

Multiplayer Gaming Achievements: From Bomb to Boost by Jeff Hardy

The world of gaming experienced an important change with the advent of networked extrinsic rewards, commonly known as achievements or trophies. The PC Steam platform and the seventh generation consoles Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 implemented these systems starting in 2007. Though all three differ in various ways, and even go by different names (achievement, trophy) they work very similarly: completing various objectives in games for these systems results in the familiar audio ding of a trophy drop or achievement points earned, and a rewarding little graphic unlocked and attached forever to one's network profile.

For power gamers, those who seek out 100% completion of the games they play, this is an interesting extra dimension to cope with, often requiring great lengths to finish all aspects of a game. Single-player trophies inevitably boil down first to rewards for progressing through the single-player campaign, and then to arbitrary and capricious rewards for anything beyond that, from the mundane to the compulsive to the ridiculous. Multiplayer trophies include all of the above with the addition of one radically unpredictable element: other humans. And this is where a number of difficulties arise in the current systems.

What if the game does not adequately match player skill levels for the various game modes? Any trophies related to winning those modes will seem out of reach. What if some game modes are just not popular? This is a real problem once a game has been out for a while, since participation drops overall and remaining players coalesce around a handful of the most fun game types. What if a game simply requires a once-in-a-lifetime lucky stunt involving coordination or competition with unwilling or unwitting players? You can play a game for ages and simply never pull it off. And what if multiplayer is simply broken? These online multiplayer challenges are difficult enough without all of the extra obstacles.

Power gamers have employed an interesting strategy to deal with these problems, so-called trophy boosting. Forums dedicated to boosting exist for nearly every game, filled with gamers setting up dates and times to get together to trade race wins or kill streaks, or to coordinate that impossible stunt, or just to work together for the long haul. A significant number of these players have never even attempted to earn these trophies legitimately, seeking only to boost them for trophy gain. It could be argued that this kind of flaccid boosting is a separate subculture from power gaming proper, since many power gamers actively work to experience all aspects of a game. Regardless, it is no surprise that this is frowned upon by many gamers since, depending on the game, multiplayer boosting activity could change the curve as it were, affecting the statistics and standings of other players.

Whether or not you agree with the trends or the methods, if full achievement is a goal, problems with these systems and the balance of multiplayer trophies practically ensures that at least a few online trophies for any given game will need to be boosted. It is an unfortunate situation that has plagued the achievement systems since their inception, and it shows few signs of improving.

The following are some of my own experiences dealing with the difficulties of multiplayer trophies for games on the Playstation 3. I hope to illustrate the wide range of issues one can encounter when seeking these achievements.

Red Faction: Guerilla has a typical multiplayer achievement problem. *Try Anything Once*, *Check Your Map*, and *Tools of the Trade* require that one finish a match on every mode, on every map, and score a kill with every weapon respectively. These were simply unattainable for me without boosting, because most of the game types, and maps, and weapon combinations were no longer played by the time I experienced multiplayer a mere two years after the game's release. I have a friend with the game, and he volunteered to be a punching bag.

Red Dead Redemption is a trophy marathon to begin with, and there are more than a few multiplayer trophies that see a lot of boosting. In particular Kingpin requires one to quickly kill a full eight players in an optional game mode. Getting eight players to respond to an optional invite proved impossible, and even if they did, killing all of them within three minutes would have required the planets to align. I ended up recruiting 15 players spanning nearly as many timezones from the ps3trophies.org boosting forum, coordinating a time to meet up and trade dynamite group kills. It was still difficult, but also hilarious. I sincerely doubt very many people have ever earned this legitimately.

Portal 2 offers a uniquely strange trophy. Professor Portal requires that one beats co-op mode, and then completes the tutorial with someone who has never played before. This is essentially a pyramid scheme in trophy land, as eventually a last wave of players will have no new players to escort through training. One approach is to play the tutorial over and over again, hoping that the strangers one plays with are there for the first time. I tried this for a while with no luck, even though I was playing during the initial surge of popularity shortly after the game's debut. Luckily I have a friend with the game who allowed me to tag along the first time he played.

Grand Theft Auto IV is consistently ranked among the best Playstation 3 games of all time, and it is perhaps appropriate that it is one of the most difficult games to earn all rewards. In fairness, it was released just as achievements debuted, but three trophies illustrate a lot that is still wrong with the current multiplayer achievement systems.

First there is *Auf Weidersehen Petrovic*, requiring one to achieve a win in every multiplayer game mode and map, illustrating the familiar problem of how to deal

with modes and maps that are no longer played. Multiplayer participation has remained relatively strong over the years since the game's release in 2008, but inevitably there are modes that are simply avoided (boat races anyone?). Players typically swap races and wins with someone on the boosting forums. In my case, I happened to meet someone in a co-op game and did the same.

Then there is *Fly the Co-op*, requiring one to beat three co-op missions in incredibly challenging times. This is a real test of skill, with the added difficulty of finding cooperative, reliable partners from out of the hordes of fools and griefers, with which to master the missions. A lot of players struggle with this trophy, and there is even a "service" consisting of a Facebook group of talented players who will shepherd wayward players through the missions. I did this the hard way, having finally found a good partner who was willing to work at it through dozens and dozens of attempts. The most interesting part is that we did not speak the same language, using online translation tools to coordinate our efforts. Both of us had so much trouble with other players that it was but a small obstacle, and it was very rewarding to finally achieve. In the aftermath of all of this, I have helped other players myself.

Finally there is *Wanted*, a matter of maxing out to level ten in multiplayer by picking up or earning cash in various game types. This is a rather common achievement for multiplayer games that award some measure of experience, but the problem here is that the only way to earn money is in adversarial multiplayer or the handful of co-op missions, and you need an awful lot of it. Also, since there are only ten levels, having this few gradations does not offer a lot of opportunity for in-game rewards, and the game barely awards any anyway. Ultimately, it is an unbelievable slog to reach level ten and the effort is not commensurate with the reward. But since it stands in the way of 100%, plenty of gamers are hard at work seeking out the fastest ways to earn cash, some taking advantage of gaming glitches. One of my favorites is one of the most ridiculous, taking advantage of a certain map, certain settings, a certain location, a respawn glitch, and rubber bands wrapped around the controller, resulting in repeated unattended headshots for an hour of deathmatch. Even employing a number of techniques, legitimate and boosting, it is simply off-balance and takes forever.

All of these experiences illustrate the difficulties inherent to the multiplayer achievement and trophy systems. Two other situations show things at their best and worst.

Uncharted 2 and 3 offer a bevy of multiplayer trophies, but merely playing one co-op game and one competitive game is enough to reach platinum. Any trophies beyond that count towards 100%, which is a long way off, but it is a nice compromise.

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames is impossible to platinum, since it requires a handful of multiplayer trophies, and multiplayer stopped functioning barely a year after the game was released. In fact, the problem is so acute that the game will freeze if one is logged into the Playstation Network when loading the game. Some gamers were reportedly able to work around this issue by buying some other shovelware from the same company, the theory being that it updated and corrected some incompatibility or error in the user's profile on their multiplayer servers serious enough to prevent this particular game from functioning. If that is the case, all this needed was an update, and it was really poor form to let a game run fallow so soon after release.

With all of the difficulties outlined here, it is obvious that there are problems with these systems that have gone unaddressed. Despite that, striving for full completion can be quite an enjoyable activity, and I have been surprised to find that it has been even more enjoyable for those games that require help from the boosting world. It has been a very interesting and rewarding experience interacting with other players struggling with these same things, and I have seen nothing but the most altruistic behavior from genuinely appreciative gamers. The average multiplayer experience would be greatly improved if conducted this same way.

Perhaps game makers can start to move away from these draconian multiplayer achievement requirements. And perhaps they can learn what it would take to improve multiplayer gaming as a whole from those gamers who strive to overcome these obstacles. Gamers will continue to achieve in the meantime, and invent creative ways to do it.