

# “Smurfing is a pretty common problem”: Toward a performative conception of toxicity

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2014, 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). Yet, game scholars agree that the actual definition of the term ‘toxic’ is slippery. Toxicity lacks definitional stability in its mainstream use and within the field of game studies. Existing research contributions (Kou 2020; Kowert 2020) have mapped and defined a normative player-driven taxonomy of behaviors contributing to toxic online-game environments, particularly in the case of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). There is also consensus that toxicity is a highly context-dependent phenomenon reliant on the relation of players to one another but extending further to include the technical elements of the game (Canossa et al. 2021; Hilvert-Bruce & Neil 2020; Kou 2020; Kowert 2020).

The design mechanics of many MMOGs fashion players into teams—ranging from small fireteams to large guilds. In these teams, players form performative cliques, some are lasting but more often transient. Cliques are defined by their members, by adjacent cliques, and most crucially, by outsiders. Exclusion thus becomes an integral feature to

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the normative function of most MMOGs. Past scholarship in this area illustrates that these spaces are deeply gendered and center masculine normativity (Cote 2020; Gray 2020; Ruberg 2019; Shaw 2015). In aggregate, cliques contribute to redefining the dominant culture of a gamespace when players either maintain or transgress the normative line through performed hegemony or counter-hegemony. In these instances of conflict there is the potential for agonism—a political and social practice that seeks to highlight generative dimensions of conflict (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). When there is dissent to the hegemonic discursivity of a game clique, members and outsiders may contribute to what players and academics alike have labeled toxicity. However, during our research process, a more compelling thread emerged that pointed to the agonistic potential woven into the umbrella term toxic gamer culture.

We employed the design studies methodology of cultural probes to better understand how players experience toxicity in online gaming spaces. Cultural probes, which typically take the form of 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 initially developing cultural probes as method, Gaver et al. (1999) were concerned that employing a survey with a standardized set of questions might limit an understanding of participant’s embodied experience of their cultural environment, and their relationship to and with technology. In developing probe kits, Gaver et al. (1999) sought to “disrupt expectations about user research and allow new possibilities to emerge” (p. 23) through a variety of interactive everyday materials. We developed and distributed a set of probe kits to 28 participants in the form of playing cards, and we instructed the participants to bring their probe kits into their regular gameplaying routine.

The probe kits were designed to gently disrupt each participant’s gaming experience by asking them to carry out a series of brief and creative gaming-related tasks. The probe kits were developed to encourage players to revisit and slow down those moments of instinctual decision-making in order to meaningfully reflect on their embodied experience of toxicity during play. This ensured the work completed by the participants in the study emerged from a place of self-reflexivity and intentionality. We used the term ‘pressure points’ in reference to behaviours that would typically be categorized as toxic throughout the process of conducting focus groups and interviews to avoid priming and limiting the responses of our participants to common understandings of toxic activity in gamespaces.

From our participants, we came to see that each person’s understanding of the pressure points was complex and, in many cases, 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 described them in ways that we identified as actions to counter toxicity. As a result, we, like others (Canossa et al, 2021; Hilvert-Bruce & Neil, 2020; Kou 2020; Kowert, 2020) have concluded that a single, clear-cut definition of toxicity is insufficient. However, we argue that conceptualizing toxicity as an expression of performance opens up new and different ways of understanding it in these contexts. We were inspired by the emerging narrative of countering and recognize this as a potential path of resistance against more harmful manifestations of certain pressure points.

Intrigued by these contextual and relational dimensions, we decided to embrace the duality, contradictions, and slippages inherent in toxicity as a concept, choosing to

analyze toxicity through the lens of performativity using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory. 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.

Emerging from participants' conversations during focus groups and interviews, this paper explores behaviours which are emblematic of performing toxicity or 'counterplay'. We position counterplay as a performance of toxicity in response to pressure points in a multiplayer gamespace. Despite its popular connotation in the work of Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter (2009), who define counterplay as a refusal to play a videogame according to its design parameters, we consider counterplay as a predecessor to counterspeech. In legal literature, counterspeech is posited as a solution to power imbalances, hateful rhetoric, and propaganda (Coleman 2019, p. 197) and has been defined as a direct response that seeks to undermine hateful or harmful speech (*Counterspeech* 2017). It is also criticized as inadequate and as a tool by some to justify hate speech. It is therefore possible that counterplay 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 within a clique has been rejected by an actor or when cliques performing antagonistically converge in gamespaces. Based on preliminary analysis of our data, we propose three common instances of agonistic counterplay: fighting fire with fire, when a player reciprocates or matches the toxic behaviour of another; ludic mithridatism, when a player develops a threshold for tolerating toxicity in a gamespace, allowing them to continue participating in a place where they would otherwise be excluded; and playful transgression, when a player or group of players performs counter-hegemonic identity-work by playing in a way that challenges existing norms.

## **Keywords**

Toxicity, performance, resistance, reappropriation, counterplay

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