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GAMING PLATFORMS AS CHAOTIC NEUTRAL?: TOXIC PERFORMANCE, COMMUNITY RESISTANCE, AND AGONISTIC POTENTIAL

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Extended Abstract

In the post-gamergate era, much has been written about the toxicity of online multiplayer video gamespaces (Canossa et al., 2021; Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Kordyaka & Kruse, 2021; Kou, 2020; Kowert, 2020). Game scholars agree the definition of the term ‘toxic’ is slippery, lacking definitional stability in the mainstream and within game studies. There is also consensus that toxicity is a highly context-dependent phenomenon reliant on players’ relationships to one another and technical game elements (Canossa et al., 2021; Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020; Kou, 2020; Kowert, 2020).

The design mechanics of many MMOGs fashion players into teams—ranging from small fireteams to large guilds. Regardless of size, teams are defined by their members, alliances, and most crucially, outsiders. Exclusion is thus an integral feature to the normative function of most MMOGs. Past scholarship illustrates that these spaces are deeply gendered and center white masculine normativity (Cote, 2020; Gray, 2020; Ruberg, 2019; Shaw, 2015; Trammell, 2023). Norms are then enforced through an enduring apolitical discursive position towards fun and play, a privileged position which erases concerns of race and identity (Trammell, 2023). The result is an ongoing reinforcement and reinscription of identity conflating gaming, whiteness, and

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masculinity, to produce a hegemonic ideal, what Gray (2020) terms the *default gamer identity*.

The enforcement of default gamer identity in gamespaces contributes to what players and academics alike have labeled toxic gamer culture. However, players outside this identity can and do enter into these spaces, coming into contact, and often conflict, with the default gamer. In instances of conflict there is the potential for agonism—described as a political and social theory that seeks to highlight generative dimensions of conflict (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). During our research, we found it difficult to produce a taxonomy of toxicity, particularly when a more compelling thread pointed to the agonistic potential woven into the umbrella term toxic gamer culture.

We employed cultural probes to better understand how players experience toxicity in online gaming spaces. Cultural probes, typically objects or a small collection of materials, are designed “to ask questions and present challenges in an open-ended, often provocative manner” (Wallace et al., 2013, p. 3442). When developing this method, Gaver et al. (1999) were concerned that employing a survey with a standardized set of questions might limit an understanding of participants’ embodied experience of their cultural environment, and their relationship to and with technology. Building on this design methodology we developed and distributed a set of probe kits to 28 participants in the form of playing cards and instructed the participants to bring their probe kits into their regular gameplaying routine.

The probe kits gently disrupted each participant’s gaming experience by asking them to carry out a series of brief and creative gaming-related tasks. Digital game play often requires players make quick and intuitive decisions. Accordingly, the probe kits were developed to encourage players to slow down and revisit those moments of instinctual decision-making in order to meaningfully deconstruct their embodied experience of toxicity during play. The kits encouraged participants to reflect on their personal experiences of pressure points in gaming before writing out their thoughts. This ensured the work completed by the participants in the study emerged from a place of self-reflexivity and intentionality. For the duration of the research, we employed the term ‘pressure points’ in reference to behaviours that would typically be categorized as toxic to avoid priming and limiting the responses of our participants to common understandings of toxic activity in gamespaces.

Using information from each participant’s probe kit, we designed a set of interactive tools and conducted three focus groups and twelve semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Our gaming-themed tools encouraged participants to pause and think through their experiences of toxicity during play. The first tool, a tier-list maker, asked participants to drag icons of toxic behaviours to the list and explain the rationale behind their choices. The icons were tailored specifically to each focus group or interview based on the information from the participants’ probe kits.

The second tool was an alignment chart—the meme format popularized in the tabletop role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons. We asked participants to drag icons of games, spaces, and communities into their corresponding alignments and explain their

rationale. This activity encouraged the participants to explore their relationship to game communities and environments, while also discussing hidden social structures.

In the analysis, we organized player-defined toxic pressure points into thematic categories. We came to understand each participant's understanding of the pressure points as complex, relational, and often, contradictory. While recognizing many of the pressure points to be so-called toxic behaviours, many of our participants also associated these pressure points with fun or describe them in ways that we identified as actions to counter toxicity. Therefore, we concluded that a single, clear-cut definition of toxicity is insufficient and is better understood as performative and dependent on situational context. We were particularly inspired by the emerging narrative of countering from our participants and recognize this narrative as a potential path of resistance against more harmful manifestations of certain pressure points.

Intrigued by these contextual and relational dimensions, we embraced the duality, contradictions, and slippages inherent in toxicity as a concept. Like toxicity, performance is relational and is a form of analysis that helps to identify the ways in which toxicity is contested and opposed, sometimes through further heightened toxicity. Additionally, it helps us to better understand non-toxic instances of traditionally toxic behaviours. This study pivots focus from determining whether a behaviour or game mechanic is toxic to questioning *why* it is perceived as toxic.

This paper explores behaviours which are emblematic of performing toxicity or 'counterplay' (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2009). We position counterplay as a performance of toxicity in response to pressure points in a multiplayer gamespace. In this manner it may contribute to deepening the toxicity of a gamespace, illustrated neatly in a quote from one of our participants: "Okay, if you are being toxic, I will just be toxic to you, and we will see who will be the most toxic eventually." This interaction is common when the hegemonic norm is rejected by an actor or when groups performing antagonistically converge in gamespaces.

Our findings from our cultural probes, focus groups, and interviews, are grounded in the following themes. We propose that counterplay exists in the form of ludic mithridatism, when a player develops a threshold for tolerating toxicity in a gamespace. From discussions with our participants, several different methods for tolerance building emerged during their play including Fighting Fire with Fire, which participants described as turning the perpetrator's toxicity against them, and Muting, the act of turning off the voice chat which are participants discussed as an easy tool that acts as a shield or protective measure. However, we also found that muting can easily tip into Silencing, a double bind where women mute themselves to prevent harassment, but doing so may put them at a disadvantage in the game, particularly in games that require group coordination. Not only does this prevent players from progressing at a reasonable pace but can also perpetuate the myth that women are inherently bad at playing video games, which in turn can encourage more toxic behavior.

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