

The Problem with the Xbox Achievement System—and Three Things Microsoft Can Do to Fix It

By Jacob Beard

Ever since Xbox introduced players to gamerscore in 2005, players around the world have been competing with themselves and each other to complete difficult challenges and rack up achievements. Gamerscore had humble origins during the Xbox 360's launch, with most games being reasonably difficult to complete and offering rather stringent amounts of gamerscore for each achievement. The achievement system was in its infancy, yet it was one of the highlights of the second generation of Xbox.

Today, gamerscore and the achievement system exist in a much different gaming landscape than they did during the Xbox 360 era. The increasing popularity of indie titles, the creation of Xbox Game Pass, and the move towards a PC-and-console ecosystem has made achievement hunting cheaper and more bountiful than ever. Indie games are now worth 1000G but are also able to add more achievements through title updates. Game Pass has enabled players to access hundreds of games (and by extension, gamerscore) for a low monthly rate. PC achievement integration has allowed diehard completionists to “stack” the same achievements on PC and Xbox by playing the same game twice. All of this contributes to a gamerscore and achievement economy that sounds rewarding at first but actually feels demotivating upon closer inspection.

Gamerscore and achievements are too easy to obtain at the current stage of Xbox's life cycle. *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* offers players 1075G for unlocking all of the game's achievements, but doing so requires you to become the number one player on the

online global leaderboards. Compare this to a game like Bullet Beat from publisher Xitilon which offers 4000G and can be completed in about 30-45 minutes. If one game takes hundreds of hours of agonizing work and the other takes thirty minutes and little skill, what is the incentive to play the more difficult game that offers less gamerscore? At this point, Xbox doesn't have an answer for this.

Xbox needs to make significant changes to the achievement system if they want players to stay engaged with it. There is already a ludicrous amount of easy gamerscore on the market, but it isn't too late for Microsoft to take matters into their own hands and give players the motivation to earn achievements again.

Solution One: Add Quality of Life Improves to the Achievement System

Xbox already made welcome adjustments to the achievement system during the Xbox One generation. Achievement enthusiasts were treated with the ability to compare achievements with friends, compete on gamerscore leaderboards, make LFG posts for achievement hunting, track achievements, earn Microsoft Rewards points for earning achievements, and more during this past generation. These are all unequivocally positive additions, but there are still a ton of quality of life improvements that could be implemented.

Giving developers the ability to add achievements alongside DLC content was a welcome inclusion from Microsoft, but it also created a problem with gamerscore that hasn't received a particularly elegant solution. The issue is that many players are having the DLC achievements counted against them, despite not actually owning the DLC. For example, Mirror's Edge offers 1000G in the base game and an extra 250G if the player buys the expansion content. However, the achievement menu doesn't clarify this at any point. Instead, the achievement page will state

that the player has 1000 out of 1250G and 80% of the achievements, assuming they obtained every other achievement in the base game. This gives anyone looking through this person's profile the impression that they haven't completed all of the achievements, when the truth is that they just aren't able to spend the extra money on the DLC content. Xbox could easily mitigate this problem by listing the DLC gamerscore separate from the base gamerscore, either directly next to this base gamerscore value or as a separate achievement list below the original game. This would undoubtedly give many players a stronger desire to complete the achievements for the base game, as seeing 1000/1250 is enough to deter some hardcore achievement hunters from even starting a game.

In conjunction with separating DLC achievements, Xbox could also give players the option to hide an achievement list from their profile. The current system allows a player to delete a game from their profile if they haven't earned any achievements for it yet, but unlocking a single achievement ensures a permanent place for that game on the player's profile. A player who enjoys completing the achievement lists for tons of games might feel discouraged when looking back at their games and seeing that they were unable to complete Halo 3, a game that came out almost 15 years ago, because the servers were shut down or because they no longer own the game. Additionally, some games like Quake 4 have achievements that can't be obtained unless the user still has their Xbox 360, since the game isn't backwards compatible at this time. Xbox should allow players to delete certain games from their achievement profile that they aren't happy with while still letting them keep the gamerscore they earned from it.

Solution Two: Get Rid of Gamerscore

Before you raise your pitchforks, hear the idea out. It's clear from the *Bullet Beat* example earlier that cheap and easy gamerscore has caused massive inflation in the gamerscore economy and made it demotivating to play more difficult titles. Perhaps Xbox could take a cue from achievement-tracking website TrueAchievements and distribute a score based on achievement rarity. TrueAchievements uses an algorithm to award more points for an achievement if less people who have played the game have unlocked the achievement. For example, the "Welcome" achievement from *Uno* awards a small amount of points because almost 100% of *Uno* players have unlocked it, but the "LASO Master" achievement from *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* is worth a lot more because only about 1% of players have unlocked it. If Microsoft switched to a point value based upon achievement rarity and difficulty, it might drive exhausted achievement hunters and the general public towards the achievement system.

Unfortunately, this solution has a glaring issue: gamerscore has been around for close to seventeen years now, and there are still some players who feel attached to their score. Using a rarity-based system like the one outlined previously would mean that gamerscore can fluctuate as more or fewer people unlock a particular achievement. This would mean that getting to the 100,000 milestone wouldn't be as meaningful knowing it could be taken away at any time if people discover an easier method to obtaining one or more of the achievements you already have. To counteract this, Xbox should use both scores; your gamerscore should appear alongside another version of your score that is adjusted for achievement rarity. This would give players the best of both worlds and provide players of all skill levels with something to chase after.

Solution Three: Hold Developers and Publishers Accountable for their Achievement Practices

Bullet Beat's achievement list offering up 4000G for 30 minutes of brain dead play isn't an anomaly, but rather a symptom of a problem that plagues a large portion of the industry. The game's publisher, Xitlon, is infamous in achievement hunting circles for their attempts to practically sell gamerscore itself. Every game published by the company is a simple indie game devoid of any passion and originality, but the content of the game doesn't matter to Xitlon. Instead, the publisher simply ensures the games are relatively inexpensive and have incredibly easy achievements that can be completed in a matter of minutes. As a result, gamerscore addicts quickly flock to buy whatever Xitlon game is available for five dollars in order to boost their gamerscore without much real effort, and the publisher is able to rake-in the profits. What's worse is that the publisher continues to add free DLC updates that add nothing more than easy achievements, bringing the cumulative value of a game up to 4000G. It's one of the most blatant examples of a publisher artificially inflating the gamerscore economy for a quick buck, but Xitlon is far from the only company doing this to every game in their catalog.

Microsoft desperately needs to put a stop to pay-for-points gamerscore inflation, which is by far the worst flaw of the gamerscore system. As mentioned previously, players generally appreciate an additional gamerscore challenge when DLC and title updates are added to a game, so outright restricting a publisher's ability to engage in this process would undermine one of the positive additions to the achievement system from the Xbox One generation. Perhaps instead, Microsoft should have a team within Xbox that more closely monitors what achievements are being added to the platform. This team could ensure an achievement list cannot be unnecessarily easy, completed with console commands, or add too many achievements relative to the size of a

content update. It wouldn't be a simple task, but it's a necessary step if Microsoft wants players to remain engaged with the gamerscore system.

Microsoft has a major gamerscore problem that will only be exacerbated if the current achievement system is left in place. The improvements to gamerscore and achievements during the Xbox One generation breathed new life into an aspect of the console experience that had gone somewhat underappreciated, but they also opened the door for the eventual crash of the gamerscore economy as a whole. If Xbox can add simple quality of life features, reconsider how points from achievements are calculated, and be more adamant about how achievements are added to their platform, the company just might be able to return the achievement system to the glory days of the Xbox 360.