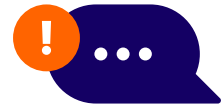


OFFLIMITS

Expertisecentrum
Online Misbruik



HELPWANTED
bij online grensoverschrijdend gedrag



GAME OVER

Gamer needs in a toxic
online gaming landscape

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01

SUMMARY

This work focuses on online toxicity in the gaming community, where gamers engage in various forms of transgressive behaviour, such as verbal harassment, discrimination and cheating – with the aim of hampering other gamers’ play or causing harm in multiplayer games. Toxicity is fuelled by the online disinhibition effect and gives individuals a sense of anonymity and being untouchable (Huijstee et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022).

The vicious circle in which the toxic behaviour of some players affects others causes the latter to exhibit toxic behaviour as well. As a result of this dynamic, toxicity is normalised in the gaming community, with certain forms of negative behaviour being considered acceptable. This, in turn, can lead to amplification of toxicity, since players feel less inhibited about engaging in toxic behaviour if they see others displaying the same behaviour (Kowert and Cook 2022). These factors lead to a gaming culture where online toxicity is not recognised or acknowledged, and bystanders do not intervene (Beres et al., 2021). This cycle can repeat and reinforce itself, making it increasingly difficult to bring toxic behaviour to a halt and foster a positive gaming environment (Frommel et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2022).

Only toxicity is mainly suffered by gamers from marginalised groups, such as women and black gamers. Online toxicity has several negative consequences including anxiety, feelings of powerlessness, stress, social isolation and symptoms of depression. In addition, this phenomenon has implications for game developers and the broader gaming community, with potential consequences such as reduced player retention and reduced team performance in the eSports sector, which could lead to losses in revenue. Gamers can adopt various coping strategies, ranging from passive methods such as ignoring and avoiding to more active approaches such as counterspeech and reporting toxic players, which may be related to their needs.

Based on twenty in-depth interviews with gamers, this study sheds light on what gamers' needs are when it comes to online toxicity. It appears they want effective reporting features, improved moderation and more inclusivity in games. More specifically, they mention the need for opportunities for constructive dialogues with toxic players, for positive role models, and for a safe environment such as a helpline with expertise in online gaming that gamers can turn to for support.

The study shows that tackling online toxicity requires a cultural shift that should focus on bystanders taking an active stance on toxicity and encouraging positive behaviour. In addition to individual gamers, platforms, parents, educators, teachers, gaming communities and gaming influencers also have an active role to play when it comes to promoting respectful positive online manners. Game developers must take responsibility for designing games that are safer and more inclusive. Politicians should set guidelines for the gaming industry and strictly enforce them. The Digital Services Act (DSA) could provide the legal framework to this end. The toxic cycle must be broken without burdening the victims, and gamers must be actively involved in initiatives to tackle transgressive behaviour online. Online toxicity? Game over!

02

FOREWORD

In this study, I will guide you through the world of online gaming to explore the toxicity experienced by players, and their needs in relation to online toxicity, through in-depth interviews with twenty gamers from a variety of backgrounds. It is important that these stories are heard and given a place in the broader approach to online abuse. I conducted this research from my role as content programme officer of Helpwanted, a helpline for online transgressive behaviour, where I represent the online gaming community. Helpwanted is part of Offlimits, the centre of expertise for online abuse.

As a professional gamer and game influencer, as well as a Moroccan-Dutch woman, I have been confronted with all manner of transgressive behaviour in online games ever since I started gaming. Through voice chat, for example, I am regularly subjected to sexist comments such as 'get back in the kitchen where you belong', or I get racist messages about my appearance. Online transgressive behaviour is known as 'online toxicity' in the gaming community.

In addition to being confronted with it personally, I also witness online toxicity aimed at other players on a daily basis. Through my channels, I try to help players who are affected by these issues, which include harassment and discrimination, usually based on the user's name, the character they have chosen in the game or the (assumed) identity of players. Toxicity is also manifested in game sabotage, scams, threats and doxing, where someone shares another player's private data on the internet without consent. Toxicity happens wherever interaction is possible, such as in voice and game chat. Players who stream their game (live broadcasting), such as myself, also face online toxicity in the live chat, among other things. It is painful to keep experiencing this over and over again.

The anonymity of the internet makes toxic players think they can say whatever they want. They are guided by the emotions of the game, taking their frustrations out on others, or being negative. Some people are sore losers. But whatever the reason may be, online toxicity is never OK! It ruins one's gaming enjoyment and can lead to mental health issues. This behaviour may also be punishable, in the case of scams, for example. Nevertheless, I have found that many players believe that online toxicity is simply 'part of the game', or that gamers adjust their gaming behaviour to avoid toxicity. However, placing the responsibility of preventing online toxicity with players who suffer it is a form of victim-blaming. It is incumbent on game developers, game platforms and browser game administrators to ensure safe inclusive gaming environments and enforce the rules in the event of inappropriate behaviour. It is the responsibility of parents, educators and teachers to teach children respectful online manners and good sportsmanship so that everyone can have positive gaming experiences.

Finally, I want to thank the players who participated in the in-depth interviews for this study. Your contribution has not only helped to better understand the issues, but will also be helpful in finding solutions to make the gaming environment safer and more inclusive. Once again, my sincere thanks for your participation, honesty and valuable input.

Ouassima Belmoussi

Policy officer at Helpwanted

03

INTRODUCTION

Online video games have long been a source of enjoyment for people worldwide. Officially, the game known as 'Tennis for Two' is the world's first computer game, devised in 1958 by an American scientist. The introduction of the 'Magnavox Odyssey' in 1972 marked the birth of the world's first game console. Since then, the gaming industry has seen massive developments, with the emergence of platforms such as Xbox, PlayStation and Wii. As a result, games became bigger, more impressive and of better quality¹. Gaming has also become increasingly digitised, in line with the growing role of the internet in our daily lives. The online aspect has significantly expanded the gaming experience, with physical encounters no longer being required to play together. Today, games also offer new elements, such as in-game purchases and subscriptions. As a result, the games industry has developed into an industry that is more than twice the size of the film industry in terms of revenue (Financial Times 2022).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, online video games became not only a significant source of entertainment, but also an important way for people to stay connected and maintain social contact in a time of physical distancing. People started playing and buying games online significantly more often, and are watching streamers² online much more often (Tervoort 2020). Multiplayer games, where people play online games together (anonymously) and against each other, are particularly popular. The growing interest in games also translates into increasing sales worldwide. Newzoo expects the gaming industry to be worth more than \$205 billion by 2026 (Elliot 2023).

¹ Obtained from www.mediawijs.be/nl/artikels/games-van-vroeger-tot-nu.

² Streamers are individuals who broadcast their gameplay live via platforms such as YouTube Gaming. Streamers play video games, provide commentary and analysis, host events or tournaments, and interact with their viewers via live chat.

Almost one-third of the world's population, approximately three billion people, game. According to market researcher Newzoo, which specialises in games and data, 46 per cent of gamers are female (Elliot 2023). Gaming is also a popular activity among young people. Dutch figures show that approximately 38 per cent of primary school pupils and 33 per cent of secondary school children play video games every day (Weerdmeester 2023). The diversity of games is enormous, ranging from action and shooting games such as Fortnite, to creative games such as Minecraft, and even games that tackle difficult themes such as loss and grief, for example, *Gris* and *That Dragon Cancer*.

Whereas previously there was more attention for the possible negative effects of games, such as the risk of addiction and incitement to aggression, an increasing number of studies does, in fact, point to the positive effects of games (Weerdmeester 2023). Games offer entertainment, education and opportunities for social contact. Moreover, online games can yield benefits in offline life. People who are bullied or feel isolated can find support in gaming. The games elicit intense, positive emotions and help set and achieve goals, cope with disappointments and develop commitment. They also promote social skills and teamwork, even in the case of violent games. In addition, games can train players in filtering relevant information, which can be useful in daily tasks³.

On the other hand, the online component poses risks for players to have negative experiences in multiplayer games due to possible negative and harmful behaviour of other players. This behaviour includes misuse of communication tools in order to harass other gamers, as well as disruptive behaviour in the game, such as spamming and cheating. This type of behaviour is often summarised under the umbrella term of 'online toxicity' (Frommel et al., 2023). These negative behaviours particularly affect gamers from marginalised groups, such as women, LGBTQ+ players and players of colour (Reid et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021). This issue has significant implications. Gamers who are targeted by toxic behaviour may experience mental stress, social isolation, and depressive or suicidal thoughts (ADL 2019-2023).

For many gamers, their lifestyle is inextricably linked to the gaming world, raising the question of how gamers deal with online toxicity and what they need in this regard. It appears that in the (Dutch) literature, little is known about this issue as yet. That is why this study explores the needs of twenty gamers from different backgrounds in relation to online toxicity. In order to fully understand the needs of gamers, insight is also provided into their reactions to online toxicity, which will hopefully contribute to appropriate support for this community and may be used for prevention and intervention purposes.

³ Obtained from www.helpwanted.nl/hoe-zorg-ik-voor-een-positieve-online-game-ervaring-voor-mijn-kind.

04

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

With the expansion of the gaming industry, toxicity in online games has also increased, according to Unity Technologies⁴, a game engine and company that specialises in developing video game software. We have, in fact, reached the point where gamers and bystanders accept and rationalise such behaviour (Beres et al., 2021; Cary et al., 2020; Frommel et al., 2023; Kowert and Cook 2022; Reid et al., 2022). In this context, gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and impact of online toxicity in games is crucial. To do so, we draw on international literature, as there is little information on the Dutch situation. Given the international nature of online gaming, these findings are likely to be applicable for the Netherlands as well.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF TOXICITY IN ONLINE GAMES

Online toxicity refers to negative and harmful behaviour of players that is intended to disrupt the enjoyment of the game and the performance of other players by misusing the communication tools or actions in the game itself (Frommel et al., 2023). Such negative interactions can also occur on gaming platforms and while streaming games, and include a broad range of transgressive behaviours (Reid et al., 2022). Since the 1990s, toxicity in online games has been researched and recognised as a growing problem (Dibbel 1994).

No set criteria are available to determine whether behaviour is toxic or not; this varies depending on the players, including bystanders, victims and perpetrators and is determined by various factors such as the severity of the action and its effect on victims (Chou 2023; Wijkstra et al., 2023). This is often culturally determined and may also be related to the rules and social

⁴Obtained from <https://create.unity.com/toxicity-report#>.

norms of a specific game (Kowert and Cook 2022; Wijkstra et al., 2023). Although stalking and threatening, sexually loaded and aggressive statements are considered highly toxic, there are numerous other manifestations. Toxic behaviour may also continue outside of the game, with the toxic gamer looking up the victim on social media, for example, and causing further damage there by sending unwanted pictures (Chou 2023).

Cybersmile⁵, an organisation for the prevention of cyberbullying and online abuse, has described the most common forms of online toxicity. Online toxicity often includes ‘flaming’ and ‘rage’, where players scold or treat others badly after a lost game to express their anger or disappointment. Players sometimes also harm teammates by deliberately playing badly or sabotaging the game, which is known as ‘griefing’. Furthermore, ‘hate speech’ and ‘hate raids’ may be involved, where players attack or discriminate against others based on (assumed) identity characteristics, or flood a game streamer with hate speech. Other forms include ‘scamming’, where a player steals accounts or in-game purchases from others, for example, and DDoS attacks, where the opponent’s internet connection is deliberately interrupted. Players sometimes also share or threaten to share another player’s private data on the internet, known as ‘doxing’. Lastly, ‘swatting’ may occur, where a player sends a police unit to the home address of the opponent or a streamer without a valid reason, to hinder them in the game. Some forms of online toxicity, such as doxing and scamming, are punishable.

In this regard, Kowert and Cook (2022) distinguish between verbal and behavioural actions. Verbal actions are expressed verbally (using voice chat or text) from one player to another, while behavioural actions are performed using someone’s in-game character or trigger an action outside the game. The researchers also differentiate between toxic actions that are often done ‘in the moment’ and strategic actions that imply that the individual has spent some time gathering information and formulating a plan for toxic behaviour.

ANONYMITY AND NEGATIVE SOCIAL NORM

The main factor that fuels toxicity in online games is the fact that individuals feel anonymous and invincible (Wee and Tan 2021; Wijkstra et al., 2023). When online, people often appear to be less adept at assessing the consequences of their actions, or experience more difficulty making ethical judgements and taking ethically responsible actions. This effect, also known as the ‘online disinhibition effect’, is not only observed in gaming, but also applies to behaviour online in general (Huijstee et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022).

The competitive element of games also contributes to online toxicity. Gamers are continuously under pressure to achieve personal goals as well as meet others’ expectations within the gaming community. This element is particularly strong in eSports, which involves playing games in competition, whether for money or not. This pressure may lead to hostility among players.

⁵ Obtained from <https://www.cybersmile.org/advice-help/gaming/types-of-abuse>

As a result of the game element, gamers who engage in toxic behaviour, or bystanders, in fact often justify their behaviour with an attitude of ‘it’s just a game’ (Paul et al., 2015).

Personality traits and players’ mental health may also play a role in exhibiting toxic behaviour, as noted by Wee and Tan (2021). Some individuals may find pleasure in sabotaging the game, while others lack empathy or experience stress, whereby online gaming serves as an outlet for negative emotions.

In addition, players may have learned toxic behaviour from others while gaming, or they may feel pressure from their teammates to exhibit such behaviour towards other teams (Wee and Tan 2021). This illustrates how toxic gamers who are already present can create an environment that sustains toxicity, making that behaviour part of the gaming culture in the long term (Cary et al., 2020; Frommel et al., 2023; Kowert and Cook 2022). Moreover, as a result of these dynamics, bystanders often do not intervene, allowing perpetrators to continue their transgressive and play-disrupting behaviour unhindered (Beres et al., 2021).

For streamers on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch⁶, online toxicity can actually be a revenue model. For example, research (Berger and Milkman 2012; Geysler 2024) shows that content that evokes strong emotions such as anger and fear is more likely to go viral than content that is less emotionally charged. Such content can result in a direct financial incentive for streamers, who earn based on views, members and engagement, to produce highly emotional content that will go viral within the prevailing frameworks of gaming culture. Given the prevalence and normalisation of toxic behaviour in the gaming community, it is plausible that toxic content that evokes negative emotions will have a higher engagement rate – and thus higher earnings – than content with a positive approach.

INSUFFICIENT PROTECTION FOR ONLINE GAMERS

The toxic gaming culture is partly fuelled and reinforced by game developers and platforms that currently do not sufficiently protect their users (Chou 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Kowert and Cook 2022; Reid et al., 2022). This is linked to a lack of clarity, transparency, guidelines and oversight of both game developers and platforms, which has resulted in, among other things, little or no self-regulation or ineffective strategies for regulating gamer-generated or interactive content in multiplayer games (ADL 2023; Kros 2023; Lamphere-Englund and Bunmathong 2021).

Existing measures such as reporting features and swear word filters have significant limitations and depend on the specific game and platform. There is ambiguity in the literature about their use and effectiveness in addressing online toxicity (Chou 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Kowert and Cook 2022; Reid et al., 2022). In practice, gamers themselves experience the reporting process as inaccessible, time-consuming or disruptive while playing, which increases their

⁶ Twitch is an online platform for streaming live video content, mainly focused on gaming. Users can create their own live broadcasts or watch other people’s broadcasts, chat and participate in communities about various topics

reluctance to use the reporting tools (ADL 2020). In addition, feedback from the platform on actions taken in response to a report is often lacking and action from the platform after reporting sometimes fails to materialise, resulting in reporting being seen as pointless (Kou and Gui 2021). Moreover, gamers may also misuse reporting tools to thwart others in the game even when there is no toxic behaviour, which may lead to new forms of online toxicity (Chou 2023; Reid et al., 2022). For example, a player may falsely report that another player is cheating, with the aim of getting that player banned (Kou and Gui 2021).

Moreover, gamers (rightly) feel that the responsibility for maintaining a positive and respectful gaming environment should not be placed entirely with the players themselves (McLean and Griffiths, 2014). Preventive measures against online toxicity in games are limited, as most intervention systems only act once toxicity has occurred, whereas it would be better to prevent damage than to reduce it (Wijkstra et al., 2023). Although most gaming platforms do engage in a form of moderation, this moderation is not always efficient and its level again varies greatly between different games and platforms. Moderation by the platform may also provoke negative reactions among gamers as a result of possible sanctions and disruption of the game (Kros et al., 2023).

LACK OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The lack of diversity and inclusion in games may also contribute to online toxicity and fuel it. According to feminist game researchers such as Gray and Leonard (2018), gaming is intertwined with mainstream cultures of systematic exploitation and oppression, whereby video games can serve as valuable distractions for some, and as sources of violence and trauma for others. Traditionally, the gaming world has been designed by and for white males (Souza et al., 2021). This is rooted in historical and social structures. In the early years of the game industry, games were generally developed by men. Gaming was considered an activity practised by men, which was reinforced by social norms that encouraged men to take an interest in technology and competition, while women were often discouraged from engaging in these fields (Zhou et al., 2022).

As a result, many video games were marketed with a focus on male gamers, in terms of both game content and advertising campaigns. This meant that not only women but all people 'deviating' from the standard player were excluded from the start (Gray and Leonard 2018; Kowert 2020; Souza et al., 2021).

Moreover, the game industry reinforced gender stereotypes by presenting white male characters as the default heroes, for example, while female characters are often sexualised (Gray and Leonard 2018). There is not much ethnic diversity in the characters and racial stereotypes are endorsed, for example, by portraying black characters as violent and people from the Middle East as terrorists (Kros et al., 2023). In addition, most online games are not accessible enough

for people with physical and invisible disabilities, as confirmed by recent research by Samsung UK (2023)⁷.

These shortcomings in the gaming industry create an environment that excludes certain groups and marginalises them based on their (partial) identities, which can lead to (more) online toxicity. The lack of diversity and inclusion is further highlighted in the 2019 findings from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), an international anti-hate organisation. These findings show that 62 per cent of gamers, based on a sample of 1,045 adult US gamers, believe that companies should do more to make online games safer and more inclusive.

MARGINALISED GAMERS

Gender stereotypes, discrimination and misconceptions about acceptable behaviour contribute to online toxicity, similarly to transgressive behaviour offline. Therefore, the toxic behaviour is particularly directed at gamers from marginalised groups (Frommel et al. 2023; Kros et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021) and predominantly perpetrated by young (white) males who often exhibit high levels of emotional reactivity and impulsivity (Buckels et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2018; Lemerancier-Dugarin et al., 2021; Nitschinsk et al., 2022).

Research by the ADL (2020), which surveyed 1,009 adult US gamers, found that 53 per cent of those who experienced online toxicity experienced it based on prejudice, stereotyping, stigma and discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual identity or disabilities (physical or invisible). Gender and sexual identity were the most commonly cited reasons, with 41 per cent of women and 37 per cent of LGBTQ+ gamers experiencing toxic behaviour. 31 per cent of black gamers and 30 per cent of Latinx players were harassed on the grounds of race/ethnicity and 25 per cent of Asian-American gamers on the grounds of their identity. Furthermore, 25 per cent of Muslim gamers and 18 per cent of Jewish gamers said they were attacked because of their religion, and 25 per cent of respondents indicated they were targeted because of their disability. The degree of online toxicity towards them increased when players with these (assumed) characteristics do not (appear to) conform to expected behaviour, based on stereotypes and incorrect beliefs about them (Frommel et al. 2023; Kros et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021; Zsila et al. 2022).

⁷ Obtained from <https://news.samsung.com/uk/new-research-by-samsung-uk-sheds-light-on-gamings-inclusivity-gap-for-gamers-with-disabilities>.

From an intersectional perspective, it is important to acknowledge here that an aspect of identity such as gender overlaps with categories such as ethnicity, skin colour, and sexual identity (Gray 2012; Gray and Leonard 2018). Players who are female, black and lesbian, for example, face a higher risk of being targeted by (various forms of) online toxicity. Age plays a role as well: younger gamers who spend more time playing competitive games are more likely to fall victim to toxic behaviour (Zsila et al., 2022).

In spite of efforts⁸ from the games industry to address toxic behaviour and make games more inclusive (Reid et al., 2022), the prevalence of toxic behaviour continues to rise. According to ADL research from 2022, 86 per cent of the 1971 American gamers they surveyed experienced online toxicity.

More recent research by Unity Technologies (2023) among 2522 international adult gamers found that the overall percentage of players who reported observing or experiencing toxic behaviour increased from 68 per cent in 2021 to 74 per cent in 2023. Half of the players who were surveyed said they regularly encounter toxic behaviour in games. In particular, an increase in cheating, deliberate game disruption and hateful comments was reported. In addition, 53 per cent of 407 game developers said they had noticed an increase in toxic behaviour in 2023.

DISRUPTIVE CONSEQUENCES

Online toxicity in online games has far-reaching harmful effects, which are similar to transgressive behaviour offline (Zousa et al., 2021). This behaviour can significantly affect the player experience, resulting in feelings of frustration, low mood or poorer performance in the game. Victims of online toxicity may also experience mental symptoms such as lower self-confidence, decreased concentration, ruminating and anxiety. It can also lead to a sense of powerlessness and a reduced sense of community in online games (Wijkstra et al., 2023).

Research by the ADL (2019; 2021) shows that adult players experience severe negative effects in their daily lives due to online toxicity. Players aged thirteen to seventeen have reported similar effects. These effects include feelings of discomfort, distress, reduced social interaction or isolation, and depressive or suicidal thoughts. Moreover, some participants reported treating others worse than they normally would, and personal relationships being disrupted.

The work of Zsila and colleagues (2022) shows that gamers who repeatedly fall victim to online toxicity show more symptoms of depression and have an increased propensity for problematic video game use. Gamers who were victims as well as perpetrators of toxic behaviour also indicated having higher levels of anxiety and anger.

In addition to the personal impact on players, online toxicity also has implications for game developers and the broader gaming community (Chou 2023). It can lead to unhealthy

⁸ One inspiring example is 'Fair Play Alliance', an alliance of which more than 200 game developers are members, with the aim of developing games that are free of discrimination and hate speech (Kros et al., 2023).

communities, which can then result in high turnover and reduced player retention, directly affecting revenues. Moreover, toxicity is detrimental to team performance, which is specifically problematic for the fast-growing eSports scene (Frommel et al., 2023).

According to the ADL (2021; 2022), online toxicity is a challenge that needs to be addressed on a large scale, and its harmful effects extend to all types of online games, not just competitive or notoriously toxic games.

COPING STRATEGIES

While gaming, people may deploy different strategies to respond to and deal with online toxicity, whereby they distinguish between passive and active approaches. These strategies may be connected to various identity characteristics of players such as gender and sexual identity (Reid et al., 2022).

Passive strategies emerge when gamers make no attempt to address or prevent online toxicity. This can be manifested in avoidance and conformity. Research (Lee et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021) shows that only a small proportion of gamers choose to stop gaming as a form of avoidance.

Players are more likely to choose to suffer/ignore toxic behaviour, or avoid talking and chatting during the game by blocking or muting toxic gamers where possible (Reid et al., 2022). Avoidance is also possible by switching to another game or only gaming with friends or with players of the same gender. In addition, some players hide their online identities or change their usernames (Reid et al., 2022), which further limits their gaming experience.

One example is gender swapping, where gamers play under a different gender identity. Zhou and colleagues (2022) investigated gender swapping among women. They found, among other things, that female gamers choose to adopt male characters or usernames that are stereotypically male to avoid online toxicity, and that heterosexuality is a negative predictor of gender swapping in women. To a certain extent, this practice may contribute to online toxicity, as some of the women who gender-swapped showed more dominant and aggressive behaviour in the game, given that this is stereotypically associated with male gamers (Zhou et al., 2022).

When conformity is used as a strategy, online toxicity often leads to a vicious cycle in which players who are victims of such behavior end up exhibiting similar behavior themselves. In research by Cote (2015), female participants reported, for example, adopting deliberately aggressive personality traits

during the game to gain respect from male players. Frommel et al. (2023) argue that the cyclical nature of online toxicity is changing and normalising what is acceptable and what is not. Other research (Cary et al., 2020; Kowert and Cook 2022) also illustrates that where there is a

prevalent culture of acceptance regarding toxic behaviour, gamers are more likely to engage in the same behaviour. These dynamics may lead to toxic behaviour not being recognised or acknowledged as such by gamers and/or to them blaming themselves for toxic behaviour displayed towards them, sometimes leading them to not take any action either (Beres et al., 2021; Chou 2023; Reid et al., 2022).

Active coping strategies include tackling and ending online toxicity, seeking help and supporting victims as a bystander. It is important to note here that the responsibility for stopping toxic behaviour does not lie with the victims. Kowert (2020) stresses that confronting toxic players about their behaviour in online games is one of the most effective ways to extinguish the behaviour. This strategy is also known as 'counterspeech', where a person responds directly to a person behaving in a toxic manner, thereby also communicating the norm that such behaviour is unacceptable (Kros et al., 2023). This is not common practice in online games, nor is seeking help after experiencing online toxicity (Reid et al., 2022).

Research by Cary and colleagues (2020) shows that only eighteen to twenty per cent of gamers take action against online toxicity. This finding can partly be explained by the normalised nature of toxicity and the fear that confrontation will lead to more online toxicity. For example, McLean and Griffiths (2019) showed that female players were directly insulted or ignored when they discussed their experiences of harassment in games, and received no support from bystanders. Reporting toxic players is another active strategy. According to Unity Technologies (2023), 34 per cent of all gamers use a reporting tool, although the literature shows conflicting results.

05

METHOD

In-depth interviews are an appropriate method to find out more about gamers' experiences with online toxicity, how they deal with it and what their needs are. The focus here is on the participants' social reality and lived experiences (Bryman 2012; Strauss and Corbin 1998). In the selection of respondents, I tried to find twenty gamers from diverse backgrounds who play multiplayer games.

As a professional gamer and game influencer, I was able to draw on my personal network when recruiting participants. During the data collection, the gamers interviewed varied in age, were employed in a variety of industries and/or attended different training types of education. They have a variety of backgrounds, beliefs and sexual identities. Fifteen players are Netherlands-based and five are international players. The stories collected offer valuable insights and show similarities in participants' needs when it comes to online toxicity. This diversity of perspectives promotes broader understanding and an inclusive approach to the issues and possible solutions.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The twenty in-depth interviews were conducted physically and online via Discord⁹, spread over the year 2023, and lasted an average of ninety minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, and I used a pre-prepared topic list. Informed consent was requested from respondents beforehand, where I briefly informed them about the interview design and made it clear that they would be able to pause or stop the interview at any time. All participants also signed a consent form before taking part in this study.

⁹ Discord is a versatile social interaction and collaboration platform that was designed for gamers, but is also used by various other communities. It allows users to send and receive text messages, voice calls and video calls in individual chats or group calls, also known as servers.

Thanks to my personal experience in online gaming and streaming, we were able to work based on a shared reality during the interviews. After all, we speak the same (gaming) language and there was mutual understanding, allowing me to put the participants at ease. The interview started with the question: 'What games are you currently playing and on what platforms?' Thus, their experiences with online toxicity were soon brought up, as victims, bystanders and sometimes as perpetrators. I then asked about the impact of online toxicity on their well-being and how they deal with it. I was also curious to find out what gaming means to participants. Next, we talked about their needs in relation to online toxicity.

DATA ANALYSIS

The research was conducted in an abductive manner, whereby theoretical ideas are derived from the collected data on the one hand and existing theories are used on the other. As such, data analysis is an iterative process; it moves back and forth between data and theory (Bryman 2012). The focus is on the respondents' experience, description and interpretation of online toxicity, with no fixed meaning or interpretation. Subsequently, the iterative coding process comprised a constant comparison of the in-depth interviews, both mutually and with theory. During the first stage of the coding process, I studied each interview separately, assigning open codes to central aspects such as 'ignoring' or 'listening'. I then compared and merged these codes if there were similarities, assessing consistency across interviews and developing new categories based on the data collected.

PERSONAL POSITION

As a researcher and gamer, I am deeply involved in the topic of online toxicity. To minimise potential biases, I strived for transparency during the interviews and repeatedly spurred myself on to critically reflect on my personal perspectives. I also involved other researchers in the data analysis, in order to ensure different perspectives. Departing from this awareness, I also aimed to stay as close as possible to the respondents' narratives and wording.

06

RESULTS

Online toxicity in games is a widespread and comprehensive problem, which has been extensively researched in the literature. The lived experiences of the twenty participants in this study reaffirm this statement, from the perspective of bystanders, victims and perpetrators alike. The degree and form of online toxicity may be related to participants' (assumed) intersectional identities. The manifold negative experiences with online toxicity also show the resilience of these gamers. Despite all the challenges, they continue to find ways to have positive experiences with online gaming. Gaming is indispensable to the gamers: it is an essential part of their lives, or serves as a way to escape the offline world.

This study outlines the ways in which participants deal with these challenges and their needs when it comes to online toxicity. In order to fully understand the needs of gamers, insight into their reactions to online toxicity is required. Fictitious names have been used under the quotes in order to safeguard the participants' anonymity. Where participants mentioned characteristics of their identity which they considered relevant to the context of the topic being discussed, these are mentioned.

RESPONSES TO ONLINE TOXICITY

Participants respond in different ways to online toxicity in games and experience toxicity in the form of cheating, 'flaming', 'griefing', hate speech, hate attacks, abusive, violent or threatening language, sexual harassment, spam and DDoS attacks. Their response depends on factors such as the type of game, the specific situation and the severity and frequency of the toxic behaviour.

When participants themselves are targets of online toxicity, they often try to ignore this behaviour. Some gamers see being able to ignore toxicity as a form of online resilience, leading them to believe that they are better able to not let toxicity affect them.

I just shake it off, I don't really care that much. I am quite used to it. I think it's just become an aspect of gaming now, especially online gaming. I've learned to kind of deal with it, though. Created a resilience, I think. (Noah, 19 years old)

In addition, participants do not always perceive online toxicity as a personal attack, given that it is so ubiquitous in online games. Participants also choose to ignore toxic behaviour because it is simply how it is. "You should just expect to come across bad people online," Omar said, for example.

Jasper, a gamer who regularly faces online hate as an LGBTQ+ person, described how he has become accustomed to the jokes and snide remarks made against him while playing.

Sometimes it feels really shitty but I just have to deal with it. They start making jokes around the game about that, when I die, for example, and then they say: that's why you've died, because you're gay. This happens a lot. I'm used to it, you know, because I play every day. (Jasper, 15 years old)

Even if they really bother him sometimes, Jasper usually chooses not to respond to toxic players. Sometimes he stops playing for a while and listens to music to shake off the negativity. Just like Jasper, Liam usually avoids interacting with toxic players, believing that responding will only lead to more provocation and has no use whatsoever. He explained that toxic players rarely change their behaviour or apologise, and so it is better to ignore their behaviour. Esra shares this view, adding that some people are just out to be loud-mouthed, and there is no point in arguing with them.

In addition, participants do not always intervene in online toxicity, for fear of further escalation, or of being targeted themselves. For example, Ahmed said: "I don't do anything, I just continue to play the game. Otherwise they will all just start shooting at me. Sometimes it continues for ages..."

Many participants deal with online toxicity by putting it into perspective. They try to imagine, for example, that toxic players might be young, have mental issues or simply do not understand the consequences of their behaviour. Ricardo illustrated this by saying:

So I just keep in the back of my mind that that person lives on the other side of the world online, and I don't really care what someone like that says or thinks about me. You know, those people insult you but the next day they have forgotten about it – so why should I worry about that if they have already moved on?! (Ricardo, 26 years old)

Putting things into perspective is not always effective, in which case Ricardo sleeps on it, takes a break from the game, or seeks support from his online friends. It helps that his gaming friends

understand what he is going through. David, a Chinese-English gamer, puts online toxicity into perspective as follows:

It kind of reflects on a person's life, maybe they have shortcomings in their life so they put their frustrations in the game instead. Maybe their parents set some standards for them and they don't meet them. Or other kind of failure. I try to keep that in mind (David, 32 years old)

In this way, according to some gamers, putting things into perspective helps shake off online toxicity. Isabella, a Maltese gamer, added that online toxicity, although annoying, has no real consequences in offline life, which is why she chooses to ignore it.

I don't really care because it doesn't really affect me anymore. It never affected me in the first place because it's the internet and not real life. Block it out and move on. It's not like real life issues where it's going to harm you in real life, no one will physically hurt you. These are not real problems but they can be annoying when trying to enjoy the experience. I just let it pass or ignore it. (Isabella, 18 years old)

For Lucas and his gaming group of friends, there is also a clear separation between the virtual world and reality. This awareness helps them during gaming, and they see it as a form of resilience. One consequence of this approach is that Lucas feels he should not take online toxicity personally, and he actually expects the same from other gamers.

Other common passive tactics used by these gamers include muting their opponents' sound, turning off communication options, or taking a break to avoid continued exposure to online toxicity, if the game offers these options. Some gamers also said that they started playing alone more often, changed their gamer tag¹⁰, changed their privacy settings, did not share personal information online and/or only played with friends to avoid online toxicity.

Emma, an Australian gamer, said she changed her gamer tag and omitted the word "girl" because she continued to experience sexism. Gamers are also taking more active measures in response to online toxicity, such as blocking and reporting toxic players, if the game offers these options. They do so mainly when they believe serious forms of toxic behaviour are involved, such as persistent negativity, racism, sexism and when insulting or derogatory language is used.

I did change it. Because whenever people would see my name, they would think of stuff what I'm not. I just didn't want to hear it no more. I was like nah, I'm going to change it. (Emma, 19 years old)

Some participants confront the person or persons who are exhibiting toxic behaviour. For example, they ask the toxic player in a message why they are behaving the way they are, or point out that it is just a game. Some participants, like Lucas, fight online toxicity with humour. He described how he surprises toxic players by going along with their negative comments, thus putting them off their stride. Lucas is an experienced gamer who does not suffer from online toxicity

¹⁰A gamer tag is a unique username used by a gamer to identify themselves in online gaming platforms and multiplayer games. You could see it as an online alias that makes it possible for other players to recognise you and lets you present yourself within the gaming community.

because he feels a significant distance from toxic players and does not take them seriously. By showing that he will not be intimidated, Lucas manages to disarm toxic players and discourage their behaviour.

Sometimes I think it's fun to say that I agree with them and then they don't know how to react. For example, if someone says: "Mate, you are so dumb, why are you playing like this?" I will just say: "Yeah that's right, I'm just dumb. Yep, I really don't know what I'm doing." Before you know it, they will stop, because you are going along with them, you know? (Lucas, 27 years old)

Some gamers find it easier to confront toxic players as a bystander than as the target of online toxicity. They are generally more likely to intervene on their online friends' and teammates' behalf than for strangers. They also think it is important that gamers stand up for themselves.

So I ask myself if I might be able to help and if there is something I can do about this. I always do something about it anyway. It is my team and I am partly responsible. If my team turn against each other, I also have a role in that because I want us to win together. (Nathan, 23 years old)

The gamers assess the severity of toxic behaviour and prioritise gamers with marginalised positions, such as women or LGBTQ+ persons. Aaliyah, for example, is particularly supportive of other women while gaming, because as a female gamer, she knows better than anyone that women face online toxicity to a disproportionate extent. She wants to stand up for them to show them that not all gamers are toxic.

The gamers confront the toxic player with their behaviour and/or support the victim by sending a message complimenting them and advising them to keep playing. Ali also stressed the importance of standing up for others during online games.

Of course I know that some people are, well, I don't know what goes on in their home situation, more sensitive to toxicity. Then I think: imagine if I didn't intervene and I don't stand up for that person. Imagine that it massively affects them and that they get depressed or something. If I just speak up, I know I did my best to help that person in that moment. (Ali, 21 years old)

In addition to experiencing online toxicity as a victim or witness, some gamers also admitted to having displayed toxic behaviour themselves in the past. For example, Aaliyah said she sometimes blamed other players when they lost a game and made harsh comments in an attempt to express her frustrations. She noticed that because she often played with men who were also often hard on each other, she got used to this type of toxic behaviour and started exhibiting the same behaviour herself. When an online friend pointed this out to her, she realised that she needed to adjust this behaviour and has now adopted a more positive attitude while gaming.

Hassan shared a similar experience and spoke openly about exhibiting toxic behaviour in the past. He admitted that he used to respond to toxic players by sending harmful messages back because he did not want to let people walk all over him. He related this to prevailing gender

norms about masculinity.

If I didn't say something back, I would see myself as a bitch or something. I think it has to do with a form of masculinity or something. You want to think of yourself as an alpha male. You don't want to start backtracking when you could react tougher. You know you can be tougher than him and you know you have to respond. (Hassan, 22 years old)

Over time, however, Hassan has learned to let go of these negative habits. He stressed that he has now become more mature and understands that displaying toxic behaviour can be harmful to others and himself.

Klaas explained that if ignoring toxic behaviour and taking the moral high road does not help, he will make a straight-legged tackle, as it were, and escalate the situation. He then starts to act mean in return, zooming in on the possible insecurities of the toxic player. Omar believes it is important to confront people, unless it involves children who display toxic behaviour.

I often say when they say I'm gay or something, 'so what if I am, huh?' I really start talking about it. I always have to have the last word, too. It makes me feel good. Then I feel like I have won. (Omar, 21 years old)

DIFFERENT NEEDS

Participants expressed different needs regarding online toxicity, which again vary depending on factors such as the type of game, the specific situation and the severity and frequency of toxic behaviour. These needs are the result of the negative effects that online toxicity has on them. Participants expressed feelings of unease, irritation, frustration, anger, irritability, fatigue, mood swings, anxiety, low self-esteem, and taking things out on others offline as a result of online toxicity. One male gamer specifically mentioned that he had gone bald and suspects that this is related to prolonged exposure to online toxicity.

One example of a shared need among participants is for gaming platforms and game developers to take responsibility for making online games safer and more inclusive, possibly through regulation. They feel it is important that this is done in consultation with gamers themselves and that the toxic player should be punished, for example by suspending or blacklisting them.

Better reporting systems and penalties for people who are being toxic, truthfully. And actually, developers should listen to the communities more about this kind of stuff. I'm not saying they don't do it, but I feel like they could address things a lot more than they do now, for sure. Because if they're the ones creating the games, you would assume they also play them, right? You would think that they would be more informed about the community. So I guess better interaction between developers and the community would probably be beneficial. (Liam, 31 years old)

This need was fuelled by common concerns among participants about the lack of reporting options and moderation on some gaming platforms, as well as the lack of a mute function¹¹ or the option to turn off communication channels in certain games. In addition, participants criticised the lack of feedback from platforms after they reported abuse and the complexity and inaccessibility of most reporting processes. Many gamers do not feel they are taken seriously as a result and think reporting is useless. Inclusion in games was also mentioned as a concern, with Isabella denouncing the lack of diversity in many characters.

Klaas mentioned a specific need for opportunities to engage in constructive dialogues with toxic players, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and empathy. Klaas suggested that gaming platforms could facilitate these dialogues through in-game chat features designed to encourage constructive communication and to allow players to resolve conflicts in a respectful manner. Participants also indicated that game developers might want to integrate pause features into their game with background music. These features can help distract and relax players for a little while after they experience online toxicity. These concerns highlight the general need for distraction that gamers feel after they experience toxicity in online games.

They also expressed a need for positive role models in the gaming world, such as well-known gamers and gaming influencers. According to Nathan, they can have an important impact by showing positive and respectful behaviour while gaming. He illustrated this with an example of a game influencer who did exactly the opposite, thus fuelling online toxicity.

His personality really affected how people interacted, in my opinion. The young boys watching him in America started adopting his toxic behaviour and doing the same in chats and on Twitch, which spread the behaviour like an oil slick. I will never forget how he was shouting into his microphone and throwing stuff. I will never forget it. (Nathan, 23 years old)

Klaas shared Nathan's view and sees game influencers and streamers as powerful figures who can influence and inspire other gamers to stop tolerating online toxicity. In line with this, Esra expressed the need for education and campaigns about online toxicity, led by well-known role models. She believes that by mobilising their supporters, these role models can effect positive change within the community. There is also a need for positive gaming communities¹² where there is no room for online toxicity and gamers support each other. Although positive and inclusive communities already exist, they are not widespread and/or always easy to find as yet, especially for new players.

At the same time, participants also expressed a desire for practical tools and guidelines for gamers to recognise and effectively deal with online toxicity. This can range from tips about using in-game reporting features and examples of respectful manners to applying self-care strategies and information on support organisations, with the goal of empowering gamers. They mentioned that this could also be relevant for parents, educators and teachers. Participants see a potential role here for non-profit organisations that champion online safety and well-being. For

¹¹ In the context of online games, a mute function can be used to reduce the sound of specific players or to mute the entire game, so you no longer hear their voices or sound effects. This can be useful if you want to avoid disruptive or unwanted sounds, such as swearing or other inappropriate language from other players.

example, a helpline for gamers offering a listening ear and practical tips is seen as a good idea. "I just think it's needed at this point. It definitely is needed," Michael, an African-American gamer who faces anti-black racism in games said on this topic.

The gamers shared their needs and expectations regarding what they consider important in a helpline or organisation for gamers. First and foremost, they mentioned the importance of a listening ear, and wanting their problems to be taken seriously. They are hoping for expert advice and emotional support to help them deal with challenges they face in the online gaming world.

Offering a sympathetic shoulder, a listening ear. Just offering advice, by muting, for example, so giving advice and then offering a listening ear. Showing that you are their mate and that gamers can call daily or weekly or monthly. Or chat. (Hassan, 22 years old)

They would also value a helpline or organisation that has in-depth knowledge about online gaming, understands what problems gamers experience and provides appropriate support. In fact, some participants experience misunderstanding and ignorance from their (offline) environment when they need support after experiencing online toxicity.

I do think if something like this is going to happen, we need to have some kind of an experience expert to get involved. Because if it's a person who has personally experienced toxicity while gaming, I think it would be easier for them to have a conversation with the person who has just experienced it, and really give some proper advice. (Ali, 21 years old)

They also mentioned that there should be a safe environment that is free of prejudice, where gamers can share their experiences without fear. In other words, transparency, anonymity and confidentiality are highly valued. The helpline or organisation should be free of charge and accessible so that all gamers, regardless of their background or financial situation, can access the support they deserve. 24/7 availability was seen as important, since most gamers are mainly active outside regular working hours. Offering this support online would be very useful based on the gamers' preferences, given their frequent online presence while gaming. Participants also encouraged the helpline or organisation to set up a positive gaming community, where gamers can support each other, share experiences and game together. Finally, gamers insisted it was important that the gamers' helpline or organisation actively engages with game developers and platforms. In this way, they can contribute to a better and safer gaming experience for all players.

I think if they build a community that way that can also play calmly with each other, it would make gaming a lot more fun. Doing so could take all the toxic people out of a game because you can always reassure each other. Imagine that after a day at work, the friendly peers that you just met in that community can also play, that would be amazing, right? (Aaliyah, 36 years old)

¹²A gaming community is made up of players who are playing the same game and participating in activities such as discussion forums and tournaments. This community can also be broader and relate to a genre, a developer or a platform.

Some gamers indicated that they had no specific needs in relation to online toxicity, either because they are able to access sufficient support in their (online) group of friends or because they do not perceive it as necessary. Some other gamers feel it is important that support and help are available, but would not use it themselves. They relate this to their level of online resilience.

I just know that some people are like that and I just need to have some resilience. I may be resilient enough but I can also easily imagine that some people don't have that and may need extra support. You know, talking to someone and wanting to be reassured for a bit. (Esra, 33 years old)

There are many players who do not think like us or are a little less resilient, in any case, in the face of online toxicity. I think it would be good for those people to be able to get help. (Omar, 21 years old)

This may partly be due to a broader perception among gamers that they should not let online toxicity affect them, which may lead to a lack of awareness of potential needs or even to feeling that seeking help is unnecessary. In the words of Ricardo: "It's just a matter of processing it and moving on."

For some, the thought appears to prevail that if gamers cannot handle online toxicity, they might be better off giving up on gaming, as Lucas articulated:

I don't need anything. If others need something, fine. But in that case: just quit the game, I think, actually. At the end of the day, it's just a game, but maybe that's putting it a little too bluntly, or too much from my personal perspective. (Lucas, 27 years old)

07

CONCLUSION

Online toxicity is still a widespread and persistent problem in the gaming world (ADL 2019-2023). It manifests itself in many ways and negatively affects individual players and the wider gaming community alike, similar to transgressive behaviour offline (Zousa et al., 2021; Zsila et al., 2022). The toxic behaviour is particularly directed at gamers from marginalised groups, whereby identity aspects may overlap (Gray, 2012), and predominantly perpetrated by young (white) males (Buckels et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2018; Lemercier-Dugarin et al., 2021; Nitschinsk et al., 2022). Online toxicity is maintained by game developers and platforms as a result of, among other things, inadequate moderation and inaccessible reporting functionalities (Chou 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Kowert and Cook 2022; Reid et al., 2022). The lack of diversity and inclusion in games reinforces stereotypes and feelings of exclusion, which then further fuels online toxicity (Gray and Leonard 2018; Kowert 2020; Kros et al., 2023; Souza et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Moreover, the cyclical nature of online toxicity allows perpetrators to continue their behaviour with impunity, while the toxic behaviour of some players influences others, causing them to also engage in toxic behaviour, and online toxicity is not recognised or acknowledged and bystanders do not intervene (Beres et al., 2021; Cary et al., 2020; Kowert and Cook 2022).

The results of this study, based on twenty in-depth interviews with various gamers, offer insights into gamers' reactions to online toxicity and the needs related to it. In line with previous research, these findings show that gamers adopt various coping strategies, ranging from passive methods such as ignoring, avoiding, putting things into perspective, accepting and conforming (Beres et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022) to more active approaches such as counterspeech, reporting toxic players and supporting victims (Kowert 2020; Kros et al., 2023). The cyclical dynamics of online toxicity also clearly came to light, and some participants are or have been bystanders, victims and perpetrators, and do not always recognise or acknowledge toxic behaviour as such (Beres et al., 2021; Cary et al., 2020; Frommel et al., 2023; Kowert and Cook 2022; Reid et al., 2022). When exhibiting toxic behaviour, gender norms around masculinity played a part for some participants (Cote 2015;

Gray and Leonard 2018; Reid et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). It also appeared that speaking up against toxicity and showing vulnerability about it is mostly discouraged in the gaming world, with people perceiving this as excessive sensitivity. Gamers do not want to be seen as a 'snowflake', an insulting term in the gaming world for someone who is considered too easily upset and offended when they make themselves vulnerable in the face of online toxicity (Kovač 2022).2022; Reid et al., 2022).

Participants expressed a variety of needs regarding online toxicity, including effective reporting features, better moderation on gaming platforms, and more inclusivity in games, which is in line with the literature (ADL 2019; Chou 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Kowert and Cook 2022; Reid et al., 2022). Specific needs include finding distractions, talking about negative experiences, opportunities for having constructive dialogues with toxic players and integrating pause options with background music into online games. In addition, gamers expressed a need for positive role models and gaming communities as well as practical tools and guidelines to recognise and effectively deal with online toxicity. They are also keen on education from experts by experience. Gamers need a safe and accessible environment where they can share their experiences and be taken seriously. This environment could be realised in the form of a helpline or organisation for gamers, offering a listening ear, expert advice, and practical support when it comes to dealing with online toxicity, with specific expertise on gaming. According to participants, such a body should also engage with game developers and platforms to help address the issues.

08

RECOMMENDATIONS

Toxicity in gaming deserves a prominent place in the approach against online transgressive behaviour. The increasing degree and normalisation of online toxicity, its negative impact on gamers' daily lives and the interplay between transgressive behaviour online and offline highlight the urgent need for action (ADL 2019-2023, Chou 2023).

REGULATION

The Dutch government should set guidelines for the gaming industry and strictly enforce them (Kros et al., 2023). Transparency about the policies of game developers and gaming platforms is an example of this, so that gamers and the public are better able to understand how they enforce their policies and promote user safety (ADL 2023). The gaming industry should be held accountable for their actions and decisions in this field.

DSA AS A LEGAL FRAMEWORK

At the supranational level, the European Union introduced the Digital Service Act (DSA) on 17 February 2024, which can partly regulate the fight against online toxicity. The DSA aims to modernise and reinforce the regulation of digital services, and protect human rights online, with a specific focus on protecting minors from harmful content, among other things. Despite billions of people gaming online every day, the DSA does not apply to most games and platforms. It is important to explore whether – and how – the DSA could serve as a legal framework to regulate the gaming industry.

INCREASED (INTERNATIONAL) COOPERATION

In addition, increased (international) cooperation between game developers, platforms, governments, researchers and social organisations is desirable, in order to develop and implement a coordinated approach to online toxicity.

MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE GAME INDUSTRY

Game developers must take responsibility for designing games that are safer and more inclusive. This responsibility includes drawing up a code of conduct, improving reporting systems and moderation, and support for victims of online toxicity. Implementing existing online tools to support victims of transgressive behaviour is recommended in this regard (Reid et al., 2022) and further research on effective interventions and coping strategies is advisable. However, more emphasis should also be placed on preventive measures from the gaming industry against online toxicity. After all, preventing damage is better than having to mitigate it afterwards (Wijkstra et al., 2023). In this way, gaming platforms can take measures to discourage toxic behaviour of streamers and promote positive content.

HELPWANTED'S ROLE

In order to meet the specific needs of gamers, an organisation such as Helpwanted, which offers help with online transgressive behaviour, will need to increase its expertise in online gaming and work on its brand awareness among gamers. It is crucial to promote social awareness about online toxicity and its consequences, to bring about a culture shift to encourage active action from bystanders against toxicity and encouraging positive behaviour in online games (Kros et al., 2023). Platforms, browser game operators, parents, educators, teachers, game influencers, gaming communities, and organisations such as Helpwanted all have a role to play in promoting respectful online manners and rewarding positive behaviour during games.

INVOLVING GAMERS

It is important to continue to involve the voices of gamers when designing measures and policies to tackle online toxicity, in order to ensure that these are in line with their needs and experiences.

Gaming has become an integral part of society and is indispensable for many, but it requires new rules of the game.

09

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ANNEXES

QUOTES FROM THE GAMERS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED

EXPERIENCES WITH TOXICITY WHILE GAMING ONLINE

"I ran into this dude, of course I was playing Jax. So I picked Jax first and he was waiting a bit and then he went straight to Robocop. So what he did was picking a different skin for Robocop and he picked a variation. A very very absurd variation name. First of all, I'm going to give you some backgrounds. Back in 2020 there was an Afro American man who was killed by a police officer. His name was George Floyd. He was killed by a police officer. His name was Derek Chauvin. So back to the variation name, the name was Derek Chauvin. Literally Derek Chauvin. That's exactly why he chose that variation name and character because I picked Jax who's an Afro American character. You know what? After it was done, I got a message from him. He told me George Floyd got what he deserved and so should you. I just don't really understand some people in this world."



Michael, 30-year-old African-American man

"I experience online toxicity like sexism. I've been told you know, they be like "We got a girl in the team, oh go make me a sandwich" and they would call me a bitch or the slut. I've been told to kill myself. I received sad messages in a game asking me about my social media and where I live or what they were going to do to me. They were gonna assault me. I just blocked it and moved on. I thought I don't want to deal with this, just forget it."



Emma, 19-year-old Australian woman



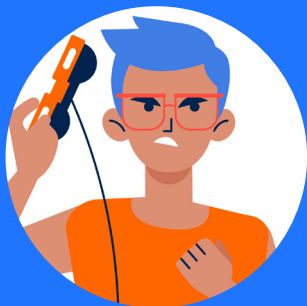
Sometimes it feels really shitty to be LGBTQ+ but I guess I just have to deal with it. They can hear it in my voice and then they ask if I am, and I say yes. So they start making jokes around the game about that, for example, when I die, they say: that's why you've died, because you're gay." The worst thing anyone has said to me in Valorant is to go and kill myself. I'm used to it, you know, because I play every day.

Jasper, 15-year-old Dutch boy

"When I talk, they start acting toxic. Then they always say "Shut up, fucking faggot". You know what they're like, right? Sometimes they just call me a pansy. They also sometimes call me tranny, as if I am transgender. And sometimes people think I'm a woman."



Omar, 21-year-old Moroccan man



"It was fine at first. From "ooh, you're Dutch, how fun. *His gamer-tag is mentioned*: aah leukkk [such funnn]". And then I don't think I had played a good game and then he said "fucking faggot, you're really fucking bad". I was like: okay. I'll just keep quiet. So then we continued playing and then he kept getting louder and angrier and then I thought: damn, where is this coming from? Then he said "I'm going to come and find you, you are so fucking bad. Just die, you fucking faggot." I know it's comp but talking like that is really not going to help."

Daan, 21-year-old Dutch man

"Yes, I have experienced online toxicity, mainly in Call of Duty. Especially, let's be honest. In that game, you can actually talk to people online. The minute they hear you are a woman, it's over. Then it's really fucking over. Even if you try to communicate with "hey, somebody is flanking over there" and then they tell you "shut up, filthy whore – get back in the kitchen". Then I think: you're my teammate, what's going on?"



Aaliyah, 36-year-old Surinam-Dutch woman

REFLECTION ON ONE'S OWN TOXIC BEHAVIOUR



"When I think now about whether my words have had an impact on players, the answer is probably yes. It's really very shitty, man. That's a really good question, I was probably the bad guy in their lives and I was the one who took away their reality. Ah shit man, I was a bully. Oh fuck. What have I done..."

Hassan, 22-year-old Somali-Dutch man

"Looking back now, I don't really think I regret my toxic behaviour. Sometimes I think that maybe I shouldn't have sent messages. I think maybe I do need to be more conscious of that since I don't really think about that, because I don't send really bad messages. I am not someone who actually sends hate messages, it's pretty mild. I don't think people will get all fucked up mentally because I tell them they're acting like a statue in the game. I don't really think that anyone would have a mental breakdown because of that. Yes, I think this last question is a very good one. It gives people insight into their behaviour, which is good."



Ricardo, 25-year-old Antilles-Hungarian-German-Dutch man



"If you are friendly but the game is lost because of you, you can expect a report. This conversation does hold up a bit of a mirror."

Lucas, 27-year-old Dutch man

"I have been toxic in League of Legends once or twice. Sometimes, I too am one of those disgusting people. When I blame people for not being able to keep to their lane, for example. And the worst thing is that I play support. That's really bad, haha. I don't go around calling people awful names but I do say "how are you not keeping your lane, why did you die, just use your fucking ultimate!". Afterwards I often think: ok, sorry, that was really not cool. I got carried away, haha. They then say: you're weird, you need help. So I just say: yeah, you're right. I also found out through my friend that I was not behaving nicely. He said to me "Aaliyah, why are you so mean?" And I said: "What on earth are you talking about?". And he said: "For all you know, that person just got home from work and isn't feeling good about himself". And that thing that you are hating on, you are actually doing yourself. Then I started thinking and thought: oh my god. I didn't even realise I was doing it."



Aaliyah, 36-year-old Surinam-Dutch woman



"Yes, I do regret my toxic behaviour. It just wasn't cool, so yeah. I did learn a lot from this. And I've mended my ways. In any case, it's shitty to be nasty to others, doesn't matter if it's online or offline. You can tell yourself it was fine; but no, it's just not cool. The reason I did this was because I feel frustrated and I don't know how to express it. That has to do with other things as well. For me, it was mainly during the period when I was gaming a lot. Maybe I was addicted, you know. I would get bad grades at school and when I got out of school, I would immediately start gaming. All day and all night, you know. So much so that I was sometimes even skipping classes."

Klaas, 24-year-old Dutch man

"I used to start with toxicity while playing online, it was back then when I was completely a different person. I wasn't as calm and collected as I am now. I was younger and I was much more immature. I was a little toxic myself. I would say things like "If you were in front of me, I would beat you up" and stuff like that. That was me back then, yes. I actually do regret how I was back in the time. I just felt like "why did I say those things?"



Michael, 30-year-old African-American man

POSITIVE QUOTES ABOUT WHAT GAMING MEANS TO GAMERS

"Gaming has been an important part of my life because gaming is like an escape from the world and you forget about real life troubles. Like when I play a game I love, I immerse myself into that games world and it takes my mind off things and it gives me a sense of freedom. Gaming has gotten me through difficult times in my life and its taught me important life lessons that I input daily. Like for example, dying in a game or failing a quest has taught me that its ok to fail and you can always get back up and try again and again and again."



Emma, 19-year-old Australian woman



"For me, gaming is a way to connect with others who have the same passion as me, and be part of a community. It has also taught me to never give up and that I can always try again even if I fail the first time. It helps me escape from reality."

Ricardo, 25-year-old Antilles-Hungarian-German-Dutch man

"Gaming has always been important to me because I feel it's the one area in life where I've found a community of people who enjoy the same things I do. It's given me lifelong friendships and feeds my creativity in a way that I'll be forever grateful for."



Liam, 31-year-old Canadian man



"For me, gaming has actually meant a lot to me for almost all my life. Gaming was my escape from reality because, especially before, I felt I did not fit in with everything. I also have so many fun memories from the past about gaming with my little brother, for example, that I would never have had without gaming. I also met my best friends through gaming. I think my life would really look very different without gaming."

Noah, 19-year-old Belarusian-Egyptian man

"Gaming is more than just entertainment for me; it is a window to adventure, friendship and growth. Through gaming, I can discover new worlds, learn teamwork and strategy, and find relaxation when things get hectic. It is not only a hobby, but also a journey of self-discovery and feeling connected with others."

Ali, 21-year-old Turkish-Dutch man



COLOPHON

Reference: Helpwanted (2024) Game over:
Gamer needs in a toxic online gaming landscape

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