Games should let us choose our own stakes



After more than 2,000 hours in *Dota 2*, I've finally been sent to gamer jail for the first time. It's worse than I ever imagined, which makes it an extremely effective deterrent in a competitive game where teamwork is essential. But now that I've been punished, I see that there's a better way to administer multiplayer justice.

I had been proud of my perfect player conduct score since Valve introduced the rating system in 2019. (By the way, that's a score of 10,000, and it comes with a reassuring green smiley face when you're doing well.) The score is a loose measure of whether you're an upstanding member of the player community. If you're reported a lot by your teammates or abandon games before they're finished, your score goes down. I think those are the right metrics to track, even though people routinely abuse the reporting feature for petty reasons.

So here's why *I'm* in the *Dota 2* cone of shame: I've "abandoned" several games over the past couple of weeks due to *having a life*. For various reasons, I've had more urgent phone

calls to attend to than usual and other things that have demanded my attention in a way I can't ignore. To be clear: I think it sucks when people leave team games prematurely and, in *Dota*, that includes going AFK for just a few minutes at a time. Even if you return to your keyboard and resume play, the jig is up: you'll be officially assessed with game abandonment. I'm not proud of abandoning my teammates, even if we still ended up winning several of those games when I returned.

I've now been placed into what's called the "low priority matchmaking pool," which is a *very* lonely place. It's difficult to find a match; in my experience, it can take up to 20 minutes to find enough players to queue up with. And the really punishing measure is that you're required to earn several *victories* to escape this matchmaking pool; losing a game doesn't get you any closer to freedom. Because each match can last anywhere from 20 minutes to over an hour, it could take many hours to get out of purgatory. As of the time of writing this, I've got one victory left, after trying to get out of this for about five hours.

Some players are punished more than others for reasons outside of their control

The way this system is set up means that some players will be punished more than others for reasons outside of their control, whether it's because of their own skill level, their ability to complete a match with life happening in the background, or because they're required to complete matches with people who are more likely to be horrible trolls.

I am a huge supporter of moderation in social games, and I've put heat on Valve in the past for making people pay to avoid toxic members of the community. I'm usually on the side of *more* moderation in games. But my recent experience has made me realize that a lot of team games are not built to recognize a particular segment of their audience: people who love the game

but just can’t commit to its demands. This group spans all ages: kids who are being called down to dinner; parents who have to suddenly attend to their children; and anybody else who is faced with an urgent need in real life that is more important than playing a video game.

Let me reiterate something: I *deserve* to be in *Dota 2’s* punishment pool because I *did* abandon those games and left my teammates hanging. And that’s true even if there were legitimate reasons for me to step away from the keyboard. But that makes me think multiplayer games that require moderation should create space for people who want to intentionally lower the stakes.

I thought *Dota 2’s* “turbo” mode, which is an unranked mode played at a faster pace (kind of like listening to a podcast at 2x speed), was that solution. But I’ve found that people take it just as seriously as other modes. Players in turbo still often get angry at teammates for not demonstrating expert skill. And the system seems to punish people for leaving turbo games the same as in other more serious modes of play. While I’ve played in turbo mode exclusively for some time because it accommodates my lifestyle better, it hasn’t really lowered the stakes of the game.

So here’s my request. Multiplayer games that require moderation and punishment pools should consider a bailout. There ought to be a mode of play where everyone who participates agrees that it’s okay to leave early if you need to. Maybe you’ll want to play this mode because everyone understands that you’re learning the game or trying out new things. Or maybe you know that, despite loving the game, there are real demands on your attention and you might be pulled away. Whatever the reason, it would be nice for games to create space for people who all agree that — like on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* — everything is made up and the points don’t matter.

https://www.theverge.com/23728570/multiplayer-game-team-stakes-competitive-moderation