2 content on YouTube since 2011.<sup>16</sup> On his YouTube channel PurgeGamers, Purge typically releases one video per day where he comments over his own gameplay in a highly analytical style to teach his viewers about the game. In addition to this format, he has several other video types where he coaches new players, teaches the basics of DOTA 2, and most notoriously of all, reads over a list of the latest gameplay changes (known as patch notes) and gives his analysis of what those changes mean for the strategy of the game, the longest of which is over ten hours long.<sup>17</sup> While Purge started on YouTube, he has since transitioned to Twitch.tv for live games and patch note readings, while using YouTube for videos that require more editing like his ‘Learn Dota Basics’ series.

Through his YouTube origins, he was contacted by Valve in 2012 and brought on to their broadcast team as a commentator or analyst for their most high-profile events. While Purge is still considered to be a DOTA 2 player and community member, he is also a face for Valve’s product. Valve has used this strategy numerous times, going into the community and giving high-visibility positions to certain content creators. While Purge’s dry and purely informational style lends itself well to a professional product it is not the only style Valve takes to selecting its broadcast teams. The most important thing to take away from this style of community integration into the broadcast product is that Valve decides to a large extent who should be celebrities within the DOTA 2 community, and what type of content creators and content they’re going to associate with their product.



Image 2.3. Purge’s YouTube Channel with Gamer Sensei and DotaBuff advertisements in the bottom right corner. Screenshot of Purge’s YouTube channel, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> [http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Purge\\_\(Kevin\\_Godec\)](http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Purge_(Kevin_Godec)) (accessed Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> PurgeGamers Youtube Channel. (accessed February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018).

Similarly, DOTA 2 videos available on YouTube are sometimes broadcast over Twitch.tv and found on the Steam platform or in-game, which encourages creative community participation and audience interaction. Recently, the TI7<sup>18</sup> short film contest was an example of this cross-platform approach to content creation and promotion. For this contest, content-creators in the community are encouraged to submit short films made about DOTA 2 or using the DOTA 2 engine that would resonate with players. The videos were first submitted on the steam platform which was open to a wide audience to comment on the best entries which were eventually narrowed down to fifteen finalists. It is important to note, however, that the finalists were ultimately selected by Valve.<sup>19</sup> The finalists were then highlighted on Twitch.tv, Reddit, YouTube, and within the DOTA 2 game client. Players who purchased an in-game item associated with the TI7 tournament were then eligible to vote on the finalists, who would have their video broadcast during the TI7 tournament to a wide audience. In addition to their high quality, the winners of the contest feature familiar in-game situations, community specific memes and references that would possess the most appeal to voters, replete with coarse language and instances of what is considered unskilled play. Again, what we see is a relationship between the community and content creators that is heavily curated by Valve.

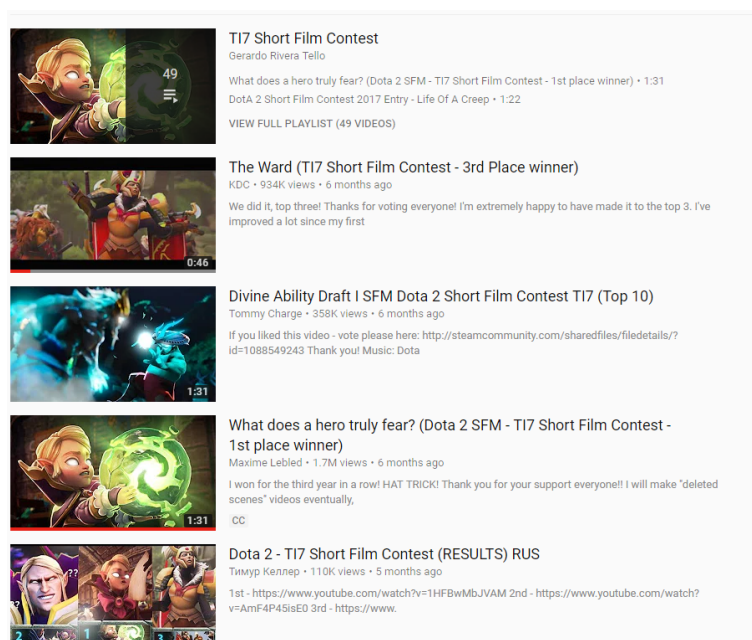


Image 2.4. The TI7 Short Film Contest Videos. Screenshot of YouTube, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> TI7 refers to the yearly International tournament, and the largest DOTA 2 esports event.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.dota2.com/international/filmcontestguidelines/> (accessed February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018). According to the contest guidelines, "Submissions will be reviewed by the Steam community on the Steam Workshop. The top entries will be selected by Valve in its sole discretion to be featured in The International 2017 Battle Pass for a final vote by the Battle Pass community, and the winners will be announced at The International 2017."

## OpenDota and DotaBuff

OpenDota and DotaBuff are DOTA 2 data and statistic websites. These sites are particularly interesting because they track data from every single match that takes place in the DOTA 2 client. While players are not automatically opted into the system, their anonymous performance is trackable as OpenDota automatically records the in-game statistics and chat logs of every single match, whether professional or casual. For players who have opted into these services, all their DOTA 2 statistics are easily trackable by anyone, including hero and item builds, win-loss ratios, competitive ranking, and full chat logs from matches through OpenDota. Alongside player statistics, there is also meta data available for the game, such as hero pick rates and win-loss ratios.

The screenshot displays a user's OpenDota profile. On the left, a list of matches is shown with columns for hero, draft type, match outcome, duration, and K/D/A. On the right, the 'Heroes Played' section lists various heroes with their respective match counts and win percentages.

HERO	MP	WIN %
Mirana	53	43.4
Nyx Assassin	39	53.8
Rubick	37	48.6
Ember Spirit	37	64.9
Spirit Breaker	37	51.4
Disruptor	35	65.7
Witch Doctor	35	62.9
Juggernaut	31	58.1
Earthshaker	31	61.3
Riki	29	48.3

Image 2.5. A section of my publicly viewable OpenDota profile. Screenshot of OpenDota from February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2018.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The available statistics on this page are hero selection, match rank, score, match outcome, and most played hero statistics. Upon clicking one of the matches, it will provide detailed information about the match for every player who participated. Players who have not logged in to the Steam API are recorded but are displayed as anonymous. However, each match has an ID that is retrievable on both OpenDota and DotaBuff that can be typed into the DOTA 2 game client. This brings up a list, including user names, of all participants, making any user you've played any game of DOTA 2 with trackable.



Image 2.6. DotaBuff Hero Win Rates and Pick Rates from January 29<sup>th</sup> to February 5<sup>th</sup>. Screenshot of DotaBuff from February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

The widespread availability of all this data causes a few different things to happen within the game. First, it allows players to monitor their allies or opponents' strategies, which can be deployed in different and unexpected ways. One example of this is OpenDota's wardmap, which shows where a player, when playing the support role, typically places an item called an Observer Ward that gives map vision. This item can only be removed when an opponent buys another item and places it in proximity to the ward. A player with consistent trends of ward placement on the wardmap can be outplayed by the opposing support if they simply look up the other player's wardmap before the game loads.

Second, it reinforces the accepted meta game. If the profiles of professional players demonstrate certain item builds on certain heroes, players who are aware of the data begin to enforce those builds as the correct ways to play. I have observed that deviations from those established builds are often used as grounds for intervention in game on behalf of players who perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable or more skilled because of their engagement with those statistics. This leads to instances of intervention that range from polite coaching, to trolling, to outright abuse in-game. Similarly, a hero with declining win rates from the data set pictured above can be seen as a sub-optimal pick which can anger teammates as soon as the game begins, leading to a range of toxic possibilities. However, it is important to note that not all players engage with this data, which creates another point of friction between subsets of players.

Finally, personal data can be used to critique player performance. While some stats can be a helpful tool for players to critique their own performance to improve at the game, others can use those metrics to launch diatribes at players performing poorly in a match. While the most common statistics are available within the DOTA 2 client themselves, such as MMR Rank and Win/Loss Ratio, they carry over into these other platforms and are documented for all time, which players can deploy against each other if they so desire. T.L Taylor encountered similar behavior in the WoW mod scene, wherein third-party mods were used by players to monitor each other's performance (Taylor, 2006: 330). These mods also changed the way players treated each other, as she herself experienced a great deal of scrutiny at the hands of another player using a mod to monitor her performance during a group encounter (Taylor, 2006: 330-331). According to Taylor, "I do however want to point out the ways that these tools can not only foster and support this kind of approach but may under the right circumstances evoke it," (Taylor, 2006: 331). The DOTA 2 metrics inhabit a similar space, as they are woven into the fabric of the game and a critical part of the game's culture. While not all players actively use these metrics against other players, their prominence across the dispositive to inform the culture surrounding the game as a competitive one.

### **Other Games**

DOTA 2 as a game does not exist within a vacuum. Game communities migrate and overlap, as Consalvo and Begy note in their study of the game Faunasphere, where players migrated to other games after the Faunasphere servers went down (Consalvo and Begy, 2015: 91-92). Celia Pearce noted a similar phenomenon among former players of *Uru* and *Myst* who migrated to other virtual worlds but maintained elements of their former games' culture (Pearce, 2009: 109-110). DOTA 2 is no exception. As mentioned in the introduction DOTA 2 emerged out of the original Defense of the Ancients mod for Warcraft III. Before DOTA 2 was released, the creator of the DOTA-ALLSTARS website started his own game company, Riot Games, and released the now popular League of Legends.<sup>21</sup> League of Legends and DOTA 2 are cut from the same gaming cloth, and while the communities are not entirely the same, it is not uncommon for players to have played both games, or for players to migrate from one game to the other. There are countless Reddit posts comparing the games or asking for help from players switching

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<sup>21</sup> [http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Steve\\_%27Pendragon%27\\_Mescon](http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Steve_%27Pendragon%27_Mescon) (Accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018).



to DOTA 2 from League of Legends.<sup>22</sup> I myself was an avid League of Legends player before the release of DOTA 2.

While the overlap between DOTA 2 and other games extends beyond League of Legends, it is probably the most important overlapping game when considering toxicity. As Yubo Kou and Bonnie Nardi point out, the League of Legends terms of service played a large role in the origins of the term toxicity spreading through players' lexicons. They note, "Players have adopted terms such as 'intentionally feeding,' 'toxic,' and 'unsportsmanlike' from [LoL's] rules," (Nardi and Kou, 2014: 16). Because they share a point of origin and belong to the same genre, the broad idea of MOBAs as toxic games is prevalent among forum comments and game journalism articles. A few google searches reveal countless articles on each game's respective forums and third-party sites comparing elements of the games, including which is more toxic.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of this project is not to make that comparison, but I mention this to highlight another way in which the communities of this game are engaged with each other, which causes them to be grouped when considering their mechanics, communities, and most importantly, their toxicity. The broad use of the term toxicity to describe game communities across games allows this to happen irrespective of what crosses over between the games and what does not.

### **Games Journalism**

This is most clear when we dive into the pool of games journalism on toxicity. While it's important to note that players throw around the term toxic in-game and on forums, games journalists play a large part in reinforcing the idea that these games have a toxic culture, and define, through more legitimized platforms than web forums, what toxicity means. Using a very alarmist tone, these articles tend to paint toxicity across the genre with a very wide brush, which leads to a problematic overall engagement and frame for understanding toxicity. Because these articles are published on popular games websites, they also set the frame for the discourses about toxicity that players engage with.

Jacob Crawford's 'MOBA Mondays' column on the *MMOGames* website exemplifies this strategy. According to Crawford, "MOBA's have been notorious for their toxic communities. If anything,

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/6yyong/league\\_of\\_legends\\_player\\_here\\_trying\\_out\\_dota\\_2/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/6yyong/league_of_legends_player_here_trying_out_dota_2/) (Accessed February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>23</sup>

[https://www.google.ca/search?q=is+league+or+dota+more+toxic&rlz=1C1GGRV\\_enCA751CA751&og=is+league+or+dota+more+toxic&aqs=chrome..69i57.5272j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.ca/search?q=is+league+or+dota+more+toxic&rlz=1C1GGRV_enCA751CA751&og=is+league+or+dota+more+toxic&aqs=chrome..69i57.5272j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) (accessed Feb 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

the collective attitude of online gamers seems to have gotten worse since eSports took off. I have become hesitant to play pickup games of certain titles lately. A casual League of Legends game, for example, is rarely fun anymore.”<sup>24</sup> Crawford goes on to describe what toxicity is not, stating “‘Toxic is a word I hear a lot these days, but I’m not sure a lot of players truly understand what it means. Yesterday, I played a casual League of Legends game in which my ADC called the bottom lane ‘toxic;’ we were behind in gold and experience. In another game (also yesterday), a player described the other team’s brilliant team fighting skills as ‘toxic.’ Both of these uses are wrong, and they make light of abusive gameplay.”<sup>25</sup>

While what Crawford describes might make light of abusive gameplay, it is difficult to concretely say that the behaviors that Crawford’s teammates identify as toxic actually aren’t. This is especially true if using Crawford’s own metric of ‘fun’ as a barometer for how toxicity affects players. What Crawford does in his article is undermine the position of his teammates’ views on toxicity by identifying moments which are ruining their own enjoyment of the game, and instead establishing a definition that suits his own views. I point this out to highlight the fact that toxicity communicates very specific things for individuals, but when taken holistically it begins to communicate almost anything that can disrupt a single player’s enjoyment in a match. Crawford is not wrong about what toxicity means, but neither are the players on his team.

The issue within games journalism is that the frame is often one that either limits the definition of toxicity as Crawford does, or one that brushes across the term without consideration for the subjectivity of what constitutes toxicity. Arthur Gies’ DOTA 2 review for Polygon states that “DOTA 2’s community also has some rather challenging elements. It can be as toxic as anything you’ll find in multiplayer gaming, and some memes relating to common player misbehavior have become legendary within the scene.”<sup>26</sup> However, throughout the entire review he doesn’t mention exactly how that toxicity manifests within the community, what it means for players, or what it means to him. It is toxic, and it is a problem, but beyond that, it is unknowable.

Games journalism encourages the use of the term as a rhetorical device that problematizes groups of players and behaviors. The problem this creates is that discussions about toxicity in-game or on game-related platforms become muddied through that rhetorical device. It is used such that it

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<sup>24</sup> Jacob Crawford, “Moba Mondays: Toxicity in MOBAs,” MMOGAMES website, July 20 th, 2015. <http://www.mmogames.com/gamearticles/moba-monday-toxicity-mobas/> (accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Gies, DOTA 2 Review, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/15/16151674/dota-2-review> (accessed February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

appears to have a collective definition when really there is none. As I will cover in the final section of this chapter, players engaging in discourses about toxicity are not actually talking about the same things. A great deal of effort is spent on working out what toxicity actually is, even though it is impossible to reach a consensus among a player base 12 million strong.

### Broader Media and Cultural Landscapes

Lastly, the final element of the DOTA 2 media dispositive I would like to highlight is the broader media and cultural landscape. Players are plugged into various media and cultural flows, and that manifests in game in unexpected and at times surreal ways. One playful example of this involves a group of players who cropped an image of Terry Crews face from a popular deodorant commercial into five separate images and each set one as their steam/DOTA 2 profile image. They also changed their steam/DOTA 2 names to match the name of the deodorant. The result, when they successfully queued for a match as five players, was this screen, visible by both themselves and their opponents:



Image 2.7. The Terry Crews Old-Spice match loading meme.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/921559-matching-icons> (accessed February 5th, 2018).

The image went viral and several spinoffs featuring Kim Jong Un, Gabe Newell, and Will Smith were seen in-game and reported posted on forums, which started the trend of 5-player teams (colloquially known as 5-stacks) theming their steam/DOTA 2 profiles.

Of course, examples of the cross-over between DOTA 2 and the broader cultural and media landscape aren't always playful. One event I observed in a recent DOTA 2 match saw players channeling the rhetoric of the latest American election. A Spanish-speaking player on the opposing team was giving advice to two players on our team as we were losing, and their response was to type the following:



Image 2.8. Two players channel Trump election rhetoric after losing to a Spanish-speaking player. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

As we can see, players will channel not only game-related content when interacting with others but will pull from everywhere they have access to. The game space is a *mélange* of these dispositive elements. While this interaction has familiar roots to anyone remotely following American politics, some of the other intricacies of communication through the dispositive require a bit more work to illustrate.

### **Flowing Through the Dispositive in Three Phenomena**

What I have shown so far through the DOTA 2 Media Dispositive are the various points of contact with the game for numerous players. The game DOTA 2 is not simply what happens in the DOTA 2 game client. It is a network of platforms where information, culture, and language flow which craft casual or competitive gameplay or spectator experiences. Players of the game may be engaged with any number of these platforms in varying intensity. I will now highlight three ways the culture of the game is created and reinforced through that dispositive by observing three phenomena that exemplify how the

community is constructed through those platforms. These examples show how average players, DOTA 2 celebrities, professional players, and the company contribute to the shaping of the community and in-game experience. The elements that contribute to what game’s journalism, academia, DOTA 2 players and the broader gaming community identify as toxicity, as identified in Chapter 1, are also clearly on display across these phenomena. The examples mentioned below are noteworthy, but they are not outliers. They are representative of trends that I have encountered again and again through my observation of the DOTA 2 media dispositive.

### **Sir Action Slacks and ‘Punta Madre’**

The first point of analysis encapsulates how in-game experiences, specifically those made of constitutive humor (Phillips; Phillips and Milner) and racialized othering, spread throughout the media dispositive and reinforce those elements of the game’s culture. It begins with a 2014 video from a now fairly high-profile DOTA 2 celebrity known as SirActionSlacks (Slacks for short). At the time Slacks was a casual DOTA 2 player and YouTube content creator. The video, titled “I make stupid voices when I play Dota 2: Jakiro Still Doesn’t Know Basic geography” is a twelve minute edit of a single casual DOTA 2 match in which Slacks uses the in-game voice chat to provide real-time commentary on the match as if it was an e-sports event, for humorous purposes.<sup>2829</sup> The spin on this video is that many of Slack’s comments come at the expense of a Brazilian player who, through matchmaking, was put into the same match as Slacks. The video’s description reads, “Jakiro returns to cast more games full of people he can’t understand on US East server. It’s cool if you don’t speak English, but Jakiro is gonna repeat things you say, butcher your language, and offer you margaritas. You have been warned.”<sup>30</sup> Here we already see the idea that because the server is in the US, that this player feels they have the right to mock and make jokes regarding non-English speaking players.

The video begins with Slacks introducing one of his teammates, playing the character Ancient Apparition (AA) as “the champion of Peru, himself.” While Slacks does this, the AA player responds in chat repeatedly with the word “Brazil,” indicating that he is Brazilian and not Peruvian. Slacks continues to refer to him as “the Peruvian” throughout the game. Another player on the team, Weaver, types a

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMrwUmVJIM4> (Accessed February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Jakiro is the name of one of DOTA 2s heroes. They are a flying dragon with two heads.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMrwUmVJIM4> (Accessed February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

message in Spanish which Slacks imitates in the chat by misreading the words. For example, the Weaver's message "El Pudge te Ganara, (The Pudge will beat you)" is read by Slacks as "El Pudge Di Gandra" in his faux sports announcer voice. This occurs throughout the video with the most famous example being a misreading of "Put a Madre," which is an expression of frustration, as "Punta Madre." This misspelled expression became a common phrase to see in game following this video.

The video continues with the AA dying first in the game and giving up 'first blood.' First blood is notable because in addition to the announcer loudly proclaiming "FIRST BLOOD" which alerts everyone in the game to the death, it also gives bonus gold to the enemy team, likely causing your teammates to react to the death. In response to AA's death Slacks does just that, declaring "And what a surprise, the guy who does not speaka-de-English draws the first blood." It is worth noting that this is an example of focusing on confirmation bias, as the other non-English speaking player on the team, Weaver, performed reasonably well throughout the video. Slacks continues to highlight the questionable plays of the AA player throughout the game, all the while making jokes at their expense, the most egregious of which is his decision to hum 'El Jarabe Tapatio,' or 'The Mexican Hat Dance' after the AA says something Slacks doesn't understand over voice chat, to which another English-speaking player (Nightstalker, or NS) adds "He wants a Margarita, that's what he just said." As the game progressed, Nightstalker began to participate more over voice chat at the expense of the AA player as well.

It's important to consider that AA, while appearing to play poorly from a gameplay perspective throughout the video, could possibly understand Slacks more than Slacks could understand the AA player. If not, at the very least, the AA player could likely discern that many of Slacks' comments were being made at their expense, and his poor play was a reflection of him disconnecting from the match because of his teammates' attitudes. While it is difficult to say for sure, through my own observation and gameplay experience, it is common for players to play poorly, either purposefully or not, after being called out or made fun of by their teammates. What Slacks is doing reinforces the idea of non-English speaking players as sub-par players while actively contributing to an environment where that player has no incentive to continue playing, and therefore appears to be unskilled or trolling.

At one moment in the video, Slacks makes a remark directly referencing Valve and the matchmaking mechanics of the game, stating "This game is actually sponsored by Valve software and the inability to region lock." The region locking he's referring to means putting a hard lock on regions so players from different geographical regions can't queue on the same server, and thus, can't be put on the same teams. There is a lot to unpack in this one comment. The first thing to note is that region

locking is a common demand across the dispositive.<sup>31</sup> These requests often go unanswered by Valve. There have been some changes to the region and language matchmaking systems within the game, but players are still being matched with people from outside of their region or language selections. The second thing to note is that in Slacks comment and in the discourse throughout the dispositive the assumption is made that non-english speaking players are queueing from different regions. Without any data to go on, players queueing on US servers are assuming that non-English speaking players are not living in the United States. There is also an implicit sense that if players situated in America are queueing on US east or US west, they should speak English in the game, even though it is not a workplace, and is a space for play. This is one of the values imbued into the English-speaking player base of the US servers.

The story of SirActionSlacks' contribution to the dispositive doesn't end there however. While he began as a YouTube content creator, Slacks migrated to Twitch.tv, and not unlike Purge was soon picked up by Valve as an interviewer for their events, which gave him a very visible position within the community.<sup>32</sup> Most recently Slacks was one of the primary interviewers during TI7, the most recent international DOTA 2 tournament. I would like to point out, in fairness to Slacks, that from what I've seen during the events, he attempts to carry himself with a bit more professionalism than in the YouTube video. However, as I say that, a Reddit post made on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 titled "Slacks sums up matchmaking" highlighted Slacks' continued approach to cross-language and cross-cultural play. The post was simply the following screenshot:



Image 2.9. SirActionSlacks post-game chat reflecting player frustration at playing with people from different regions.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/search?q=Region+Lock&restrict\\_sr=on](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/search?q=Region+Lock&restrict_sr=on), <https://www.dotabuff.com/topics/2016-02-25-ok-there-seriously-needs-to-be-a-region-lock-lol-has-it>, [http://steamcommunity.com/app/570/discussions/search/?q=Region+Lock&gidforum=882957625821971751&include\\_deleted=1](http://steamcommunity.com/app/570/discussions/search/?q=Region+Lock&gidforum=882957625821971751&include_deleted=1) (All Accessed Feb 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> <http://liquipedia.net/dota2/SirActionSlacks> (Accessed Feb 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/7vk4ur/slacks\\_sums\\_up\\_matchmaking/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/7vk4ur/slacks_sums_up_matchmaking/)

It is not my intention to condemn Slacks' content, but to highlight his approach to the game, and his position across multiple platforms in the dispositive for the sake of establishing this facet of the community. Slacks' original video and his most recent post are, in addition to everything else, constitutive humor. Once again, turning to Phillips and Milner, constitutive humor is a fetishistic form of humor. According to Phillips and Milner, "...Fetishized laughter is fundamentally myopic, allowing participants to focus just on the *us* who laugh, not on the *them*, who do not, or how in-group behaviors might personally impact the outgroup," (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 98). Indeed, Slacks' 2014 video and 2018 post-match comment transmitted by a third-party user to Reddit captures something that many players on US servers find humorous because it reflects their experiences with DOTA 2's matchmaking system. It also, as Phillips and Milner point out, creates outgroups from whom the humor is generated at their expense. Additionally, as is evidenced by the Night Stalker player in Slacks' video, encourages other players to enact these behaviors for additional humor in game. As Phillips and Milner point out, this type of behavior is generative, stating "It is generative because it weaves an influx of new experiences, references, and often highly fetishized jokes into a collective *us*. Once that, in turn, recontextualizes content, engenders subsequent laughter, and contributes to an even deeper sense of collective identity," (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 99).

Phillips and Milner also point out that if it creates an *us*, it also creates a *them*, (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 99). In this case, that *them* is being actively mocked in a highly racialized and discriminatory mode in what is supposed to be a community and space of play. While we're seeing constitutive humor, we're also seeing what Nakamura would characterize as a reinforcement of American imperial and colonial values through the online space, which attempt to reinforce new borders in cyberspace through the same discriminatory modes of the out-of-game world (Nakamura, 2002: 44). And in these replicative discriminatory and racist modes of thought, the official action of the company responsible for managing the game is to take a figure like SirActionSlacks and give him an even wider audience through official channels of DOTA 2 spectatorship, thereby validating his earlier work and the players who find it humorous, instead of supporting or validating the players who are harmed by it, or curating a culture or play space where this kind of humor is left in the gutter rather than being the norm for in-game exchanges.



## **“James is an Ass” and the Legitimization of the DOTA 2 Subreddit**

This next point of analysis further highlights Valve’s curious approach to community curation and their e-sports brand, and how their focus on the e-sports scene influences the dispositive. The DOTA 2 e-sports scene is centered on their largest yearly tournament, known as The International (TI for short). However, there are also several other high-profile events known as Majors held throughout the year by third-party organizers, but broadcast through the game’s official channels including Twitch.tv.<sup>34</sup> These events feature many of the same teams competing at the TI tournament and offer a sizeable prize pool of 3 million USD. These are presented with high production values as official e-sports products. The last Major, held in Kiev in 2017 [?], was reported to have a peak viewership of 5, 249, 343 viewers, with over 4.5 million of those views coming from China.<sup>35</sup> It is also worth noting that across all Major events, China fields the largest number of professional players per tournament. In the case of the Kiev major, 24 of the tournament’s participants were Chinese, quadrupling the next highest country’s representation of 6.<sup>36</sup>

This brings us to 2016’s Shanghai major, which precipitated the legitimization of Reddit by Valve. Like all Majors, the Shanghai major was an anticipated event among the DOTA 2 community. However, after the event began, there were a few obvious problems with the organization and broadcast of the event. Comments came flooding-in on the DOTA 2 community forum on Steam and on the DOTA 2 subreddit. One poster in a thread titled “SHANGHAI MAJOR = EMBARRASSMENT” made the following remark on the quality of the Twitch stream and the event, stating “It is already mega delayed, but really, I don’t get it how production of this tournament, is so low at every aspect, and they had months to prepare, its simply so lame... At least matches are good and dota is good, but everything else will be remembered like worst DOTA 2 MAJOR Tournament so far!”<sup>37</sup>

The poor reception to the early days of the event led Valve CEO Gabe Newell to make a now-legendary post regarding the event on the DOTA 2 subreddit. The targets of Gabe’s fury were the production company behind the event, and more notably the person brought on to host the Major, James ‘2GD’ Harding. Gabe Newell’s post reads as follows, emphasis mine:

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<sup>34</sup> [http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Dota\\_Major\\_Championships](http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Dota_Major_Championships) (accessed February 7th, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> <https://esc.watch/tournaments/dota2/kiev-major-2017> (Accessed February 8th, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> [http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Kiev\\_Major/2017#Country\\_Representation](http://liquipedia.net/dota2/Kiev_Major/2017#Country_Representation) (Accessed February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> <http://steamcommunity.com/app/570/discussions/0/412448792346276571/?ctp=2#c412448792346769829> (accessed February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

“Two Things:

- 1) James. We’ve had issues with James at previous events. Some Valve people lobbied to bring him back for Shanghai, feeling that he deserved another chance. That was a mistake. *James is an ass, and we won’t be working with him again.*
  
- 2) *As long as we’re firing people*, we are also firing the production company that we’ve been working with on the Shanghai Major. They will be replaced, and we hope to get this turned around before the main event.”<sup>38</sup>

Gabe’s post had several notable effects on the community. Most visibly, the post took the DOTA 2 community by storm. His glib tone and, in hindsight, almost Trumpian remarks of course led to the kinds of humor the DOTA 2 community is known for. “\_\_\_\_\_ is an ass and we won’t be working with them again” and “fired” became popular phrases to see in the dispositive and in-game.



Image 2.10. Inspirational quote parody posted in response to Gabe Newell’s comment.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/47sc46/update\\_from\\_the\\_shanghai\\_major/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/47sc46/update_from_the_shanghai_major/) (accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> <https://imgur.com/t5N4453> (accessed February 7th, 2018).

More interesting however, is how the community was left to speculate about why James was fired, citing his lack of professionalism, pressure from the third-party tournament organizer, and offensive sense of humor. James, not unlike SirActionSlacks, was brought on board specifically because of his personality and sense of humor that appeals to some elements of the DOTA 2 community yet was fired in this instance by the individual with the highest authority in the company, in a public forum, without more clarification than “James is an Ass.” This left the player base unable to reconcile with the fact that personalities would be brought on to do what they’re known within the community for doing, then be dismissed when they deliver exactly that product. In a 17-page statement released by James, he notes that a person informed him behind the scenes that he was fired for being disrespectful towards the players and referring to one player as another’s “bottom bitch.”<sup>40</sup> However, Gabe Newell’s solution demonstrates an incredible inconsistency in the way Valve intends to represent their game. Giving his own volatile and inflammatory response to James Harding’s actions, all the while continuing to bring in talent and produce segments that promote this standard for communication through the community encourages the community to act in accordance with the actions set out by the CEO of the company. It also echoes the kinds of inflammatory interaction that occurs in-game.

Finally, Gabe’s post legitimized Reddit as the primary platform for communicating with Valve. Gabe Newell seldom makes public statements on any online platform, including steam. In the aftermath of the event, on the Steam community forums for DOTA 2, players were instructing other players to migrate to Reddit to find out what had happened with the Shanghai Major.<sup>42</sup> Gabe Newell’s intervention with the displeasure over the Shanghai Major revealed that there was a direct connection from the DOTA 2 subreddit directly to the highest position within the company that manages the game and all the systems present therein. Yet it is important to note that the DOTA 2 subreddit has only 402,552 subscribers of a game with over 12 million players.<sup>43</sup> The DOTA 2 subreddit in contrast to the DOTA 2

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<sup>40</sup> James Harding, “James is an Ass,”

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1B061Rs4gw4zkCec35Q5v2r576e\\_Jd6pJfrT\\_5\\_GZ74I/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1B061Rs4gw4zkCec35Q5v2r576e_Jd6pJfrT_5_GZ74I/edit) (accessed February 8th, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> After researching the incident I speculate that James’ firing actually has to do with a comment he made regarding pornography and Chinese censorship laws, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVerBZfwWAs>). Given the importance of the high viewer numbers from China, the overwhelming contribution of Chinese players to DOTA 2’s e-sports product and Valve’s bottom-line, and the fact that the event was being hosted in China, it is reasonable that Valve would want to preemptively curb any controversy from James’ comments that could offend any of the groups that contribute to DOTA 2’s successful and lucrative e-sports product. This also helps to explain the inconsistency in the way Valve handled James’ situation relative to other DOTA 2 personalities.

<sup>42</sup> <http://steamcommunity.com/app/570/discussions/0/412448158149789919/#c412448158150128093> (Accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Figure as of February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/> (accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

community forums are also entirely English-language. The implications of this are that a small fragment of the community has more power over the game than the majority of players. Even if their comments do not result in Valve taking action, the members of the DOTA 2 subreddit are comfortable petitioning Valve through that channel as an official point of contact. The balance of power in negotiating the game space by petitioning or making demands through official channels appears heavily skewed in favor of English-language players, specifically users of the DOTA 2 subreddit. If my speculation regarding James' firing is correct, however, Chinese players have more power from an economic and fetishized position not unlike the gold farmers described in Chapter 1, as primary consumers of Valve's e-sports content. The power of each region is linked to their value to Valve as consumers or brand builders.

### **The Meta Game, New Players, and Torte De Lini**

The final point of analysis is the meta game of DOTA 2. The Meta Game describes shifting sets of norms within the game that dictate the best ways to play. As has already been described, the Meta Game is influenced by the happenings in e-sports and stats in DOTABUFF and OpenDota. It is also regional and can be tied to racial, social, and skill-based markers, as was explored in chapter 1 through the concepts of "Chinese Dota" and "Ricing." The formation of the Meta Game stretches across the entire dispositive as conversations on forums, community social norms, and in-client guides also determine the Meta Game and how players respond to it. Unsurprisingly, the way players engage with the Meta Game also contributes to the instances of toxicity in-game.

DOTA 2 is both beloved and reviled because of its complexity. This poses an interesting challenge for integrating new players into the game. The new player experience is made even more stressful because new players are not always matchmade with other new players, creating a high experience and skill discrepancy among teammates in a casual matchmade game. In July 2017, Valve attempted to improve the new player experience by matchmaking new players with veteran players who have a high 'behavior score,' in casual matches.<sup>44</sup> Behavior score is a hidden metric (although it is viewable through console commands), that attempts to quantify player behavior in game. Valve has not been transparent about how behavior score is calculated, but it is likely related to the report and

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<sup>44</sup> <http://blog.dota2.com/2017/07/welcoming-new-players/> (accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

commend system in the game. Players also speculate that quitting a match before it finishes contributes to a low behavior score.<sup>45</sup>

There are two main problems with the behavior score system directly related to toxicity. The first is that the report system upon which the behavior score rating is likely based is easily manipulated. I've observed players who queue for a match in a party of 2 or 3 chain reports on a player whom they perceive to be the problem with the game, whether that player is committing any of the reportable offenses. It is also common practice for players to ask in cross-team chat for players to report their teammates, which stacks a disproportionate amount of reports on players who may not deserve them.

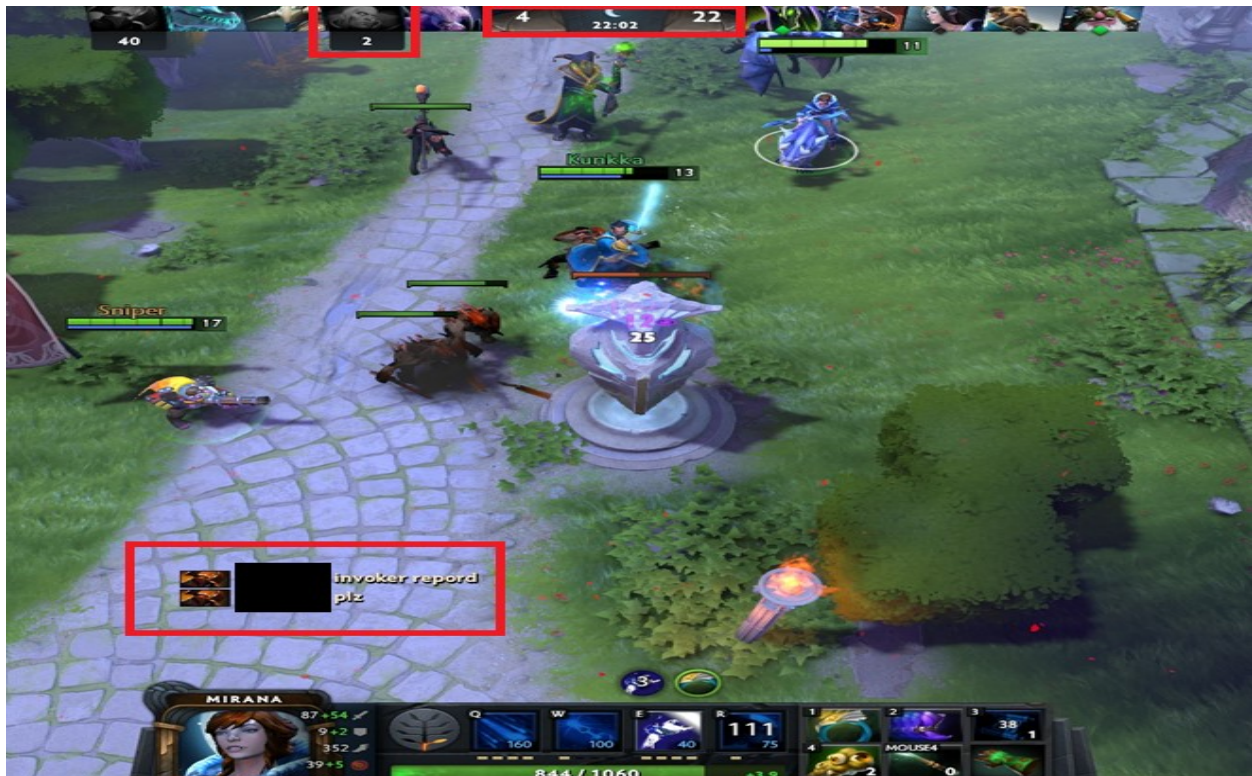


Image 2.11. A player from the losing team asks for all players to report his teammate, Invoker. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

<sup>45</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/learndota2/comments/60c7s4/what\\_actually\\_is\\_behavior\\_score/](https://www.reddit.com/r/learndota2/comments/60c7s4/what_actually_is_behavior_score/) (accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

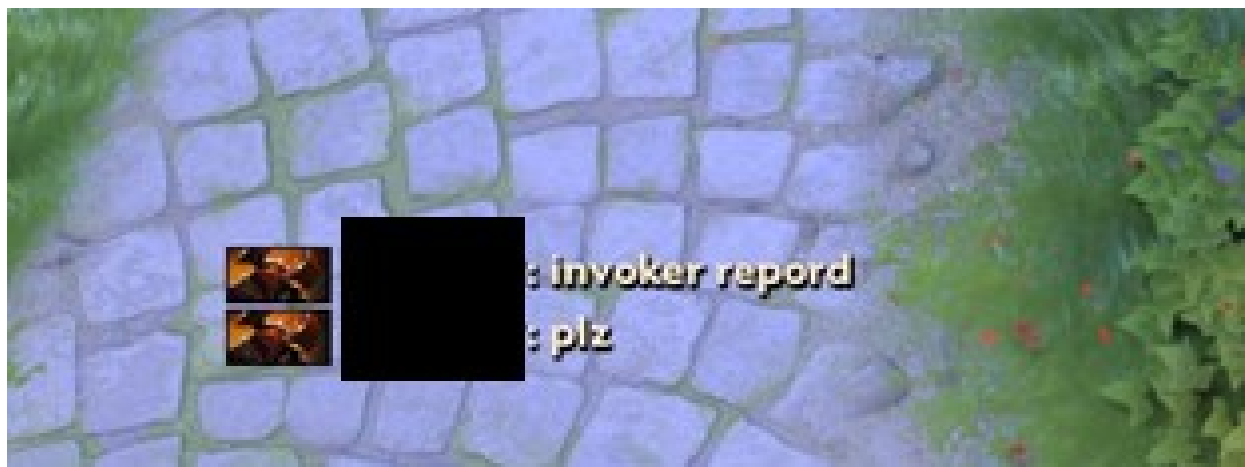


Image 2.12. Close-up of the chat. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

The player in chat (CK) is asking everyone in-game to report the Invoker player. However, the Invoker player only constituted 36% of his team's deaths, which indicates that the Invoker was not the only player having a bad game, yet the player complaining in chat decided that his play warranted a report.

On the flip side, players also sometimes request commends at the end of games. I have observed that players who exhibited behaviors that could be considered toxic are more likely to request a commend at the end of the game than players who do not. While it is unclear exactly how this affects behavior score, what *is* clear is that the mechanical system in place is easily manipulated through the social mechanisms of the game, and that the manipulation of that system is pervasive, which calls into question the effectiveness of splitting new players from those who are the most likely to lash out in-game.

The second issue with using behavior score, is that in instances where it does work, veteran players can feel punished by being matchmade with new players. As a player with the highest possible behavior score, I have felt a great deal of frustration when being randomly paired with teammates who don't understand even the simplest game concepts. While I am more likely to give advice than lash out once I realize they are new players, it creates an atmosphere where it is easy to react negatively and vocally because new players exhibit a lot of inexplicable behavior in-game that is not always easily distinguishable from trolling or griefing gameplay. Another player on the DOTA 2 subreddit recounts their experience and regret over how they carried themselves when playing with a new player: "Seemed pretty normal build. However, whenever sniper or void hit him, first thing he did was running away. He would have 10% hp, pretty much guaranteed he's dead and still he chose to run away. I was pretty sure he would have killed them both if he stood there and right click. He processed to die 4 times in 10 minutes. I then triggered my inner keyboard warrior, I flamed him. 'wtf you max third skill why did you

run?!?!,' 'damn noob' and so on."<sup>46</sup> They continue, "Seriously, fuck me man. It's only Monday and I'm treating people like shit already. Sorry Huskar (the new player's character) and sorry to all the new players that just joined this game."<sup>47</sup>

The Reddit poster's experience is not an uncommon one to have with new players (although his admission of remorse is less usual). The new player matchmaking system, in a competitive game like DOTA 2, lays a foundation for even more friction between players on a team. Add in the fact that these players also come from across cultures, regions, and lingual backgrounds, and what remains is an extremely volatile matchmaking system. However, given that this is the flawed and hostile system available, what we are left with to consider at present is how are new players learning the complex systems of the game? As one subject of this study did, some new players engage with various elements of the dispositive, such as e-sports, and once again as Georgen, Duncan, and Cook explained, attempt to embody the gameplay and personalities of the professional players they watch, and learn their idea of the meta game, which contributes to this cycle of elitism and hostility towards new players.

However, there is one additional way that players learn the various hero mechanics in the game, and that is through the in-game guide system. The system allows players to create and share item and skill builds, and to write explanatory text for those choices in-game. When shared, other players can pull up a guide which makes it easier for new players to select those items and skills over the course of the game, cutting down on both the effort it takes to manage the individual heroes and the number of decisions a new player must make. For many years the system was consistently out of date, as guides became obsolete but remained in the system because there was no auto-clear function. There was also no quality control. However, sometime in 2015 a third-party DOTA 2 community member, Torte De Lini (Torte), took it upon himself to create a guide for every single hero in the game. When a hero is selected by a player, they have the option of opening a guide for the hero, with Torte's being the highest rated and most recent across the board. Torte does not work for Valve, and instead uses a crowd-funding model to support the time-intensive project, however many assume that he is an official Valve employee as he was a caster during the new player stream of T17.<sup>48</sup> He does, however, have an incredible presence in the game and the greatest in-game impact on the meta game as millions of players use his builds. One newer player with whom I played several matches for this study would use the Torte De Lini guides for all his heroes. When he would ask me for advice as a more experienced

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<sup>46</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/7oy4tr/played\\_with\\_a\\_new\\_player\\_today\\_felt\\_damn\\_guilty/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/7oy4tr/played_with_a_new_player_today_felt_damn_guilty/) (accessed February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018),

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.patreon.com/Torte> (Accessed February 8th, 2018).

player, if I ever gave him advice that wasn't in the Torte De Lini guide, he would exclaim "but that's not in the Torte guide," as though Torte's guides were gospel for how to play the game. What this shows is not only Torte's presence overall, but his impact on the game for newer players as a point of connection for learning.



Image 2.13. A Torte De Lini guide for the Techies hero. It has a 91% approval rating and has been played across 3.63 million matches. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

Torte's presence makes the final dispositive-related event of this chapter even more remarkable. During a third-party broadcast on Twitch.tv for a minor DOTA 2 tournament held in January 2018, the production team had a special guest from the National Football League, Blake Martinez, who tied for the lead in tackles during the 2017 NFL season.<sup>49</sup> The presence of a top-tier athlete at the event seemed like it was leading to a legitimizing link between sports and e-sports as Martinez revealed that he was a DOTA 2 player during college during an interview segment.<sup>50</sup> However, things took a turn when Blake revealed that his friends had made him an account under the name "pussyfucker69." His story was met with laughter at the event and quickly spread throughout the dispositive from Twitch.tv, to Reddit, to game's news websites. Most interestingly, it also spread into the game at one of the least expected locations. The guide system displays the username of the creator as it appears live, not as it was when the guide was submitted, and in a case of by-now familiar DOTA 2 memory, Torte decided to change his user name to that of Blake Martinez's former account.

<sup>49</sup> <https://twitter.com/nflnetwork/status/949324793563766784> (accessed February 7th, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> <https://clips.twitch.tv/UgliestTacitTrayPastaThat> (accessed February 7th, 2018)



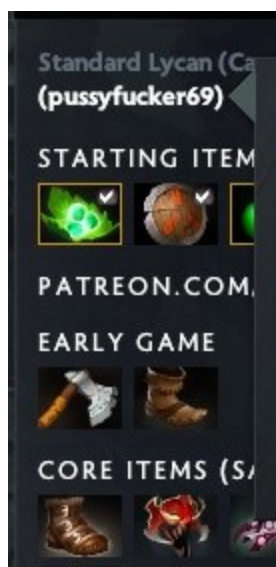


Image 2.14. Torte's temporary moniker.<sup>51</sup>

For two days, Torte's guides were all listed as pussyfucker69, thereby imbuing the new player experience with sexism, what could be called toxic masculinity, and a great deal of confusion. As a veteran player who did not see the Blake Martinez interview before playing a match that day, I found myself at a loss when I pulled up the guide menu, and even with all my experience with DOTA 2 and its community, was still taken aback by the name and its high-profile placement within the client. I was not alone, as several Redditors commented on the event, with one stating "valve next patch 'sets guide by tortedelini to always say tortedelini'" and another commenting "[Not Gunna Lie] it actually threw me for a loop in my game as [Shadow Fiend] today lol."<sup>52</sup> Here we see a dispositive-based event flow across the entire dispositive and imbuing even the most disconnected corner of the game with its cultural make-up. It had the power to shock Redditing DOTA 2 players, who face the most grueling elements of the community daily. This facet of DOTA 2's culture can at best be mitigated but is ultimately inescapable as part of the gameplay experience, even by the players least connected to the platforms that make up the DOTA 2 media dispositive.

<sup>51</sup> Screenshot taken from Reddit, <https://i.redd.it/bafwav0mwl801.jpg> (accessed February 7th, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/7opjom/thank\\_you\\_pussyfucker69\\_for\\_the\\_beginner\\_guides/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/7opjom/thank_you_pussyfucker69_for_the_beginner_guides/) (accessed February 8th, 2018).

## **What the DOTA 2 Media Dispositive Means for Toxicity**

These events have several implications for how we should understand toxicity going forward. The SirActionSlacks video positions constitutive humor against racialized and discriminatory discourses in play, across the community, and through the matchmaking system. Toxicity in its racialized mode flows throughout the dispositive through Valve's game mechanics, the community response to those mechanics, and the figures it selects (through an unclear process) to represent the game. SirActionSlacks' video, in addition to everything else it conveys about DOTA 2, also represents a sense of entitlement through the way it refers to Valve's matchmaking algorithm. English-speaking players believe they have the right to play in-game without players from other regions. Slacks' sentiment is repeated ad nauseam in game and over Reddit, with little consideration over Valve's continued approach to not region-lock to give players from other regions better queue times and better latency during matches. The entitlement of opinion and perspective on behalf of these players contributes to the negative social experience and the friction between players who speak different languages in-game.

While the 'James is an ass' fiasco also reinforces the above point, it also shows how power over the in-game and community experience is distributed unevenly across the community. Being engaged with various segments of the dispositive appears to skew the power relationship in one's favor. While Chinese players appear to have the most economic influence over the game through their engagement with its e-sports product, the lines of communication to the highest tiers of the company are reserved for an English-speaking audience on a forum that bears much of the same tone as found in-game. From this example we see that toxic behavior is curated from the highest possible position as Gabe Newell fires a renegade e-sports host and production company in very trollish language.

Valve disproportionately listens (or at least gives the appearance of listening) to a small percentage of the player base when making gameplay or mechanical decisions. This creates a group of predominantly English-language players who believe they have the greatest impact over the mechanical features of the game and embody that position during actual gameplay and discussions about gameplay. This leads to an environment that suits a very small percentage of players and creates a negative or disproportionately untailored experience for players from different cultural, lingual or racial backgrounds (or those not plugged into the dispositive elements).

Finally, the Meta game shapes the earliest points of contact for new players through its dispositive-based construction. While the meta game seems to be a purely mechanical and data-based

formulation through the OpenDota and DOTABUFF websites, it is also very socially constructed and reinforced, with certain community members, most notably Torte De Lini, serving as curators of that gameplay experience. When considering the example of 'ricing' in chapter 1, it is also a social construction that highlights cultural difference in approaches to the game.

While we are yet unable to say what toxicity means for individual players, toxicity as it describes the game is not determined solely by one players' negative experiences with one or more of these aspects of play. What I've described in this chapter allows us to consider the day-to-day or baseline experiences of all players, with attention to the ambivalence in the reception to these phenomena. What my account of the dispositive lays bare is the extreme likelihood that any given player will run into something they don't like in the toxic mode that was established in Chapter 1, which can be viewed as pervasive and systemic.

However, toxicity is understood differently on an individual level because different players believe that different things are toxic, as briefly encountered in Crawford's description of League of Legends and through the contrast between constitutive humor and racism and sexism. If taken holistically, there are at least two opposing perspectives clearly visible throughout the examples: The in-group and the out-group perspectives. However, so far, all I've revealed is a binary view, which is insufficient for using the DOTA 2 community to more clearly define what toxicity means. Therefore, the next chapter focuses heavily on individual relationships to the concept of toxicity through the DOTA 2 in-game experience. This will shift the binary perspective to one of a spectrum and provide a more comprehensive data set for understanding what toxicity means in-game. This chapter has provided a better framework for understanding exactly what kinds of behaviors and culture players are immersed in during play, which sets the foundation for exploring in-game events with less need to link each happening back to the dispositive. Going forward, it should be clear that the in-game experience is inseparable from that of the dispositive for all but the smallest subset of players, but that players perceive and respond to the environment and behaviors the environment allows in different ways. This creates vastly different definitions of toxicity as it relates to DOTA 2.

### **Chapter 3 – DOTA 2 Systems, Experiences, and Player Interpretations of Toxicity**

This chapter will deal with the experiences that players have throughout the DOTA 2 client. This most clearly refers to what happens in matches of DOTA 2 between players, but also addresses the game systems in which those behaviors are conducted, and the way the in-game systems help to shape the toxic environment for players. This is an original approach to studying toxicity because most prior studies on toxicity in games focus on player behavior rather than the interaction between players and in-game systems. While conducting the research for this chapter, I discovered that the players I interviewed were very engaged with several the game systems and viewed them as causes of, and at times excuses for what they identified as toxicity. As such, this chapter integrates players' in-game experiences and opinions of what constitutes toxic behavior alongside an analysis the systems that players engage with when they play the game.

My intention for this chapter was to collect interview data from players who self-identified as toxic and to compare that data with my own ethnographic and participant observation data. Over the course of the project, I discovered that DOTA 2 players, even those who maybe didn't identify as toxic were not so eager to share their experiences and motivations, even anonymously. The most successful of my recruitment posts was met with its fair share of trolling, and not a single person came forward to participate from those posts. However, through my network of friends, in-game friends, and colleagues, several DOTA 2 players expressed interest in participating and contacted me, however the initial direction of this chapter changed shape throughout the research project.

In total, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews between January and April 2018. Of those 7 players, 3 self-identified as toxic, and a 4<sup>th</sup> player was unable to determine whether he was toxic. 4 of the participants identify as men and three identify as women. In addition to those 7 interviews, two of the players agreed to participate in a longer participant observation portion of the study. One of those players was a new DOTA 2 player who agreed to go through the DOTA 2 new player experience to uncover how that experience integrated new players into the game, what that experience felt like for a new player, and how a new player might encounter toxicity upon entering the game. The second participant observation study followed a returning DOTA 2 player over an eight-month period (roughly 100 games of DOTA 2) to see how their experiences in-game and opinions of toxicity changed over time. Additionally, this interview and participant observation data is supplemented by my own ethnographic data taken from 200 matches of DOTA 2 played between September 2017 and April 2018. All participants and players observed through the ethnographic portion of the study will remain

anonymous. Each have either selected or been given a randomly generated user name. Match data and chat logs are publicly recoverable through the game client's replay feature and the OpenDota website.

This chapter will address the participant observation data first, beginning with user FragileShep's first forays into DOTA 2 from their first impressions, the tutorial process, and their first game with real players. Following this, a recounting of FetaKing's 6 month return to DOTA 2 will outline the gamut of what kinds of behaviors and discourses players encounter in-game, and what it feels like to engage with the game's systems over time. Because I was also a player in these participant observation sessions, this is the section I will supplement most with my own ethnographic data. Finally, I will close the chapter with an analysis of player and viewer perspectives on toxicity: Two self-identified toxic players, two who do not consider themselves toxic, and one spectator of professional DOTA 2. The overall analysis will highlight what players deem to be toxic, how they view themselves relative to that toxicity, and to demonstrate how the game's culture as established in chapter 2 interacts with game systems to manifest multiple forms of toxicity.

### **FragileShep Frolics into the Toxic Swamp**

In July 2017 Valve changed the way they incorporated new players through matchmaking in DOTA 2's unranked play. According to Valve's blog post on the change, "Today's update also introduces a feature that matches new players against players with consistently high behavior scores. It is especially important for a new player to have a good social experience while they are first trying to learn the game. The matchmaking system will now ensure that new players will play with and against appropriately-skilled players that also have a track record of good behavior."<sup>53</sup> FragileShep came to this project as an experienced gamer who was also interested in toxicity. While she had more experience with Blizzard's first-person shooter, Overwatch, she was familiar with the reputation of the MOBA genre as a toxic one and was interested to see what it was like to play a MOBA as opposed to a first-person shooter. Because she was not experienced with MOBA gameplay, it seemed like an ideal time to have a player play through DOTA 2's tutorial system to see how new players were being taught game mechanics and integrated into the game. I myself am a veteran player with over 1700 lifetime matches of DOTA 2 and a high behavior score, which Valve's blog post identifies as an ideal candidate for improving the new player experience. I thought an analysis of this matchmaking system from a new player's perspective would provide an important point of contrast to my own experiences with the system.

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<sup>53</sup> <http://blog.dota2.com/2017/07/welcoming-new-players/> (accessed April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

We began by creating a new Steam and DOTA 2 account so FragileShep would get the full new player experience. Upon entering the game for the first time, it asks new players how familiar they are with similar games, to which FragileShep selected the “I’m a beginner” option.

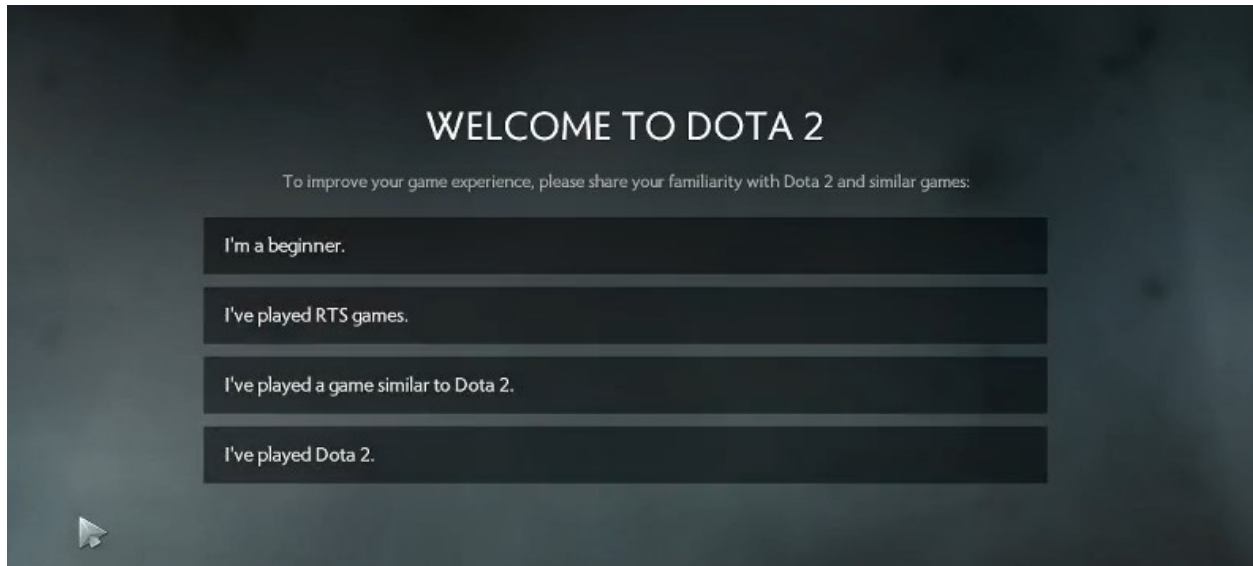


Image 3.1. The first time DOTA 2 opens it asks you to identify your level of expertise with MOBAs. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

The game then suggests the new player enter a basic mechanics tutorial which covers a number of fundamental game mechanics, like purchasing items, moving the camera, combat, and leveling and using character abilities. Several text boxes which explain the various mechanics of the game appear on the screen while the player is controlling a single hero with an entire map to themselves.

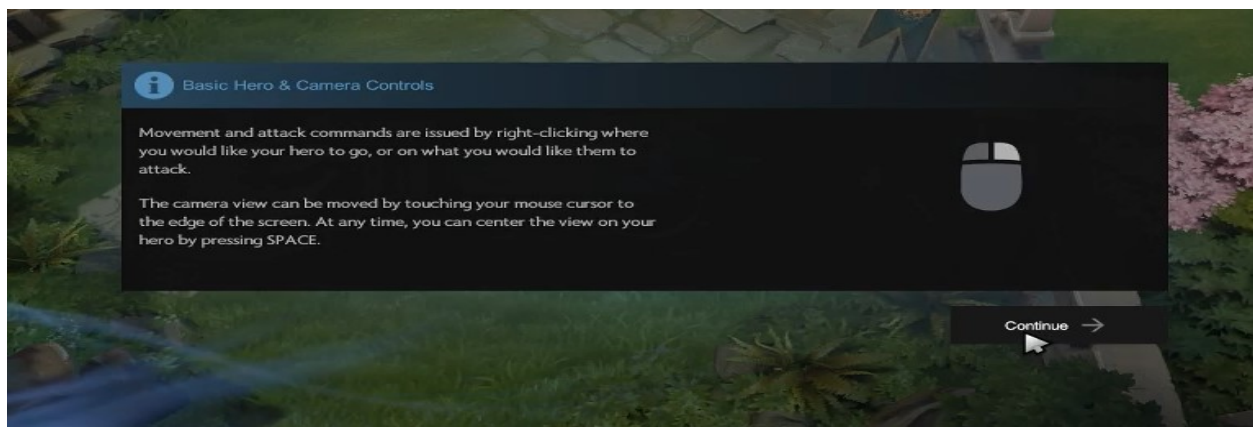


Image 3.2. A Tutorial Pop-Up Window from FragileShep’s first bot game explaining how to move, attack, and move the camera. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

In a few short minutes, many of these text boxes appear one after another interrupting the flow of gameplay, attempting to explain these game mechanics purely through text. Already, FragileShep was overwhelmed because when she was attempting to apply what the tutorials were telling her to do, she was bombarded with one text box after another. The overall goal of this tutorial is to kill a single tower, one of several objectives that must be achieved to win a match. Typically, these towers would have enemy resistance in the form of other players, but in this tutorial, FragileShep and her AI creep (little minions that run straight into the opposing team) army were able to rush down the opposing tower in a little over 5 minutes using only the most basic abilities, without needing to internalize any of the mechanics the tutorial was attempting to explain.

Following this first match, the game suggests the new player plays 'guided bot matches' with an AI team against AI opponents. These are intended 'to explain the game step-by-step' according to the game client. However, once she entered the first guided bot match, there were no more tutorials for how to play. She found herself going from a simple tutorial with one hero on the map to a full 5v5 match with no assistance. While she wasn't playing against real players, the added pressure of enemy AIs provided a significant leap of focus, which caused FragileShep to mis-click mouse buttons and forget much of what the first tutorial suggested she do. This first bot match ended in a loss after 15 minutes, with the enemy AI team having 25 kills to her team's 4. This first match was in the recently added 'Turbo' mode which is typically a faster match with some automated and simplified features. It is worth noting that each of the ten heroes in this match was entirely new, and at no point did the game attempt to teach FragileShep what any of those heroes did in the game. This match didn't include the hero from the original mechanics tutorial which would help build on the new player's prior in-game experience. Aside from her own hero which she is trying to learn, there are 36 other hero abilities that she could encounter over the course of the match and the game made no attempt to direct her to those abilities or even indicate what kinds of roles those heroes might fill as either strong 'tank' heroes or vulnerable 'carry' or 'support' heroes. The tutorial vacillates between providing tons of information at once and providing no information at all. Perhaps a more stream-lined tutorial that combines a basic mechanics tutorial while facing off against a set of opposing heroes in a one versus one gauntlet could introduce players to both basic mechanical concepts and hero abilities in a more effective manner than what FragileShep experienced. While I am criticizing the game for having both too much and too little information, I am doing so because this approach clearly frustrated FragileShep and in her opinion failed at preparing her to play the game with human teammates or opponents.

The second tutorial match was also in turbo mode. In this match, now playing a long-range character known as Sniper, FragileShep encountered additional mechanics that were not explained to her. At one point, she was shooting a creep and encountered a “miss” notification, to which she responded, ‘why did I miss.’ I explained to her that when firing uphill you gain a passive miss chance to all your attacks, a mechanic that I believe is never actually explained clearly in-game, and that I only know because of third-party DOTA 2 videos that I’ve watched. In this game, she killed her first enemy hero, and although she seemed exhausted by the game at this point in the session, she cheered when she landed the killing blow. However, when I asked her moments after this kill how she would describe the new player experience, she said “I would use the term ‘hell on earth, and not lightly. If I were to jump into a match [with real players] now, I think it would be enough to infuriate [them].” This statement was perhaps an omen, as after the match ended in another defeat we encountered a hiccup with the in-game client. From the post-match screen, I direct FragileShep to hit the leave match button. Unable to locate it, she eventually navigates back to the DOTA 2 home screen but is unable to locate the next step of the tutorials. I direct her to try the ‘learn’ tab at the top of the screen which leads her back to the game-end screen of the match that had just completed. From there she finds the ‘leave match’ button, but it brings her back to the home screen again. Upon clicking the ‘learn’ tab a second time, it returns her to the game-end screen, which earns a befuddled and appalled reaction from FragileShep. Upon hitting the ‘leave match’ button again we return to the home screen, and I ask her to press the big ‘play dota’ button, which initiates matches to see what the game suggests she do next.



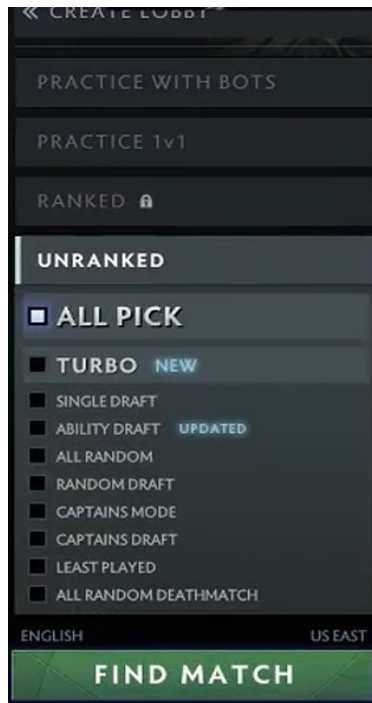


Image 3.3. The screen where players choose what kind of match to play. Here 'ALL PICK' is selected by default. Dota 2 Screenshot.

By default, unranked All Pick is selected even though the practice with bots option is available, and after some discussion we agree that this is what she would play next being unable to navigate back to the tutorial herself and being unimpressed with what the tutorial is teaching her overall.

While attempting to navigate these menus, a non-sequitur discussion is taking place on the local Montreal, QC chat room that DOTA 2 opted her into by default due to her region.



Image 3.4. In-client Local Chat Screenshot. This chat is visible while waiting for matchmaking to find players a match. Dota 2 Screenshot.

I bring up this incident to point out two things about the DOTA 2 new player experience. First, even when attempting to play matches without other real players, the game client funnels you into chat

automatically. In only approximately one hour of play, in which mere minutes were spent in the menu where this chat is visible, a culturally-directed discourse is occurring. Even outside of the matches, this culture is unavoidable. Second, these discourses change the expectations for players, with FragileShep noticeably face-palming at the chat, and becoming increasingly unconfident in the outcomes of her future in-game encounters with other players. To cut down on the stress and to allow some of the tutorial to sink in, we agree to save the real match for another session.

Before moving on to her first real match, I want to highlight two specific issues with the tutorial experience. The first issue is that the game fails at communicating the basics from FragileShep's perspective. Even though she clicked the 'I'm a beginner' option in the opening menu, the speed of the tutorials and what it demanded of her as a new player did not ease her into the game. According to FragileShep, "The teaching basics is lacking. I don't know if that's because they rely on throwing you in the deep end. If I sat here without you pointing things out, I would just be lost. This was deeply infuriating at points." Indeed, the game doesn't direct new players or force new players to engage with several important aspects of the game, like item descriptions or hero abilities, and assumes they will learn them on their own time. Of this, FragileShep remarked, "It feels like the game is trying to cut out a particular player-type, like players who aren't interested in that sort of thing just won't want to play." The tutorial section of the game, as FragileShep identifies, seems to be culling certain kinds of players from the game, something that Chris Paul found to be true in his analysis of EVE Online's grueling tutorial experience, which I will revisit later in this chapter (Paul, 2011: 24.). Players who would prefer to learn the game through an integrated tutorial, or who come to the game without the background knowledge of a spectator or MOBA veteran are at a huge disadvantage compared to those who go out and engage with tutorial videos, made by those who are already firmly rooted in the game's culture.

Her second issue is with her AI teammates in the bot games. Compared to prior experiences with games, she felt as though the bots that are stand-ins for normal players were not useful, and not informative. FragileShep noted "You kind of rely on the bots to lead you, at least that's been my experience in like, Overwatch, the bots you play against would be gentler to teach you the mechanics of the game, but here, they're just there to fill the spaces. As a sniper, I should be at the back, but then I'm just looking at them like, where are you going?" Indeed, the AI doesn't attempt to demonstrate any semblance of a correct way to play the game. Their movements are erratic, and I anticipate that any player who imitates the bot movements in a real match of DOTA 2 would be shamed or flamed into another dimension. Rather than a teaching experience, the tutorial resembles something that new players are supposed to grind out until they learn, of their own time and effort, the basics of the game,

until such a point when those new players have themselves identified the moment when they are competent and comfortable enough to play with real players. What's more, is that the tutorial offers no insight into strategy, which is another layer of game competence that players are left to discover on their own either through hundreds of hours of play with real opponents or through third-party and community-based sources.

Before her first match with humans, FragileShep indicated she was extremely nervous about the upcoming experience. Eight seconds into the hero-selection screen prior to the start of the match, the first line of chat FragileShep experienced in multiplayer, was a cross-chat message that included a racial slur. To our surprise however, the rest of the match was fairly tame in terms of toxicity. FragileShep was forced to pick a hero she had never played before in the support role. While learning that hero, FragileShep was noticeably out of place on the team. She was having very slow reaction times and was still struggling to position herself correctly around the map and to use her hero skills at the correct moments. One player on her team however, seemed to target FragileShep for their play. In DOTA 2 there is a 'ping' command that can be issued by alt+clicking a location on the map. This command makes a chime sound and creates a small blip on the mini-map and an exclamation point on the physical map that fades after a moment. Strategically, this can be used to issue a quick warning or direction at a crucial time when it would take too long to type a message or use voice chat. However, it is common practice among some players to 'spam ping', whereby they repeatedly alt+click on a player which replicates the chime sound and visual indicator to the point of annoyance. While it isn't always clear what the 'spam ping' means, it is most often read as a form of hostile communication or flaming on the part of the pinger. In this game, the 'spam pinger' frequently targeted FragileShep with these pings in moments when they could not possibly be used to give meaningful direction, such as moments after she died from being out of position. Interestingly, FragileShep was completely unaware of what those pings meant because through the tutorials the game had not taught her how to use them. She assumed they were part of another hero's ability set. Without the knowledge of the game, she couldn't read those pings as a form of griefing or toxicity which many other players tend to do.

The match ended in a loss for FragileShep's team, but overall it was a less toxic experience than FragileShep and I both anticipated. Considering the match started with a racial slur and had someone who was abusing in-game communication, it says a lot about what we both expect from a match of DOTA 2 or in-game interaction in general. After the match FragileShep noted "I definitely psyched myself up to like, I thought when I messed up I was going to get a lot more grief, but it was just very quiet in the game chat. I was initially not enjoying it. I was just thinking, when is it going to start? When

am I going to have to deal with people yelling at me?” This apprehension comes from her general experience of interacting in online multiplayer games. Christopher Paul cites games’ journalist Andrew Todd’s article “Video Games, Misogyny, and Terrorism: A Guide to Assholes” to succinctly sum up the pervasiveness of negative experiences online. According to Todd, “The Video Gaming Internet can be a horrible place. Hiding behind infinite fake twitter accounts and message-board anonymity are some of the worst examples of humanity. The abuse gushes forth in such torrents that reporting tweets becomes almost useless. [...] There is a culture of harassment, abuse, and bigotry in the rotten core of multiplayer gaming; it has been allowed or even encouraged to fester by developers, and it has created some of the most toxic individuals on the internet,” (Andrew Todd, 2014) (Christopher Paul, 2018: 71).

The game’s reputation and her prior experiences with the chat had primed her to expect the worst out of the game. In her study of EVE Online’s non-players, Kelly Bergstrom identifies that prior knowledge and opinions about a game can influence a potential player’s choice to not play the game. Bergstrom also found that the respondents who cited this prior knowledge about the game mirrored the opinions found in games journalism (Bergstrom, 2015: 125-126). Most importantly, Bergstrom notes that EVE’s tutorial was similarly feature-incomplete, which Christopher Paul (2011) highlighted as a purposeful move on the part of CCP games, the developers of EVE Online. Christopher Paul notes, “The tutorial and the way it introduces new players to EVE are at the center of how the game functions rhetorically to push players away,” (Paul, 2011: 24). FragileShep was admittedly echoing the sentiments found in games journalism about DOTA 2, and it set the course for her entire journey as a new player. Unsurprisingly, FragileShep also clued into the fact that it appears the tutorial was designed to filter out players who are not willing to do a certain amount of extra work to integrate into the game as a player and as a community member.

One last thing to note about this match, was the discrepancy in experience between FragileShep and the other players. FragileShep was on her first match, but aside from one other player on the opposing team, each other player in the match was between 70 and 300 matches played. Already this is a significant discrepancy in terms of player experience. As a player who has consistently had a high behavior score, I have likewise found myself paired with many new players after the update, to my great discontent and frustration. It is rare for me to check a player’s profile level and match history before a match begins to determine how experienced a player would be. To do so is relatively time-consuming and cumbersome from within the client and is only possible once the pick phase of the game has begun, so it is unlikely that many players check these statistics at the start of a match. To do so would take time away from the hero-selection screen, where the pace of the game is set. Instead, players rely on the

matchmaking system to play reasonably balanced matches. However, because of the behavior score change, I found myself in matches with players who appeared to be engaging in trolling which I identified through their odd and ineffective use of their abilities, being vastly out of position which caused them die and give excess gold to the enemy team, or AFKing (leaving the keyboard or minimizing the window so the player-controlled hero doesn't move). During the matches themselves I believed these players were intentionally griefing our team, and at times responded to their gameplay in chat with frustrated comments, which is not usually the way I engage with teammates. However, upon the end of these matches I would check the player profiles and noticed that they were low-level accounts, with some players on their first match, and realized that even though I have over 1700 lifetime matches of DOTA 2, that I was being paired with people in their first matches. The way these players conducted themselves in-game and the impact upon my own feelings and gameplay was often indistinguishable from players who intentionally grief<sup>54</sup>

Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun found a similar ambiguity in their study on griefers in Taiwan. Lin and Sun found that "the only way to identify a griefer is when he or she comes out," (Lin and Sun, 2005: 11). They note that players who do not self-identify as griefers often end up griefing unintentionally, and without the knowledge that they have grieved at all. The same behaviors are being committed by those who identify as griefers and by those who do not, but Lin and Sun found that those who do not identify as griefers are actually less self-aware of their own actions in game and stigmatize other groups of players (young players in the case of Lin and Sun) as the primary griefers (Lin and Sun: 9-11).

Returning to Philips and Milner, I would like to point out the ambivalence of these in-game interactions and how the fundamental ambivalence of online interaction contributes to what we call toxicity. It would seem unintuitive to call a new player playing to the best of their abilities toxic, but in those matches with new players I absolutely interpreted what those players did as toxic play. Similarly, the 'spam pinger' from FragileShep's match was communicating in a way that many players would characterize as toxic, but they were doing so in response to what they identified as sub-par play or what they possibly read as trolling that was ruining their game experience. Ironically enough, as a player with the highest possible behavior score, I considered deliberately lowering my behavior score, which would require behaving in ways that would likely be viewed as toxic, in order to be matched with fewer new players because I anticipated that quality of my teammates would actually improve. This particular

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<sup>54</sup> A secondary issue with this system is that players who have been suspended or banned on a primary account for toxic behavior can liberally make a new level 1 account because the game is free. When being matched with a new player there is a chance that it is actually a player toxic enough to have earned a ban or suspension on an alternate account.

system of new player integration fails at creating a quality experience for both new and veteran players who have put a lot of effort in to keep their composure in many high-stress game situations. The behaviors that constitute toxicity can be difficult to read from in-game, and so far the back-end systems, including matchmaking, appear to prime players for toxic interaction. Here we saw how both the new player tutorial can lead to increased instances of toxicity by not sufficiently teaching new players or guiding new players into the game, and how this new player matchmaking impacts the experiences of veteran players by incorporating less experienced players into the same matches.

### **FetaKing and Me, a Buddy Tragicomedy**

FetaKing started playing DOTA 2 during the game's closed beta in 2012. He took a hiatus from the game in 2015 until 2017. He is also a former League of Legends player and has a lot of experience with the MOBA genre, going back to the original DOTA Warcraft III mod and its first spin-off game, Heroes of Newerth. Despite his prior experience with the genre, FetaKing felt that his return to the game had a steep learning curve, and he felt a great deal of pressure to perform well in matches. Importantly, FetaKing also freely admitted that before his hiatus, he considered himself to be a toxic player across all the games he played. He cited his time in League of Legends as particularly offensive because he and his play group would direct their toxic behavior towards both random players and long-time friends and acquaintances. In scrimmage matches where players are deliberately chosen from an in-game friends list, FetaKing and his friends would engage in what he referred to as "extreme toxicity." This toxicity escalated to flaming and language being used on a third-party voice chat program among friends, and these toxic instances carried over into his out of game friendships with these individuals. Since returning from his hiatus for this study, however, I did not witness FetaKing engaging in anything as aggressive as this behavior, although he still viewed himself as a toxic player when the study was over.

FetaKing and I played over one hundred matches over the course of eight months, from September 2017 to April 2018. This long-term participant observation component allows for a comparison between my own ethnographic and observation data and another long-term perspective. All these participant observation games were played together in unranked all-pick matchmaking; the same matchmaking bracket where I conducted the bulk of my own solo-play research. During his return to the game, FetaKing only played in duo queue, predominantly with me, but he also played four other

matches with 2 other players throughout this eight-month period. During our interview he said that he never queued for a solo match, because he has no interest in playing the game alone, and that its more fun and it feels like you have more of an impact on the game with teammates that you know. Because I had more experience with the game, FetaKing often deferred to me for advice for how to play and re-learn the game, so I was directly involved with his in-game experience. For all our matches we were communicating on a third-party voice chat. Also, despite his admittedly toxic past, he also had the highest possible behavior score in-game. Because my solo queue research did not yield noticeably different data than our duo queue, I will use this section to first outline the kinds of notable behaviors falling into a toxic mode that FetaKing and I experienced, and then compare our reactions and interpretations to those behaviors, and our overall experiences with toxicity in DOTA 2.

We both agreed that we encountered toxicity most consistently during the hero select phase. In DOTA 2, there are five main positions a player can choose to play, with each hero being suited to one of those positions. However, there is nothing before the pick screen to determine which player is going to play what hero in what role. This leaves the players to themselves to communicate through text chat and the in-client systems to build a suitable team composition.



Image 3.5. The DOTA 2 Hero Selection Screen. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

For example, at the start of most matches during the initial “ban” phase, where a small selection of heroes is removed from contention, I will type a message to my teammates indicating that I would like to play one role primarily, but I could also play a fallback role relatively well. This is not a norm among the DOTA 2 community but was something I started doing in an attempt to begin my matches with

positive, game-focused communication. This is most often met with silence on the behalf of our teammates, and the occasional trolling, as shown in image 3.6.

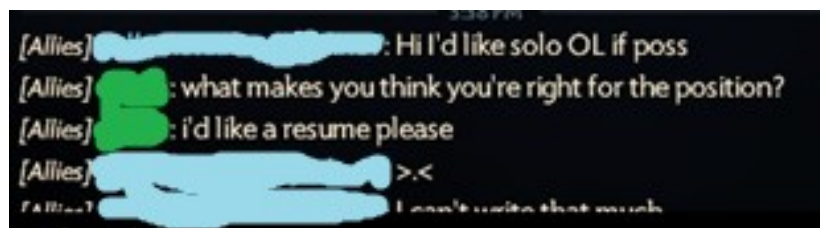


Image 3.6. A player (green) responding humorously(?) to my (blue) request to play solo in the offlane. DOTA 2 Screencap.

Over the duration of this study I began to type this message less and less because I felt as though it had no impact on what my teammates chose to play. I found that players rarely engage with the chat to strategize picks at this stage of the game, even when another player initiates the conversation. However, near the mid-way point of this participant observation study, I noticed that FetaKing began to type his preferences here in the chat as well, to indicate his preferred roles, although it was met with the same general outcome.

My familiarity with the game has made this lack of communication a manageable problem. I very rarely feel out of place on a team. I noticed that FetaKing, however, became noticeably upset when he was forced into roles that he is not comfortable with. Because he was re-learning the game, he preferred to play the same few roles across numerous matches, so he could focus on improving his gameplay in one or two key positions by practicing the same types of heroes over and over. In our interview, he reaffirmed that if he was ever put into the support role he would underperform because of stress, because he doesn't know how to play support well. He anticipated that other players would be more likely to target him with aggressive language, pings, or reports for not playing well enough, which did come to fruition. From my perspective, the most notable effect on FetaKing from these encounters was that he would become noticeably dejected from the moment the game began. Excitement for a match changed dramatically to discomfort and at times anger and frustration at the click of a teammate's mouse. As soon as his favorite positions on the team were taken by other players, he would stop communicating on voice chat, and wouldn't focus on the game. At times he would suggest that he abandon<sup>55</sup> the match to avoid spending his time playing something he didn't like. FetaKing later

<sup>55</sup> Abandoning enough matches in DOTA 2 can punish players by putting them in the low priority queue and negatively affecting behavior score. Abandons stay on an accounts behavior record forever. FetaKing was so averse to playing support that he felt the risk to his behavior score was worth it.



explained in a post-game conversation that it wasn't just that he was stuck playing support, but that other players' lack of communication and the frequency that other players ignore chat contributed to his mood when this happened.

Typed chat messages are not the only way players can communicate on the hero selection screen. In fact, most of the communication about what heroes and positions players are going to choose comes from the strategy map and the hero portraits above player names.

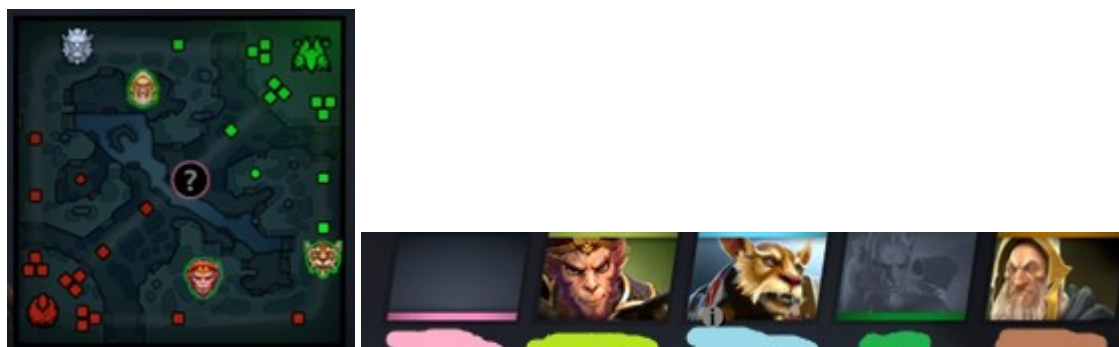


Image 3.7. The strategy map and Hero Icons during hero selection. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

The strategy map allows players to indicate which positions they are intending to play, and with what hero. To use this feature, a player must actively click on the strategy map to indicate their preferences. If that player has not selected a hero yet, it will indicate that with a question mark. At the same time, if a player has selected a hero for consideration but has not yet confirmed it, that hero portrait will be visible but greyed out, and similarly greyed out on the strategy map if that player has opted to use it.

At a glance this seems like a lot of information, but there are several ambiguities within this system, and it is easily ignored or abused. Because players are not automatically given a position or opted into the strategy map, some players rely entirely on the hero portraits to convey information.<sup>56</sup> However, the portraits alone don't convey where or how they would like to play those heroes, because some heroes are suited to multiple positions. It also doesn't specify whether they would like to play that hero with a lane partner or alone, leaving other players unsure of what to pick to make other players comfortable. It is also common practice to leave a specific hero selected but unconfirmed in the hero portrait area, which gives the impression that this hero is the one a player intends to select. However, at

<sup>56</sup> Certain heroes are often played in specific positions or in combination with other types of heroes. These norms are not explicitly stated in the client but are formed through the meta game established through the media dispositive outlined in chapter 2. When a player highlights a specific hero for selection, it sends signals to other players who are engaged with the meta game about what that player intends to do in a given match, such as whether they intend to play a carry or a support role, or which lane they intend to play.

the last moment, that player may swap to another hero and confirm the selection immediately, leaving the team with an ineffective line-up or forcing the players picking later to completely change their picks. This is what often forces players into roles they aren't comfortable with and contributes to a feeling of toxicity. Both from the player who is forced by another player's ambiguous communication in the pick screen to choose a role and/or hero they are not comfortable with, and from the other players who will read that player's performance in-game as sub-par. These kinds of interactions are incredibly common even in matchmaking with high behavior score players and the final participant observation match with FetaKing began with this exact situation.

The chat, in theory, exists to mitigate these ambiguities that occur during the hero-selection screen. However, the norms of chat use that I experienced were not conducive to mitigating this brand of toxicity. As I said, my messages regarding my role preferences were often ignored by other players. Four of the seven participants similarly referred to the hero selection screen as a source of toxicity, and as a space that sets the tone of every match. Based on interviewee data and my own analysis, the root causes of these interactions (or rather a lack of interactions) are a combination of trolling, player inexperience or inattentiveness, fear of communicating through chat, or experimentation. There is also the language barrier between some players that could contribute to a lack of communication during the hero-select screen. Additionally, every player I interviewed expressed that they have preferred roles in matches. Most players were not interested in a negotiation with other players about which heroes or positions to play and would always rather play the positions and heroes they feel most comfortable with. Rather than spending time discussing potential roles with the team, to avoid being put into a last-pick scenario thereby increasing the chances of getting a less desirable role, most players I observed claim positions and pick heroes as soon as they can. It is worth noting that in the time I spend typing my preferences, I could just be racing to select the hero I wish to play without consideration for the other players on the team. This course of action appears to be the norm. Whatever the causes, what is clearly identifiable from both mine, and FetaKing's point of view, is that Valve's design of the hero selection process still easily facilitates instances of toxicity by creating often frustrating situations for players from the earliest moments of the match.

What is occurring through these systems is what Ian Bogost refers to as procedural rhetoric. Through procedural rhetoric, systems are arguments and persuade players through their design. According to Bogost, "Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created," (Bogost, 2007: 3). Even though those processes create rules and limitations, they also create system-specific expressions. Bogost

states, “While we often think that rules always limit behavior, the imposition of constraints also creates expression. [...] When we do things, we do them according to some logic, and that logic constitutes a process in the general sense of the word,” (Bogost, 2007: 7). What’s more, is that when we’re speaking of digital processes, we are talking about cultural and personal logics that are coded into those processes (Bogost, 2007: 4-6). The digital processes described above, when matched with the personal and cultural logics observed by players, highlight a fault in DOTA 2’s design. The procedural rhetoric of hero selection when matched with the personal and cultural logics of the DOTA 2 player base rhetorically persuades players, even those on the same team, into a state of conflict. When a player ignores my chat message, they are making a system-specific expression based on the rhetoric of the hero-selection system in the context of the cultural logic of the DOTA 2 player base and their own personal logic: that ignoring the chat and choosing the hero they wish to play is the proper course of action for the match and for themselves rather than engaging with it.

The systems-driven toxicity players engage with in DOTA 2 are a combination of the procedural rhetoric and the implicit participation built into those systems. Once again, via Mirko Tobias Schäfer, implicit participation “...does not necessarily require a conscious activity of cultural production, nor does it require users to choose from different methods in problem-solving, collaboration, and communication with others. Rather, it is a design solution that takes advantage of certain habits users have,” (Tobias Schäfer, 2011: 51). While Tobias Schäfer notes that users need not interact through systems built around implicit participation, users of DOTA 2 are interacting regardless of whether they are actively communicating through those systems. The presence of hero metrics, personal match histories and statistics indicate that Valve collects an abundance of data from its players. However, Valve focuses on in-game performance data far more than in-game behavior data. So much so that much of this data has recently been monetized in the newly released DOTA Plus feature, which players can buy into for a 4.99 monthly fee. By subscribing to DOTA Plus, the client integrates statistics that were previously available through third-party websites and integrates them into the game to provide valuable up-to-date metrics on game data and player performance.<sup>5758</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.dota2.com/plus> (Accessed May 21st, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> One feature is the post-game damage-done screen. With DOTA Plus, you can view the total damage done to every target from everyone one of any hero’s abilities. Here a teammate can see if a player was frequently putting out damage on priority targets, or instead going after less valuable enemies, which would be detrimental to the team overall. Because this feature is only available after a match has ended, however, it is a less valuable tool for course-correcting a match in-progress, and more valuable for blaming players after something has gone horribly wrong.

Instead, player data could be used to design systems that alter player behavior to be more positive. The interviewees in this study agreed that the DOTA 2 game systems contribute to the toxicity experienced in-game. What's more, the volume of metrics Valve monitors gives the sense that they could use them to design systems with a procedural rhetoric that contributes to a less toxic environment. Two players I interviewed, DailyMongoose and LateDragon, both noted that League of Legends implemented a hero-selection system where players choose their preferred roles prior to being matchmade with other players, thereby alleviating a common source of toxicity. Similar systems have been used in MMOs where players would use matchmaking systems for dungeons based on their roles. MOBA developers avoided adapting that system to their genre until recently, likely due to player demand as a possibility for alleviating one aspect of toxicity. However, Valve has been less interested in both addressing toxicity and altering its game systems unless those systems can be monetized.<sup>59</sup> While the systems are not effective and limiting instances of toxicity, they are also not purely to blame. As is the case with the hero selection screen, players are making choices to use the game's features to affect other players rather than to simply play out the game mechanically. FetaKing and I frequently encountered communication abuse either directed at ourselves, other players, or just being typed or said into the void with no clear target for any discernable reason other than that players can type and vocalize odd and offensive things in-game. As mentioned in chapter 2, it was common to see chat directed at non-English-speaking players.



Image 3.8.A player trolling another for speaking another language. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

On the flip side, it was also common for Spanish players to refer to other players in the match as "Ratas," or "Rats." This often refers to players using a specific strategy in game where they avoid conflict with the enemy team and focus entirely on farming or taking down objectives. It is also very aggressive and what some would consider toxic communication. However, as discussed in chapter 2 there is

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<sup>59</sup> Prior to the completion of this thesis, Valve has implemented a limited version of this 'role-based matchmaking' into DOTA 2. However, this feature is tied to the 2018 "Battle Pass," a 9.99 USD buyable item that encourages players to spend even more money to support the 2018 International Tournament. As of this writing, the feature appears to be poorly implemented, leading to long matchmaking times for players. This is probably in part to it being tied to the Battle Pass, which limits its use to a slice of the player base. It is too early to say how this will play out, but it is worth noting that this highly-requested feature has been added behind a pay wall.

prevalent discrimination and systemic inequality against players perceived to be broadly South American.

Turning back to Kishonna Gray's analysis of women of color in Xbox live, there could be an element of individual resistance in these exchanges on the part of the non-English speakers. Gray focused primarily on collective resistance, but noted that individuals resist as well, and their resistance can take the form of aggressive and "equally offensive behavior," (Gray 2013). The difficulty in judging these encounters is in the pervasive ambiguity of these interactions. In Gray's study, those on the receiving end of individual resistance were primarily annoyed at the tactics the resisters employed rather than engaging with the underlying issues (systemic discrimination on Xbox Live, racial slurs being used by other players) that caused the resisters to act out. However, Gray argues that these tactics constitute meaningful resistance if those using them felt they were meaningful and empowering (Gray, 2013). However, as these kinds of behaviors are acted out in DOTA 2, the environment is further defined by various players acting out against others without the inclination to understand each other's motivations for doing so. These kinds of cross-cultural interactions are another pervasive layer of behaviors that contribute to the overall feeling of toxicity in-game.

In addition to the kinds of communication abuses highlighted above, there are also players who use the abilities of certain heroes in the game to actively troll and impede their teammates. This creates a 6v4 situation, because one of your own teammates is actively trying to lose the game for your team. FetaKing and I experienced an egregious display of this when a player on our team chose a hero called Io. Io is nothing more than a little ball of energy designed to support the other heroes. This hero's ultimate ability is a map-wide teleport that can bring Io and one other hero to any other location on the map. While Io is forced to return to the location they departed from after a few seconds, they can opt not to bring the other hero with them. There is a lot of strategic value in this ability, but it is also easily abusable. The Io on our team appeared to target a specific player on our team, Shadow Fiend, and began teleporting them into the enemy base where they were instantly killed. Not satisfied with this, the Io once again teleported Shadow Fiend, but this time he found a part at the very edge of the map that is guarded by trees. This area is normally inaccessible unless other special movement abilities are used, or other items are used to destroy the trees. Because Shadow Fiend had none of these items, and because Io was simultaneously killing our courier (the little pet that delivers items to heroes anywhere on the map), Shadow Fiend was stuck in the trees for the next five minutes while players on our team spent a great deal of effort to get him out. In the moment, FetaKing and I vacillated between frustration

and amusement at the absurdity of the match we were playing. The Shadow Fiend player, now stuck in his tree prison, could only describe his situation in one word.



Image 3.9. Shadow Fiend contemplates the meaning of life in a prison of Io's Making. DOTA 2 Screenshot.

This specific example was perhaps an obvious case of trolling through ability abuse, but it is worth noting that other examples of this are much less clear cut. It is possible for an Io player to make mistakes with the same ability that could produce a similar impression from teammates.

Io's persistence and their methods led me to believe they were doing what Whitney Phillips dubbed "trolling for the lolz," (Phillips, 2015: 31-33). However, this is purely an assumption and one made based on the fact that Io's actions, while frustrating, were also hilarious to FetaKing and I during the match. According to Foo and Koivisto's taxonomy of grief play discussed in Chapter 1, Io's actions are defined as harassment because they disrupt the plans of other players (Foo and Koivisto, 2004: 247-250). However, while Io's actions affected our entire team, they only targeted the Shadow Fiend player with their teleport ability. They also didn't begin trolling until 15 minutes into the match, and until that point gave no indication that they were attempting to troll or disrupt play. I revisited the match replay, and I was unable to discern anything in the Shadow Fiend's actions that would push the Io player to

begin trolling.<sup>60</sup> In chat Shadow Fiend asked why the lo player was acting in this way, with no response, leading each of us to draw our own conclusions about what exactly lo was up to. Our interaction with lo further illustrates that toxic behavior is challenging to define. While I first believed lo was ‘trolling for lolz,’ in hindsight there is the possibility that lo was actively protesting something they experienced at the hands of Shadow Fiend that went unaddressed by the rest of the team, even though FetaKing and I couldn’t determine what exactly that might be. Even though this appeared to be a clear-cut example of grief play, it has layers that complicate easily labelling these actions as harassment or toxicity through player behavior. This serves as another example of what Phillips and Milner referred to as the “fundamental ambivalence of digitally mediated expression,” (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 12). However, whatever lo’s motivations, their actions were read by the team as toxicity, although even how players read toxicity varies greatly from player to player.

When all was said and done, Fetaking and I had witnessed, across a bevy of matches, some of the most creative and offensive insults through text, voice chat, and even through steam user names.<sup>61</sup> We witnessed players who abused hero abilities, who ran into the enemy team to deliberately ruin the game for their own teams, and players who just left games because they had (apparently) had enough. And yet, through all these toxic instances, I never saw FetaKing lash out against anyone. FetaKing rarely typed more than an exclamation of surprise if he was the target of someone else’s comments or trolling. While he expressed frustration in voice chat from time to time, he never lashed out in an aggressive manner. He did however leave two matches before they completed, however he and I both felt we were being trolled when he left those matches.<sup>62</sup> When I asked FetaKing if he still considered himself a toxic player, he answered yes nonetheless. According to FetaKing, “A lot of people have toxic thoughts or attitudes about the players on their team. But I think what actually constitutes toxicity is how much of it you display in the public sphere that the game gives you, either chat or voice chat, and we’ve played enough together that you’ve seen me be angry at people on our team and to just leave. And that’s probably toxic for some people.”

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<sup>60</sup> Later in this chapter I will discuss how individual players bring very specific expectations about how players should perform in-game. It is possible that lo decided Shadow Fiend had breached those expectations and warranted punishment.

<sup>61</sup> In addition to commonly heard racial slurs, FetaKing and I had been called anything from ‘Asswipes’ to ‘Mud Monkeys’ and ‘Sweaty Hut Dwellers’ by players with user names that referred to gloryholes, anime characters, pop culture icons and everything in between.

<sup>62</sup> In both instances FetaKing was being told by other players that he was playing poorly. At the same time, the players communicating to FetaKing were walking into the enemy team in a way that we surmised was on purpose. Even though FetaKing muted those players before leaving the match, his enjoyment of the game was already ruined in his mind and so he decided to abandon the matches.

Here FetaKing highlights that toxicity is highly context dependent, which Mia Consalvo found was similarly true of cheating in videogames. Of cheating, Consalvo states “...particular activities have been codified in ways with which everyone might not agree, even if they are a small minority. [...] There is only a limited set of situations or activities that are consistently labeled cheating. And different sets of individuals and groups have varying stakes in solidifying those labels,” (Consalvo, 2007: 147). As we’ve seen, this is true of toxicity as groups of players view speaking another language or unskilled play as toxicity.

As discussed in Chapter 2, these are ubiquitous opinions, but they are also contested. This extends beyond the most popular discussions among the community about what constitutes toxicity to slight differences of opinion between two reasonably like-minded players. From my point of view, FetaKing’s decision to abandon the matches discussed above was entirely justified because of what we had experienced. FetaKing, in hindsight, felt otherwise. Similarly, FetaKing believed what we experienced overall throughout our time playing DOTA 2 was far more toxic than I did. When I took stock of our matches, I figured that based on the matches we played, about one in every three matches had someone do something I felt could be considered toxic.<sup>63</sup> Because we played one match a day and were in many of the same matches, I had assumed FetaKing would have come to a similar conclusion.<sup>64</sup> However, when asked, FetaKing exclaimed “Let’s say every day I play... actually no, on the days I don’t play, there’s toxicity on the subreddit, so yeah, every day.” FetaKing clearly perceived far more than I did as clear-cut instances of toxicity. When asked to clarify what he qualified as toxic he cited nearly everything we encountered while playing, stating “So everything that’s calling out another player on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, political opinion. That has no place there. I suppose there are forms that are harder to qualify like pinging. What’s normal, and when does it cross-over into toxicity? Advice too. Like, sometimes its advice, but sometimes its things that players in those roles should be doing themselves, so that’s like a softer form of toxicity. Then there’s like intentional feeding and ability griefing. Like the lo game.” FetaKing, unlike myself, was quick to judge certain aspects of play as toxicity, and although our criteria for what constituted toxicity was similar, he perceived it to be more frequent than I did. What is clear from this is that players have different views on what constitutes toxicity in game. While FetaKing and I agreed that the same types of behaviors can constitute toxicity, I

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<sup>63</sup> This would include insults directed at anyone on the team, rude behavior during hero select, and active trolling griefing or flaming of any kind.

<sup>64</sup> I’m not entirely sure why I made this assumption. I think because we had good rapport and were in constant communication with one another about what was happening in the matches and what we were experiencing at the time that our long-term observations regarding the toxicity we experienced would be similar.



was less sure of deliberately labeling what FetaKing referred to as ‘softer’ toxicity as toxicity. In the next sections, I will examine 5 other perspectives that widen the gap of what players consider to be toxicity even further.

### **Toxicity from the Inside-Out**

Here I will compare the perspectives from five different individuals on toxicity. Two of these individuals, LateDragon and DailyMongoose identified themselves as toxic players. Another player, RelativityGecko was less confident that he is a toxic player but expressed that he engaged in behaviors that others might identify as toxic. The final two individuals do not self-identify as toxic. UnluckyShallots is a long-time DOTA 2 veteran, while NotableEye is a former DOTA 2 spectator who never transitioned into the game as a player.

RelativityGecko has been playing the game since the beta in 2012 and has played about 1500 matches. Like FetaKing, he only plays the game with friends when they queue as a 5-stack (a full team so only the opponents are randomly match made) and are all together on a third-party voice program. He does this because in his view, it leads to better matches. It also mitigates several issues that arise on your own team such as intentional feeding and the miscommunication during the hero selection screen. He also mentioned that all his friends are much better than him, so they carry him through the matches.

When I asked him if he encountered toxicity in game, the only thing he considered toxicity was “People that throw. People that really don’t try all the way. People that don’t try their best and just give up half-way. People that half-ass the game and make other people’s experiences terrible by running down mid or feeding (intentionally giving and advantage to the other team), or just giving up and not trying.” I probed further asking whether a player on the team that is being verbally abusive would be toxic to him. He replied, “If he carries (contributes to the success of) the game and if he wins the game then whatever. It’s the end result, right?”

For RelativityGecko, toxicity directly correlates to the outcome of the match, and how much players on his team give their all to win the match. Until I proposed a theoretical situation where a player might be addressing someone’s race with a slur in chat, he didn’t even clock it as an offense. Once he considered it, he linked it directly to the outcome of the match, noting “I would definitely think that player is toxic, because by doing that to the teammate, the teammate would be less inclined to win.” He cited the game’s mute functionality as a way for players to avoid those kinds of interactions or to ignore them once they’ve started. However, when I asked RelativityGecko if he used the mute

function when these events occur in-game he replied with a hearty laugh, “No, I flame them back.” He qualified his response by saying that he only flames people when someone else instigates, and that he doesn’t actually flame that much. After this, RelativityGecko also admitted that he used to report system to troll his friends in his pre-made 5-stack by reporting for fun.

RelativityGecko at times seems to behave firmly in-line with what Whitney Phillips described as ‘trolling for the lulz.’ (Phillips, 2015: 31). However, he claims to only target those within his own friend group with reports, or those who instigate in-game with more flaming. He admitted that this did not help the team win further, but that he finds it fun and humorous. Additionally, he views racialized language that FetaKing and I would have considered outright toxicity as a kind of instrumental toxicity that is toxic in so far as it impacts the result of the match. Lastly, to return to systems for a moment, he feels comfortable using the report system (that provides limited opportunities to report players) on his own premade teammates.<sup>65</sup> He justifies this by claiming the report system is ineffective saying “Even if your whole team reports you for one game, nothing happens right. It takes like constant reports to trigger something.” Also, RelativityGecko noted that he only had 3 reports made against him on his account in about 1500 games. Either he was overselling how much he flamed other players, or in his matches where he flamed he was not a primary target for reporting.

LateDragon is one of the self-identified toxic players I spoke to. LateDragon is a former DOTA 1 player who migrated to League of Legends. While he did not return to DOTA 2, I was interested in speaking to him regarding his motivations as a self-identified toxic player and to get a sense of how he felt League of Legends addressed their own toxicity problem. LateDragon began playing League of Legends by checking out Twitch.tv (at the time Justin.tv) and tuning into what was quickly becoming the site’s most popular game.

LateDragon was also a participant on the League of Legends sub-Reddit. LateDragon proudly remarked that he once had a post on the front page of the sub-Reddit that dealt with LoL’s own systemic causes of toxicity. LateDragon explained that LoL’s former competitive matchmaking system encouraged players who were already at a certain rank to play less seriously because they couldn’t drop below a certain rank threshold, while other players in those matches were desperately trying to win their matches. LateDragon’s perspective also illuminated that compared to Valve, Riot Games has attempted to integrate systems that deal with player toxicity into the game. As Nardi and Kou pointed

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<sup>65</sup> In the case of his own teammates, he told them that he was going to report them and followed through on that threat. Otherwise they would have no idea whether they were reported unless they had been reported so many times to receive a ban. It is unclear whether this is toxicity, because the players RelativityGecko is queueing with have chosen to play with him and may expect and encourage this kind of behavior.

out, the Tribunal was one of those systems. However, Riot has since experimented with additional tweaks like an honor system where you could commend one positive player in an aspect of play that rewarded players with a cosmetic badge. However, LateDragon felt that these systems were only somewhat impactful. According to LateDragon, “I don’t think it’s a huge thing that really changes something. It adds a little bit on top of it. It’s a good step in the right direction, but it doesn’t solve the problem.” LateDragon also pointed out that these systems don’t often work to address good behavior, but rather skilled play. LateDragon notes, “Not just in MOBAs but in most games, it’s always the flashy plays. No one really looks at the support standing at the back healing them.” Like RelativityGecko, LateDragon also believed that players who play poorly or attempt to ruin the gameplay mechanically are worse than those with poor attitudes or those that use offensive language: “When I play competitive, I just want to win. So, for me, personally, I don’t really care that much about how positive or toxic someone is. If somebody is a dick and wins their lanes, sure why not.”

In terms of his own toxic behavior, LateDragon was vague in terms of what kinds of behaviors he engages in, however, he made his motivations clear for when he becomes toxic. According to LateDragon, there is always a valid reason: “Sure I’m toxic, but not all the time. If I’m playing a promotion game (an important competitive match) and someone tries to troll me, sure. But it’s not that I verbally abuse them or something like that, but I’m just like, what the fuck why are you doing that, I’m trying to win. But it’s not like I log into the game and I’m like, hey, I’m going to start flaming some kids for no reason.” In addition to other players, LateDragon once again pointed to the systems in place as a source for his own and community toxicity. “If I really thought about the whole toxicity problem, I would think the whole matchmaking is the problem. Personally, I think you can match people with the same game skill in terms of how to control the characters [...] but from a strategy point of view, people are a lot different, but there’s a thing about age too, where maybe you know 16-year-old kids are mechanically good, but they’re not looking at the game from a tactical view.” Once again, emphasis is put on the inability of the systems in place to mitigate toxicity.

This trend continues with the most toxic player I interviewed, DailyMongoose. DailyMongoose has been playing since 2013 and is a near-daily competitive DOTA 2 player. Of his behavior, DailyMongoose said he has been banned from the game around ten times, and that “Every time I log in now I get a message that says, ‘you are in danger.’” Not unlike the previous interviewees, DailyMongoose distinguishes between degrees of toxicity by breaking it into two types: toxic play (toxicity that is detrimental to the success of others in matches), and toxic communication. Like the other 2 previous interviewees, he expressed that toxic play is much worse.

DailyMongoose identified both systems and other players as the course of his own toxicity. Regarding matchmaking, he suggested DOTA 2 implement a system like the League of Legends role select to cut down on the toxicity that begins on the hero select screen. He also felt that the report system doesn't work, and that people use it for the wrong reasons: "I think it's more of a blame system, not a toxicity punish system." DailyMongoose explained that as a carry player he would be the target of reports if the game goes bad even if it's not his fault. The fact that he 'fires back' (uses voice chat or text chat to comment on other players' performances in match) makes him an even more visible target for reports in losing games. DailyMongoose admits that he communicates in unacceptable ways, but he believes that that's not why he's being reported: "And that really bothers me. Because if I'm being punished, and I deserve it, I want to be punished for the right thing. And the whole jury of your peers thing doesn't apply to DOTA because someone's always looking for someone to blame after a loss." This sentiment is not uncommon among the community, as a recent front-page reddit post pointed out.

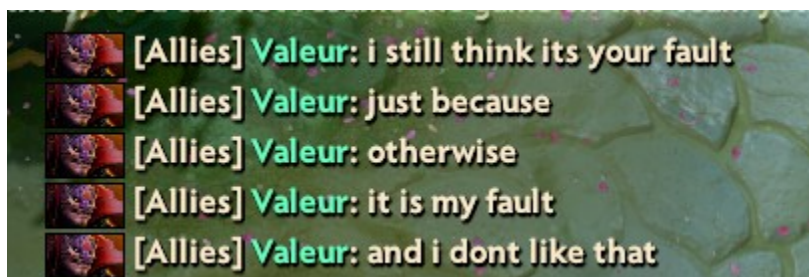


Image 3.10. A player demonstrating the logic of blame when something goes wrong in a match of DOTA 2.66

DailyMongoose, however, also admits that his ire is most-often directed at his own teammates, and that this is often a product of his own expectations. "I play ranked games at a reasonably high rank, but you'd expect that people know what they're doing. And sometimes people don't do that, and to me, that constitutes toxicity because they're being willfully detrimental." However, Mongoose gave no indication that he is communicating his expectations about how his teammates should play prior to these instances of toxicity forming. This was also a common experience in my own matches, where players would assume matched players share the same strategic or tactical inclinations without communicating in-game intentions or playstyles. Instead, players would only begin using the chat features to (what I interpreted as) aggressively inform the players who aren't meeting those uncommunicated expectations. This does not appear to be a systems issue, but rather a cultural issue with how players use the features available to them, and their expectations of other players.

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/89yknh/well\\_he\\_has\\_good\\_point/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/89yknh/well_he_has_good_point/) (accessed April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

DailyMongoose noted that players who micromanage the entire team too much are undesirable teammates, while teammates who just play on mute and don't communicate at all are also detrimental to the team. My conversation with DailyMongoose highlighted the very prominent fact that every match of DOTA 2 is loaded with player expectations, and in DailyMongoose's case, those expectations are very specifically tailored around his own ideas of how people should approach the game. The competitive players I interviewed identified these breaches of expectations as toxicity, and subsequently used it as grounds for engaging in toxic behavior.

Part of these expectations derive from the concept of the metagame. Michael Debus identifies the 'rule metagame' as a set of constitutive rules formed out of a game's player culture through testing and discussion (Debus, 2017: 5, 7). According to Debus, "Breaking the constitutive rules means that the player failed at playing the game, or was simply playing a different game," (Debus, 2017: 5). Rule metagames, according to Debus, exist without mechanical enforcement, by they can be enforced by "social restrictions (and verbal harassment)," (Debus, 2017: 7). This is supported by the experiences of David Myers' avatar Twixt as discussed in chapter 1, where his breaches of social norms elicited very harsh responses from the City of Heroes and Villains community (Myers, 2018). However, Twixt breached more clearly established and enforced community norms. Because DOTA 2 is a competitive game with numerous competing strategies, it is often unclear what the constitutive norms of a given match might be. While some elements of the dispositive (such as the Torte De Lini guides discussed in Chapter 2) reinforce a broad metagame because of their ubiquity, others are buried deep on specific third-party platforms frequented by a particular segment of the community (players who frequent Dotabuff, for example). DOTA 2's constitutively-determined metagame contributes to the breaches of expectation identified by DailyMongoose and LateDragon, but many of these constitutive 'norms' are not actually shared among the community.<sup>67</sup> Without communication, it is difficult to know prior to being made aware of a perceived breach of these norms, which norms any given player subscribes to, and which breach of norms will result in aggressive reactions. Rather than a concrete metagame, DOTA 2 has many competing metas that put players in conflict with each other.

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<sup>67</sup> For example, for many years there was a debate among the community whether the hero 'Legion Commander' was a viable jungler (a character who does not go to a lane but instead acquires gold and XP in a different part of the map). Some players believed this to be acceptable while other players would rage at the very idea of that pick. This Reddit thread from 2015 illustrates the contention between players when trying to establish this one aspect of the meta:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/45yz4q/arteezy\\_and\\_eg\\_just\\_shat\\_on\\_vega\\_with\\_a\\_jungle/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DotA2/comments/45yz4q/arteezy_and_eg_just_shat_on_vega_with_a_jungle/)

Numerous other aspects of the metagame, from hero builds to lane positions to team compositions are constantly shifting, and frequently debated with seldom an agreed-upon metagame emerging at a given time.

DailyMongoose and LateDragon both indicated that what they do is toxic behavior. However, they both emphasize that the kinds of toxicity they engage in is either a lesser form of toxicity (toxic play vs toxic communication) or emphasize that the systems in place already create a toxic environment. LateDragon and DailyMongoose do not shed all responsibility, but there is a push to remove some of the agency relating to their toxic actions themselves and on to other players and game systems. They do not identify themselves or their individual actions as key contributors to part of the toxic culture of the game, nor did they identify their own agency as something that could contribute to lessening toxicity overall in-game. They also both indicated that game developers need to be more proactive and accountable for toxicity in-game. While RelativityGecko is a player who uses the in-game space to ‘troll for the lulz’ as Whitney Phillips describes (Phillips, 2015: 31), LateDragon and DailyMongoose identify their toxicity as a product of the competitive environment, the game’s systems, and their own expectations for other players.

In contrast to these players, NotableEye and UnluckyShallots do not self-identify as toxic. UnluckyShallots has been playing since DOTA 1 at local LAN parties. Like DailyMongoose, she favors playing carry heroes. NotableEye came to DOTA 2 as a spectator in 2015 and although she doesn’t have in-game experience, she was a part of the broader DOTA 2 community as a spectator.<sup>68</sup>

As a native of China and fluent English and Mandarin speaker, NotableEye was both very engaged with the Chinese DOTA 2 fandom, but also preferred to watch matches on the English streams. She noted that the Chinese DOTA 2 casters tended to wear their biases towards other players and teams more clearly than the English-language casters. Of her DOTA 2 community she remarked that “Chinese fans are very crude. Like spreading rumors. It is just like gossip girl. They create fake news and fake data; they use photoshop and make fake tweets. They also say bad names to each other or make nicknames for each other and professional players.” When I asked her if she felt included in this community she remarked that “The best part about online community is that its anonymous so you can hide your sexuality and gender. But sometimes it’s hard to hide because sometimes you see something and its really sensitive or offensive, but usually I choose not to say anything and just close the laptop and ignore it. I’m a female, but I’m also a fan of team Newbee. We also have some kind of common language, so within that we can communicate.” When I asked her if this was why she chose to remain a spectator rather than enter the game, she first mentioned the game’s difficulty before addressing the community,

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<sup>68</sup> I included the experiences of this spectator because she provided a cross-national perspective to the study. In addition, after reading Kelly Bergstrom’s article, I was curious if this person’s motivations for not playing the game despite being a passionate fan were linked to toxicity in some way, or if it was another factor.

stating “Because its hard! And the community, well, it’s not friendly. It’s not friendly at all to new players. They expect you to have 3000mmr (a slightly above average skill rating) to even begin in that game.” NotableEye did not identify any of these issues specifically as toxicity, but they do echo some of the sentiments mentioned by the self-identified toxic players, and also illustrate how it is better to be anonymous as a woman within this community.

UnluckyShallots’ also indicated that her gender encourages her to often remain anonymous. “The fact that revealing my gender at all causes any sort of commotion, that in and of itself is negative. I would love to come to a point where we are judged by our merit in game and ‘who we are.’ It’s all negative to me, but if someone says, ‘Oh you’re a girl, that’s awesome,’ that’s better than the other type of reaction.” Because of this, Shallots typically does not use voice chat in-game to communicate even though she prefers to be a team player. On flaming or griefing, she noted that “I don’t agree with it. It’s one of the things that makes the game real terrible for everyone. You can have the most perfect game, but just one negative person commenting negatively can impact all of the players. I’ve seen perfect games go down because of negativity. I try to keep people around me who are not like that, though that’s very rare to find on this game. That’s difficult... that’s difficult.” She indicated that these moments give her a very negative impression of the game, the people who play it, and people in general after those moments: “I learn so much about human nature after playing this game. You can play different people from different places in the world, but they all act the same, negatively, after a certain situation. So, I question that, and I’m not pleased with that.” UnluckyShallots also admitted, however, that in situations where her friends were the subject of negative comments, she would type things back without the use of expletives. She did not give any further details into the nature of her reactionary comments.

NotableEye and UnluckyShallots both highlight that the community rather than the game systems are the primary point of their negative experiences in-game. Both players cite the ability to be anonymous as a benefit, because it allows them to play or watch the game as a fan of a favorite team, or as a capable carry player, rather than being defined by their gender. However, even though they attempt to remain anonymous, they frequently encounter behaviors that they say negatively affects their experiences while playing or watching the game. Here, culture, rather than systems, is the clear source of negativity for NotableEye and UnluckyShallots. While it is not something that is actively done on an individual basis, the fact that they feel suppressed by default because of their gender is as toxic as anything else I’ve encountered or been recounted during my research. Importantly for this chapter, it counterbalances the idea that in-game systems are largely to blame for the toxic landscape of DOTA 2.

There is no change to the mechanics, matchmaking, or communication structures in or surrounding the game that would make these women feel like they could fully be themselves while enjoying their hobbies. In Carina Assunção's study, "No Girls on the Internet: The Experience of Female Gamers in the Masculine Space of Violent Gaming," she found that female players in violent games often expressed their gender identities through their user names, and surprisingly, that "women who have been exposed to toxic behavior find it slightly more important to express their gender identity in gaming than those who have not been exposed to it," (Assunção 2016: 54, 57-58). However, female players who were exposed to toxicity also took long hiatuses from gaming online (Assunção, 2016: 58). In contrast, neither of these women felt comfortable expressing their identity, and while UnluckyShallots had at times used the voice chat, she only did so very rarely. However, in keeping with Assunção's findings, both NotableEye and UnluckyShallots took long hiatuses from the game, and while UnluckyShallots is once again playing DOTA 2, NotableEye, at the time of our interview, had not been actively watching DOTA 2 for over a year.

It is incredibly telling that none of the self-identified toxic players considered that offensive language was a more serious form of toxicity, because the players most affected by it are rendered invisible, or as is the case in cross-language communication in-game, mocked or treated as interlopers into a space that isn't theirs. As Nakamura identified, the cultural layer and digital layer are interacting to suppress certain individuals (Nakamura, 2002, 3-5). While Nakamura outlines this in racialized terms (which is also happening as I pointed out in Chapter 2), here we see once again how online games are heavily gendered, to a point where it isn't even an active suppression, but a default feeling on the part of these two women that they should remain quiet and anonymous to achieve the best-possible in-game result or spectator experience. The effect of this is a broader conversation about toxicity within the game community, and a negotiation between players within the game space that doesn't even consider the existence of these women, let alone their perspectives on these issues.

### **The Toxic Swamp in Review**

Through this chapter I have highlighted numerous trolling, flaming, and griefing behaviors that players engage with while playing and spectating DOTA 2. Through my interviews with several DOTA 2 players and spectators I demonstrate that DOTA 2 players have different criteria for which behaviors they consider toxic, and how severe they consider specific toxic behaviors to be relative to others. The self-identified toxic players tended to view gameplay that interferes with victory as more severe, while



the players who did not self-identify as toxic were less discerning regarding what they considered toxicity, and how those toxic behaviors ranked relative to each other. All players interviewed agreed that they frequently experienced either toxicity or extreme negativity in-game.

All but two of the players highlighted the in-game systems as contributors to in-game toxicity by creating situations that could lead to poor matchmaking among players, miscommunication, or frustrating situations that precipitate toxic actions. My analysis of the new player system and my experiences with hero selection and matchmaking lead me to agree that those systems do in fact contribute to toxicity by creating frustrating gameplay situations. However, those systems are still used by players in ways that highlight their shortcomings rather than their affordances. As previously mentioned, across 200 unranked matches players would rarely use chat in hero selection to communicate their intentions.

The three players who self-identified as toxic tended to point to in-game systems and other players as the foundations for their own toxicity, even though they acknowledged that their own behavior was probably considered toxic by other players. Even players who did not self-identify as toxic (including myself) have responded to what we ourselves deemed to be toxicity or negativity in chat in ways that were not constructive. Through Philips and Milner's ambivalent mode, it is likely that all players involved in this study have contributed things that other players interpreted as toxic behavior or toxic play to other players' in-game experiences. As such, systems may be a frequent topic of discussion because League of Legends, a game that has undergone more systems changes designed to combat toxicity than DOTA 2, has seen some positive effects from their systems changes.

Finally, systems alone don't account for what players experience in game, and systems changes don't address all forms of what players deem to be toxicity. The women I spoke to do not feel comfortable speaking over voice chat or revealing their gender online. This is connected to the pervasiveness of anti-female attitudes in games culture and online identified by Mia Consalvo, Carina Assunção and many others. In DOTA 2, as is the case with Adrienne Massanari's account of reddit, toxicity is a techno-cultural issue. However, the community as I have analyzed it disproportionately pins the problem on the technological side and erases or devalues the perspectives of those who exist outside the community's assumed norms. In the conclusion that follows, I will outline what these factors mean for how I believe toxicity should be defined going forward, and how that definition might be useful for uncovering new solutions to the problem of in-game toxicity.

## Conclusion - The End is Just a Toxic Beginning

The research question at the heart of this project was how players of a game deemed from inside and out as toxic construct toxicity. How do they define the term, how do they engage with it as a community, and where do players of a toxic game view themselves relative to the toxicity that permeates their game space? I found that toxicity is very well defined for individuals, but when taken holistically has a broad range of meanings that are often contradictory. Individually, toxicity is a very descriptive term but when looked at holistically it serves a rhetorical function. Several definitions of toxicity have been explored throughout this study. At the end of Chapter 1, I identified that toxicity appeared to be a collection of trolling, griefing and flaming practices often enacted aggressively in racialized, gendered, sexualized or cultural modes. These practices are often ambivalent in intention, and as I understood it, *people* were the causes of toxicity, and I anticipated that players would respond first and foremost about player interaction and toxicity that fit in trolling, flaming, griefing, racialized and gendered modes. The framework of this study began out of that presupposition, but through the research I uncovered that players were far more engaged with toxicity as a product of DOTA 2's systems. As such, the focus of study grew to incorporate systems-based elements alongside an analysis of player perspectives and community interaction to define toxicity.

Some players I spoke to regarded toxicity most prominently as something that affected play, specifically the outcome of matches. In those definitions, something as innocent as a new player being matched into a game they are massively unprepared for constitutes toxicity. Here, systems are cited as the primary cause of toxicity, and aggressive racialized, gendered, sexualized or cultural attacks are toxic only insofar as they impact the end-result of matches. It is not just the systems however, as players frequently breach other players' expectations of how matches should be played and how people should respond in game. When players judge others as toxic, it doesn't derive from how players behave in the familiar toxic modes of griefing, trolling, or flaming, but how they behave at all relative to competing sets of norms and expectations.

The lack of coherence among individual player definitions indicates to me that toxicity, in so far as it is useful, describes that members of a community are discontent with other members of the community or the systems of the game. While I'm sure there are players who embrace toxicity as a concept and fully act in that mode, the toxic players in this study indicated full well that their toxicity is a product of cultural elements or game systems that negatively impact their gameplay experiences, although there were large differences in what those specific cultural elements or game systems were.

Within the broader community discourse of what toxicity is and what solutions to toxicity should be, there is no clear consensus. While some players point to systems, others have pointed to their personal mitigation tactics to limit their own contact with what they consider toxicity to be.

The community discourse about toxicity and its solutions throughout the media dispositive is incredibly lopsided. As seen in Chapter 2, Valve, through their choices of who to promote to high-profile community positions, as well as through the language and platform they use to communicate with the player base, cultivates a community that is both highly discriminatory towards non-English speakers and highly aggressive towards pretty much everyone. While I did witness some of what Gray described as ‘meaningful resistance’ in-game by non-English-speaking players, the ambiguous nature of that resistance that Gray also identified in her own study seems to be interpreted by other players throughout the dispositive and in-game as more toxicity that should be dealt with, rather than resistive play that contributes to some cultural reckoning within the community (Gray, 2013). What’s worse, is that those players have been targeted as interlopers on English-language servers, and their abuse at the hands of players is part of the culture of North American DOTA 2 servers. While the voices of non-English speakers are present in-game, they are not audible in the dispositive’s key sites.

Other voices, notably those of the women I interviewed, appear to be entirely absent from the game and the dispositive-based negotiation of what toxicity is and how it should be dealt with. Despite the insistence on behalf of the subjects of this study that systems are a foremost cause, there are strong cultural elements contributing to players’ definitions of toxicity, but those definitions are overshadowed by the voices of a privileged section of the player base. As this study shows, women are impacted much more severely than men by the game’s toxic culture, often feeling forced to conceal a key aspect of themselves in-game, which can also have an impact on gameplay. Moving forward it could be valuable to establish a hierarchy of toxicity, because although this study highlights its rhetorical form, it doesn’t fully account for its impact upon individuals, and how certain identities are disproportionately affected by toxic behaviors and the entire discourse around toxicity.

DOTA 2, like Reddit, is a toxic technoculture. My research shows that Massanari’s account of cultural and algorithmic formations of a toxic community translates to DOTA 2, as it is a combination of in-game systems, and a dispositive-wide cultural formation that sanctions certain player actions and gives players a sense of power or authority over others in-game. What’s more, is that these toxic technocultures overlap with each other through what Mirko Tobias Schäfer labeled the media dispositive (Tobias Schäfer, 2011). DOTA 2 as a toxic community is the result of overlaps between numerous mechanical processes and cultural sites. As I have clearly outlined in Chapter 2, the game

client, Reddit, Twitch.tv, YouTube, games journalism websites, esports, and the broader media landscape are all shaping the DOTA 2 community and the in-game and spectator experiences.

This thesis expands upon this literature by highlighting that toxicity is not necessarily about what players *do* in a game because of the game's culture and systems, but about how players perceive each other through systems and cultures that form and reinforce negative perceptions. There is no easy definition of toxicity because as Philips and Milner point out, expression online is fundamentally ambivalent, (Phillips and Milner, 2017: 12). What's more, is that this fundamental ambivalence is core to how players understand and construct toxicity out of the various *situations* that occur in DOTA 2. In many cases a player making a strategic decision in the heat of the game is effectively the same as a player intentionally disrupting their own teammate's objectives. Toxicity in large part comes from how players can be perceived by others as ruinous to another's in-game experience, regardless of whether the 'toxic' player has actively done anything at all.

The elements that players use to describe toxicity also have a great deal of game specificity. With each new game players are finding new ways to disturb other players. Companies are also implementing new ways (whether they are conscious of it or not) to direct player experience into new volatile and confrontational states. While there is, at this point, a plethora of documented grieving, trolling, and flaming practices across games and genres, the precise nature of those practices, their causes, and their impact on players and game communities greatly depend on a game's own procedural rhetoric, and the culture throughout a game's dispositive. As this thesis has illustrated, the specific make-up of game communities, their interactions across multiple platforms, and their governance all contribute to how those players view themselves and each other, which is at the heart of toxicity.

At this point, the fact that in-game communities are identified and self-identify as toxic, seems to be incidental to the player base. 'Toxicity' as a loose term is something that players of these games are knowingly signing up for. Players of all kinds continue to play these games in spite of their own discontent while playing them. While certain players are seeking respite from and solutions to toxicity as they define it individually, the players I spoke to are also under no assumption that any of their concerns will actually be resolved, either by Valve or within the community.

In a recent presentation regarding the upcoming Valve card game, Artifact, Gabe Newell made a comment regarding toxicity.<sup>6970</sup> His usage of the term is entirely based on player retention. Regarding

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<sup>69</sup>Gabe Newell talk on Artifact <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mERhtoD21rU>

<sup>70</sup> Artifact is also based on the DOTA 2 IP.

games with stagnation in their gameplay strategies, Gabe Newell says “You have people who just keep playing and they’re going to get bored and then they just stop playing, so it has kind of a toxic effect.” This quote leads me to believe that toxicity from within the company is viewed primarily (if not entirely) on how it affects the company’s bottom line. If that is the case, it means that responses to toxicity from the community need to have not just a visible impact, but an economic impact. In the five years since DOTA 2 became publicly playable, it is likely that Valve has made the valuation that toxicity as it has been described throughout this thesis hasn’t been a sizeable enough impact upon their bottom-line to warrant more direct action.

Equally troubling is that Valve has very recently doubled down on its neo-liberal sensibilities regarding the entire Steam platform. After a recent incident where an independent game that recreated a school shooting appeared on the Steam store, Valve was forced to re-examine their approach to curating steam. However, according to a Steam blog post, they viewed that less policing and more tools for individuals to hide what they find offensive would be the best course of action. A section of the post reads, “...we’ve decided that the right approach is to allow everything onto the Steam Store, except for things that we decide are illegal or straight up trolling. Taking this approach allows us to focus less on trying to police what should be on Steam, and more on building those tools to give people control over what kinds of content they see.”<sup>71</sup> Essentially, they aim to create a mute feature for content that certain consumers find to be offensive. There is a great deal to unpack with this in future studies, but I highlight this here to show that Valve is even less likely than before to intervene into the environment they have shaped through code and cultural influence within DOTA 2. Even though altering the code, and therefore the procedural rhetoric of the game would be a valuable place to experiment with curbing toxicity, it is incredibly unlikely that Valve, with this reaffirmed stance, is ever going to tinker with DOTA 2’s code as far as mitigating toxicity is concerned. As such, the community is left to make what it will with the environment Valve has crafted for them, regardless of who is suffering as a result.

## **Limitations**

This project had several limitations. This study had a lower sample size than I had intended. I offset this by doing a deeper analysis of these participants’ experiences with toxicity. It is worth noting

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<sup>71</sup> <https://steamcommunity.com/games/593110/announcements/detail/1666776116200553082> (accessed June 19th, 2018),

that in my recruitment posts, players did not respond well to being asked to discuss toxicity in an interview format. This creates an opportunity for a quantitative study on player habits that demands less engagement from participants but could perhaps be more successful at obtaining a larger sample.

More importantly, this study does not fully address the cross-cultural and cross-language perspectives of the DOTA 2 community. The player base under analysis was primarily English speaking. Although not all participants were North American, this thesis is skewed towards the English language player population. However, this thesis opens the possibility for further studies that examine different cross-cultural norms in game, and different server make-ups. A future study that compares cross-cultural and cross-language perspectives or the make-up of servers from different regions to the findings of this study would unpack how toxicity is defined across regional boundaries. More importantly, understanding the interactions across different regions could allow us to identify instances where a player base feels differently about toxicity. Analyzing why those servers deviate towards the perception of a more or less toxic environment could help uncover new ways of combatting toxicity.

One final limitation is that the landscape of the media dispositive I have examined in this thesis is far larger and complex than I have been able to illustrate in a work of this size. Platforms like Twitch, for example, connect numerous game communities through its aggregation of games as a communal spectator activity. There is a need to examine these key sites to better uncover their role as propagators of the toxic idea within communities and more importantly, across them. Game communities overlap, and many of them overlap on key sites like Twitch. These key sites require careful analysis because their cultural norms have a high likelihood of diffusing across game communities because of their interconnectedness.

### **Towards the Toxic Future**

Moving forward on a solutions-oriented trajectory, I first believed our focus should be on identifying and presenting small but detailed slices of what constitutes toxicity among these communities and subsequently confronting these communities, companies, and regulatory bodies with that specific information. For example, if an identified segment of toxicity in-game is the widespread cultural and systemic discrimination and overt racism against South Americans, as it is in DOTA 2, a sensible plan of action going forward would have been to document that phenomenon comprehensively through the game and the dispositive. However, though not highly detailed or researched, this (and other) issues are frequently communicated throughout the dispositive and in-game, such that Valve and

the player base are already be aware of the issues. Given their hands-off approach to game management, it seems unlikely that there will be any results until these companies are forced to be accountable for the environments they produce and hold themselves to a higher standard of community curation.

For academics, I still believe there is value in studying games and players that are deemed toxic to identify the specific elements that constitute toxicity in these games and online communities. However, when looking towards solutions, it seems best to abandon toxicity as a focus because it means too much to be useful and is also far too rhetorical. As Busch, Boudreau and Consalvo pointed out, it is the companies rather than the communities that stand to benefit from these loose terms, allowing them to engage with whatever elements of toxicity they deem impactful to their bottom line or to the mass destabilization of their player bases (2016). The rhetorical property of toxicity is kept alive through discussions among the DOTA 2 community, and as such, proposing a plan to curb 'toxicity' as an entire community defines it would be a miraculous achievement. As far as DOTA 2 is concerned, I see no path for initiating change other than through community influencers who might realize the effects the community has on itself. If there are no visible solutions on the immediate horizon then I can say with confidence that research into these games, their systems, communities, and governance must continue so that we might find a way to climb out of the toxic swamp that so many game communities are said to be.

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