

Insult swordfighting: Gendered, Competitive, and Transgressive Communication in Gaming Culture

Kristian A. Bjørkelo

University of Bergen

Sydneplass 7

5020 Bergen

kristian.bjorkelo@uib.no

Keywords

Folklore, Flyting, Dozens, Toxicity, harassment, trash talk

INTRODUCTION

Trash talk and toxic behavior in gaming culture has an historical dimension that is all too seldom connected in analysis. It is too easy to blame toxic behavior and competitive speech in gaming culture on games alone, and this presentation aims instead to understand it as a complex and interwoven tapestry of boundary keeping, play and historical cultural practices.

The transgressive, gatekeeping, hostile and possibly harmful way players interact with each other online, both in games and in game forums have received some well deserved attention. Christopher Paul (2018) has focused on how the competitive focus on being good at games has fostered a negative meritocratic culture. Emma Vossen (Vossen, 2018) and Kelly Boudreau (Boudreau, 2019, 2022; Busch et al., 2015) are among those who have focused on the toxic engagement within gaming culture, and how it serves to push people, particularly women, out of games and establish cultural boundaries. While there are many lines of division brought up in this behavior, gender and sexuality has become of an utmost importance (Consalvo, 2012; Shaw, 2012) for gaming culture, and online discourse in general (Jane, 2017; Massanari, 2015; Massanari & Chess, 2018), and is the point of departure for this presentation.

The presentation represents ongoing work using previously collected data to explore the gendered and toxic discourse in two large gaming forums, using an approach aligned with Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis to quantify and contextualize the usage of slurs and aggressive language. Through this analysis we will find what kind of language is predominant, what contexts they occur in, and what different meanings they have. Preliminary findings show that it is a contested space, and while there is a tradition of using gendered slurs, they are as much used sarcastically to invoke the image of misogynist speech, rather than being intended as misogynist in itself. It does

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

however reflect on an established gendered and misogynist culture that relies on a competitive and aggressive discourse.

The presentation will also situate this discourse in a large historical frame of play and games, dating back to saxon and norse traditions of competitive poetics, such as flyting (Hughes, 2006) most recently seen in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal 2020). A style of discourse that seems to be a cultural constant, and can also be seen in rap battles and “the dozens” that used to play in racialized street culture (Abrahams, 1970). In many ways, this toxic discourse of trash talk bears some resemblance to Insult Swordfighting seen in the classic *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990). A complex tapestry of competitive oral play and games takes shape that is not only deeply rooted in our history, but is ingrained and perhaps enhanced by play and gaming culture itself to form what we today recognize as both gatekeeping and toxic.

These are elements that combine to show that this discourse can not be easily exorcized from gaming culture, or culture at all, by pointing out its toxicity. For some it would appear to be an attempt to exorcize play itself from games (Vossen 2018). Neither can it be completely ignored. As Christopher Paul states: “the current state of culture around video games is dark, and I think that those of us who recognize problems have an obligation to address them” (Paul, 2018, p. 2). The aim of this presentation is not to contest this or other similar positions on the dark side of gaming culture, but to add nuances from cultural history and contradictory empirical observations, hoping to flesh out the darker side of gaming culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahams, R. D. (1970). *Deep Down in the Jungle...* (2nd edition). Routledge.
- Boudreau, K. (2019). Beyond Fun: Transgressive Gameplay—Toxic and Problematic Player Behavior as Boundary Keeping. *Transgression in Games and Play*, 257.
- Boudreau, K. (2022). Beyond deviance: Toxic gaming culture and the potential for positive change. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 39(3), 181–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2022.2080848>
- Busch, T., Boudreau, K., & Consalvo, M. (2015). Toxic gamer culture, corporate regulation, and standards of behavior among players of online games. *Video Game Policy: Production, Distribution, and Consumption*, 176–190.
- Consalvo, M. (2012). Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars. <https://doi.org/10.7264/N33X84KH>
- Hughes, G. (2006). *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-speaking World*. Routledge.
- Jane, E. (2017). *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473916029>
- Massanari, A. L. (2015). *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New edition). Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers.

- Massanari, A. L., & Chess, S. (2018). Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: The discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 525–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447333>
- Paul, C. A. (2018). *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst* (1st edition). Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Shaw, A. (2012). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *New Media & Society*, 14(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394>
- Vossen, E. (2018). The Magic Circle and Consent in Gaming Practices. In K. L. Gray, G. Voorhees, & E. Vossen (Eds.), *Feminism in Play* (pp. 205–220). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90539-6_12

LUDOGRAPHY

- Lucasfilm Games. 1990. *The Secret of Monkey Island*. Lucasfilm Games. MS Dos.
- Ubisoft Montreal. 2020. *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. Ubisoft. Xbox Series X.