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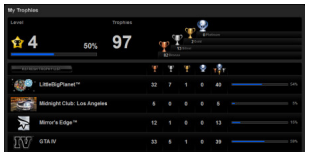

The current generation of video-game systems made a number of significant upgrades, from online play becoming standard to high-definition graphics to downloadable content to extend a game's longevity. One addition stands out from the others, though: the inclusion of publicly recognized achievements.

The Xbox 360 launched in 2005 with its Gamerscore system in place, and the growing popularity spawned the Playstation 3's Trophy system in 2007. The idea is simple: Put a task in a game for players to achieve, and when successful they receive an award and points for doing so. The points are then added together and are displayed with a person's online screen name as a sort of status symbol. The goals vary, from just pressing the start button in *The Simpsons Game* to reaching number one in the global online rankings on *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*.

Achievement unlocked

What started as a way to make games more challenging has turned into an almost obsessive

desire to get more points and a competition between friends and complete strangers to get on this modern version of an arcade game's high-score list.

It certainly drives me to play a game more thoroughly than I would normally, for the sake of seeing the little message pop up that I gained an award. I, along with friends and co-workers, will pick up a game and play it for the simple sake of increasing a Gamerscore or Trophies. It's like fast cars with gearheads: They get jealous when someone has something better than they have, so they want to get something even better. It's achievement envy.

It used to be that gamers would document their ridiculously impressive achievements via videotape or photos. In some cases, they would send the evidence to a publication such as *Nint endo Power*
or world-record arbiters Twin Galaxies. With online gaming, there's no waiting for recognition; you get awards right away, and your score is available for the whole world to see. Games have given us "bragging rights 2.0."

There are a number of titles that people pick up and play for the sole purpose of gaining more awards, even if the game is not good or interesting to the player. Working at Video Games Etc., I have seen people purchase *Avatar: The Burning Earth* for Xbox 360 and sell it back to us the next day; I did the same thing myself. The game has 1,000 Gamerscore points that can be earned within two minutes of starting. A number of games for children have similar setups, with points that can be snagged quickly and easily. In essence, it's a brilliant marketing strategy that makes games appealing to audiences outside of their target range.

Achievements have begun to shape how people play their games: They'll spend more time with them, and they're more likely to finish them. Thinking about getting more Xbox 360 Gamerscore points motivated me to complete *Prince of Persia* a few days ago, even though I hadn't played it in more than three months.

I know I'm playing games I don't like from time to time, and playing games for a longer period of time than I would like to, but it doesn't stop me. I fall into the trap of wanting to make sure my score is higher than my friends' -- to be the "winner." Worse, even though I emphasize that video games need to have a certain level of quality to be worth playing, I send the worst possible message to game developers: "I'll buy a bad game that I have no interest in as long as there are easy points to get." Hypocrisy, thy name is Luke.

But there are a number of publishers that don't abuse the achievement system. And overall, achievements are awarded appropriately. Earning some can be a real point of pride, such as completing a game at the hardest difficulty. And now that online play has become common, many awards also involve the satisfying experience of winning against actual people.

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