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# Young Video Game Players' Self-Identified Toxic Gaming Behaviour

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## Abstract

In this study we analyse negative behaviour in the context of digital gaming through interviews of players (N=12) aged 16–27 who self-reported as having behaved in a manner they acknowledged as toxic. Through thematic analysis of the interviews, we highlight three central themes: games as affective spaces; affordances and norms facilitating negative behaviours; and players' navigation of negative behaviours. Our study demonstrates the situational and affective nature of negative behaviour and offers solutions for reducing it in gaming.

## Keywords

Video gaming; toxic behaviour; affect; affordance; young people

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**"I get annoyed the same whether in real life or gaming, but in real life I hide it much better … I kind of think that it doesn't matter if I'm angry in a game."**

This quote from an 18-year-old interviewee captures something essential about the digital gaming experience. Games are a special environment, simultaneously very much a mundane activity yet also often considered to be separate from 'real life' (e.g., Stenros, 2014). While the mental and social freedom this escapist quality provides is precisely what many people find enjoyable (e.g., Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023), it also opens the door to hostility that can render this kind of enjoyment taxing or impossible for others (e.g., Passmore & Mandryk, 2020). The quote above reflects a common view: in a game, being angry does not matter—or at least it matters less.

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Toxic behaviour is an acknowledged problem in digital gaming cultures. The term is used to refer to a broad range of conduct that is seen as harmful, hostile or unwanted, ranging in intensity from minor transgressions such as losing on purpose to severe harassment and threats outside the gaming environment. In addition to the psychological distress caused (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2017), toxic behaviour can drive people away from gaming (Kordyaka et al., 2020; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2022), whether through intentional harassment, fear of it, or an overall unwillingness to play in a gaming environment perceived as hostile (Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Passmore & Mandryk, 2020), and groups that are in a vulnerable position in game cultures are particularly susceptible to this (Fox & Tang, 2017; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Passmore & Mandryk, 2020; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). Although gaming culture toxicity is also discussed in other contexts such as game industry workplace conduct (Bergstrom, 2021), in this article we focus on toxicity that occurs during and around instances of game play.

We approach our subject through semi-structured interviews of adolescent and emerging adult respondents, who self-reported as having behaved in a manner they acknowledged as toxic. Grounding our analysis in young people's experiences and views, we draw attention to the many personal, situational, and material variables as well as game cultural and societal norms that contribute to instances of toxic behaviour. We forefront the situated and situational nature of toxicity and utilize the concept of affect to examine how toxicity is often, albeit not always, born out of intense interplay between subjects and material artifacts and how games themselves appear to become affectively loaded.

Our qualitative, solution-oriented study complements previous victim-focused research on toxic behaviour (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2017; Gray, 2018; Ortiz, 2019; Passmore & Mandryk, 2020) and quantitative explorations of toxic behaviour (e.g., Kordyaka et al., 2020), as we examine the experiences of those behaving in a negative manner. Focusing especially on the role of affect, we discuss the dynamics bringing about negative behaviours and how the victim–perpetrator dichotomy is not mutually exclusive, while simultaneously remaining sensitive to the power dynamics and structural inequalities involved.

## Background

In previous research literature, toxic gaming behaviour has been given many definitions, and the problematic ambiguity of the term has been recognized (Kowert, 2020; Kwak et al., 2015; Türkay et al., 2020). Gaming behaviours identified in previous literature as toxic typically include verbal hostility such as flaming (e.g., Karhulahti, 2022; Kordyaka et al., 2020) and transgressive play such as cheating and trolling (Boudreau, 2019; Kordyaka et al., 2020). There is no exact consensus on boundaries, however. Karhulahti (2022) discusses "competitive toxicity" especially in the context of esports and makes a function-based distinction between toxicity that

manifests as verbal hostility, and forms of transgressive play (trolling, griefing, cyberbullying) (p. 25). He also excludes so-called strategic 'trash talk'. Neto, Yokoyama, and Becker (2017) note that griefing is "very similar" to toxic behaviour yet differs from it in intention (p. 27). Kwak, Blackburn, and Han (2015) discuss a range of negative behaviours, including cyberbullying, griefing, mischief, and cheating as toxic behaviour, while Rimington (2018) has explored flaming, trolling, and raging as three distinct, if overlapping, types of behaviour with different causes. The trolling sometimes mentioned as a form of toxic behaviour is in itself an umbrella term of different, and differently motivated, behaviours (Cook et al., 2018).

Research has suggested several factors that contribute to toxic behaviour. Toxic disinhibition (the lack of restraint in expressing oneself negatively through words and actions), previous toxic behaviour victimization, and individual attitudes and subjective norms all appear to play important parts in the whole (Kordyaka et al., 2020). Aggressive behaviour in online games may be seen as normative and more acceptable than in face-to-face situations (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020), and players' repeated experiences with a particular game may socialize them into accepting and conforming to norms of toxic behaviour (Beres et al., 2021; Ross & Weaver, 2012; see also Karhulahti, 2022). Much of the research on toxicity focuses on competitive games such as League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009) (e.g., Karhulahti, 2022; Kwak et al., 2015), and the aggressive affect and behaviour elicited by competition in games (Adachi & Willoughby, 2011; Dowsett & Jackson, 2019) is likely a contributing factor. Karhulahti (2022) goes so far as to say that "the fire of toxicity burns in each and every competitive player" (p. 24).

While most online game players likely come into some kind of contact with toxic behaviour, the experience of it may vary considerably. Instances of online hostility can be explicit or implicit expressions of systemic discrimination, such as sexism (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Salter & Blodgett, 2017) or racism (Gray, 2018; Ortiz, 2019) or be perceived as such, prompting additional emotional labour, and creating additional barriers of participation for certain groups of people (e.g., women, gender and sexual minorities, people of colour) (Passmore & Mandryk, 2020). Discrimination may manifest as both tone and quantity: for example, in a study by Kuznekoff and Rose (2013), in an online gaming setting a female voice received three times as many negative comments as a male voice or no voice.

As the multiple ways the term toxicity has been used in research demonstrate, the term is ambiguous. Our own use of the term in this study stems from its ubiquitous use in gaming cultures, and its practical usefulness. While we considered alternatives like "inappropriate", "hostile", or "aggressive", these all had their own issues: what is appropriate is both a moral judgment and contextual, and behaviour perceived as toxic is not always aggressive or hostile—at least from the perpetrator's point of view (e.g., Kordyaka et al., 2020). When recruiting respondents, we also used the word "salty", another word for a range of similar gaming conduct, alongside "toxic". Both words were well understood and appeared to be common knowledge

to our participants, although some respondents pointed out that they did not consider the terms to be synonymous. For those participating our study, we defined toxicity as behaviour that occurs in games or is related to games (e.g., in game communities or social media) that the respondent considered inappropriate, impolite or mean, or that someone else has considered or could consider as such. Despite discussing toxicity in the interviews, in this article we have elected to instead mainly use the formulation *negative behaviours* to reference the wide range of behaviours addressed.

# Theoretical framework

In this study we examine how players reflect on their own negative behaviour and agency in gaming situations. We suggest that their behaviour is both configured and to be understood in a complex, affective matrix of materiality, (game) culture and its norms, interactions with other players, and personal preferences.

## Affect

Central to the examination is the concept of affect. The study of affect in digital games has gained attention in recent years, alongside the interest towards the materiality of video games and gaming (Apperley & Jayemane, 2012; Cremin, 2016; Giddings, 2009). Theories on affect have been applied in the study of both player experiences and player communities as well as when seeking to understand the form of digital games (see Cremin, 2015). Affect is an evasive concept, the definitions of which vary across disciplines but sometimes also inside a given discipline. Affect is sometimes used almost interchangeably with emotion (Taira, 2007), but has also been understood as fully unstructured and pre-personal force that has the potentiality to move people whereas emotions can be understood as more tangible and recognizable expressions of feelings (e.g., Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Massumi, 2005). According to Teemu Taira (2007), a third way of understanding of affect has been suggested by Lawrence Grossberg (1992), who talks about "affective investment" that brings forth the intensity of affective relations to those matters we give value to. What most of the accounts of affect share is the recognition that affects rarely, if ever, belong to us in a sense that they would be fully subjective.

In this article, we understand affect as a force that has the potential to move subjects and alter both their emotional states and actions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Shouse, 2005) as well as having different levels of intensity depending on the subject's affective investment (Grossberg, 1992). In this sense, it is potential which is actualized in different ways. Affect, as a very material and bodily expression, occupies a place at the fringe of the cultural and linguistic matrix, while not being fully separable from it. Affect exists beyond subject, both as intersubjective, but also in socio-material entanglements. Thus, one's agency, or capacity to act, is affected by the affective tensions and intensities that are born from the interplay of these socio-material en-

tanglements but is not fully determined by them. Rather, players navigate these entanglements reflectively (see Zhu, 2023). As videogames are designed environments, sometimes these socio-material entanglements are consciously produced.

## Games and affect

Because of both game design and many players' strong attachment to game cultures, games are often highly affective spaces and can retain their affective tensions even when players in them change. As Shouse (2005) notes: "Because affect is unformed and unstructured (unlike feelings and emotions) it can be transmitted between bodies." Affect—and facilitating affective encounters—are an intimate part of both game design as well as the game-play experience. James Ash (2010) discusses how positive affective encounters are designed as part of videogames and how creating them effectively is key for video games to be successful. What Ash means by positive affective encounters is that they enable the player to do more in the game in ways that create sensations of empowerment. Negative affective encounters on the other hand are the kind that diminish a player's capacity to act in a game in ways that often make them feel frustrated. Studying young people's experiences of "gamer rage", Kahila et al. (2022) found that, for example, repeated or unexpected failures, comparison to others, interruptions, and technical problems could serve as acute reasons for outbursts of rage, while game characteristics, the social and physical gaming environment, and daily life troubles contributed as background factors. This highlights how behaviour in games is not reducible to game design but is constructed by the different factors that make up an instance of gaming. This is particularly true with multiplayer games, where players have affective encounters not only with the game, but also with other players.

Nevertheless, when examining games and affect it is important to examine the game mechanics—what the player does and what they can do, and the effects this produces—rather than only the narrative and representations in the game (Ash, 2010). Indeed, paying attention to what is beyond representation and what it evokes is central to analysing affect (Grossberg, 1992). One way to examine the way games evoke affect beyond representation is through the concept of affordances.

## Affordances

The term affordances refers to possibilities or opportunities of action that are made possible by an object or an interface (e.g., Greer, 2013; Norman, 1988). In video games, affordances are often related to game mechanics, thus performing particular actions within games enables particular outcomes (for instance, defeating the last member of the opposing team wins your team the round). However, affordances in video games can also be social or communicative in nature (Hoffman, 2019). This can be for example an embedded voice chat that allows players to talk to each other or a pinging system, which allows players to communicate locations in game by pressing a location on the map or the game world. This makes it possible to relay information to other players without any textual or vocal communication.

Affordances can be affectively loaded in different ways: for example, a human voice carries a different affect than using a pinging system in game. Alternatively, a game might lack a chat function altogether, but provide other ways for players to express themselves to other players: in their study about Hearthstone (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014), Arjoranta and Siitonen (2018) show how players, while lacking a chat channel, find a way to communicate by using emotes and their communicative affordances. This again highlights how behaviour is influenced by designed affordances, but not reducible to it.

## Data and method

Our study draws from semi-structured interviews (Cote & Raz, 2015) with active digital game players. We interviewed a total of 12 people (six women, five men, one non-binary person, ages 16–27). The interviews were conducted in Finnish over the course of two days at the Assembly Winter 2023 gaming festival in Helsinki, Finland in February 2023. We opportunistically (see Riemer, 1977) chose the event as it coincided with our planned data collection schedule and allowed us to reach our target demographic: young people invested in digital gaming.

We approached festivalgoers who we estimated to be in the study's intended age range of 15–25, explained the topic of the study and asked about their willingness to participate. Interviews were conducted in a separate quiet room in the convention centre that the festival took place in. The interviews were conducted as three individual interviews and three group interviews of three interviewees each (Table 1). Although our initial upper age limit for participation was 25, we elected to include two respondents aged 27 as they wanted to participate with their friends and were in a similar life stage. We approached both masculine-presenting and feminine-presenting festivalgoers to have a balanced sample in terms of gender.

In the interviews, we explored negative gaming behaviour with the interviewees and asked what constitutes unwanted behaviour in the context of gaming and how the interviewees themselves had come to behave in these ways. Interviewees participated in the study anonymously. Before the interviews, we explained to the interviewees the aims of the study, their rights as research participants, and the study's privacy policy, and recorded explicit consent and confirmation that they had been made sufficiently aware of these and were willing to participate. In the case of the two interviewees who were under 18, we instructed them to inform their parents of their participation in the study. All participants were given contact details for any questions or requests regarding the study. Following university data protection guidelines, we conducted a risk assessment for data processing and security prior to the start of data collection, and we transcribed the interviews personally.

While an ethical review of the study was not required, we were careful to take steps to minimize potential distress stemming from the study situation, as we were in

some cases working with underaged respondents. We made clear to the respondents our own position as both researchers and experienced game players familiar with hostile online behaviour as both targets and producers. We stressed that our intent was not to judge any behaviour and that respondents did not have to sanitize their language when discussing their experiences. As there was an obvious power disparity in some situations, with two adult researchers and an underaged interviewee, we sought to make the situation as socially comfortable as possible, casually discussing for example their festival experience before the interview and establishing rapport through discussion of our own gaming (see Cote & Raz, 2015, p. 107–108).

Our semi-structured interviews were built around a core of six individual questions (see Appendix 1) which were then complemented with follow-up questions during the interview. Individual interviews ran from 17 minutes to 1 hour and 5 minutes, the group interviews being longer than individual ones. In the longer interviews, after the 30-minute mark, we periodically reminded the interviewees of the time that had passed and asked if they still wished to continue.

### Thematic analysis

After transcription, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) on the data. Both during and after the transcription process, we went over the interviews several times both individually and together, coding features we considered interesting and relevant (e.g., "Self-control", "No toxicity towards children", "Zero tolerance for slurs"), resulting in 239 individual codes. These were then further examined, overlapping codes merged, and redundant codes removed for a final total of 195 codes that we both agreed on.

Next, we started grouping these codes, experimenting with different thematic groupings. In an iterative process, groups were constructed, de- and reconstructed into subthemes which were then further grouped into three main themes: games as affective spaces; affordances and norms facilitating negative behaviours; and players' navigation of negative behaviours.

## Results

In this section, we present our analysis sorted by main themes. We have provided illustrative quotes, translated from Finnish, from the interviews. While the original Finnish interviews were transcribed verbatim, during the translation quotes have been edited for easier readability by for example removing repetition, filler words, and other similar elements common in informal spoken language. Interviewees have been pseudonymized and are shown in Table 1.

| Interview | Participant(s) (gender, age) |
|---|---|
| 1 | Erik (man, 20) |
| 2 | Waltteri (man, 16) |
| 3 | Ariel (non-binary, 18) |
| 4 | Alexandra (woman, 16); Greta (woman, 27); Airi (woman, 21) |
| 5 | Konsta (man, 16); Petja (man, 22); Jonathan (man, 23) |
| 6 | Ira (woman, 24); Anne (woman, 27); Kirsti (woman, 25) |

Table 1. Details of the six conducted interviews.

## Games as affective spaces

Games are spaces that are loaded with affect, both by intentional game design and by accidental outcomes (Cremin, 2015). Our interviewees had different kinds of relationships with different games, with their relationship with some games marked with a sense of relaxation, whereas the relationship with other, typically competitive, games was often characterized by a sense of competitiveness, a drive for improvement, and by the multiplayer nature of these games. Greta demonstrates this when asked to name three games she likes to play:

> Yeah, *Valorant* [Riot Games, 2020] at the moment. *Dragon Age* [franchise, Bioware, 2009–2014], but it's like single-player, what would a third … help, like *Apex* [*Legends*] [Respawn Entertainment 2019]. Well, a solo game is like your own little refuge where you want to relax sometimes, and then the others are ones where you either play with a friend or want to challenge yourself, like in a competitive manner. That's why I like them.

Affective encounters do not only happen between the player and the game, but also between the players within the game. These kinds of encounters were particularly prominent in our data, as our interviewees talked almost exclusively about multiplayer games due to the research topic. These affective encounters amounted to tensions which manifested as emotions or were channelled as actions or often both. They commonly led to verbal outbursts, directed towards either oneself, the game, or other players. Regardless of interviewee gender, especially men's behaviour was often brought up in these contexts. Whereas men more commonly viewed their and other men's negative behaviour as stemming from immaturity, something to be "grown out of", women and non-binary players on the other hand saw men's sexism and misogyny as the biggest issue. They also brought up that it was not only men's actions they found problematic, but also their lack of action, for example not intervening when they saw someone being bullied or harassed.

> **Ariel**: On my own team—it was a rare occasion that I was playing *Valorant* solo—there was someone who was really nasty towards me. In voice chat people assume I am a woman, and this person yelled things like "go back

> you fat bitch" to me, so I gave him back in kind, "go fucking die you fucking man." Then I started feeling bad because I started thinking what if he actually lives somewhere where there is a war, and he has to really go to war. And then I say things like that to him in the game and now he feels bad. But then again, he started it, so.

Ariel's description shows how certain words and expressions have affective stickiness (Ahmed, 2004) to them: they tend to hurt more than other words because of the associations and feelings they evoke. This is even more evident in the following comment from Anne:

> So, people who say "kill yourself" to someone else in a video game, for real, get some help. I'll call your mother, really, if it's like that. [Saying] it is probably the lowest on the list … it's probably the worst thing you can say. Actually, even if you are enraged, you can't say such things. If you say such things out loud you have to be like "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I'm sorry for that."

At times even when these outbursts were about other players, the interviewees would verbally express their frustration not to the players concerned directly, but for instance to a friend with whom they were in a voice chat with while playing or just saying it out loud, even if they were by themselves. Importantly, it seemed that sometimes channelling the affect somewhere was enough, rather than having to do it directly to the player who the interviewee found frustrating. Verbal channelling was not the only option but releasing the affect could also take physical forms. For example, Erik mentioned that he had smashed his mouse due to (in his words) overreacting to in-game events (see also Kahila et al., 2022; Moreau et al., 2023).

> **Ariel**: Sometimes I bad mouth the opponent. But usually, I do not say anything directly to the opponent, but I talk in voice with my friends, like "fuck that is a shitty person." I usually don't say anything directly to the opponent, because it is not nice when people act like that towards me.
>
> **Waltteri**: My parents have commented a little that I should swear less, but I've never followed their advice. Well, when they're home, I swear a bit less, but not that much, but if they're not home then it's like … your mouth runs free.

As the quotes below demonstrate, emotional outbursts could be a cause for regret, whether for crossing personal lines (Kirsti) or for spilling out of the game (Petja). Petja's story is also a reminder of how, with the player serving as a conduit and simultaneously occupying a space in both the digital and the physical world, games can reach beyond their immediate digital environment (see also Kahila et al., 2022). A common factor in both examples is that the interviewee acts before conscious thought, and immediately regrets it.

> **Kirsti**: Well, I can say that when I shouted at that one kid, I was so goddamn ashamed. I felt like this isn't the sort of person I am.

> **Petja**: I'd played a game when I was little, and something had happened and I'd gotten angry. Right then my mom had knocked on the door and I had said something pretty nasty [to her]. You do remember, it's like you're saying "shut up" like by accident because you're raging. ... You do remember when your mom gets angry at you.

Both Kirsi's and Petja's accounts aptly demonstrate how feeling bad for getting caught on the affect and the resulting behaviour makes the situation memorable and can possibly spark reflection and change.

What was notable about these affective encounters was that the affects tended to linger in the bodies of the players after the temporal space (match in the game) giving birth to them had stopped existing. Sometimes players would carry them with them to the next match or even all day, but they could also find alternative outlets. For instance, Greta told us how, when she got really agitated while gaming, she would take a break to go for a smoke or talk to her mother, whereas Kirsti mentioned "going to cry into a pillow".

Players also discussed how bad experiences in a game would affect their behaviour in the next game and make them more reactive towards other players. The interplay of intensity and the social nature of competitive play leads to a highly affective experience, resulting in a kind of an affective loop of revenge (see also Liu & Agur, 2023) that constantly intensifies as well as spreads the affect around it.

> **Kirsti**: Yeah, it's usually a basic situation for me that you're just having like a really miserable day, and you have these teammates who are a little more miserable and angry, it's really easy for it to boil over for me as well. Like you just can't bear it, so you act kind of the same back at them.

Negative behaviour was also connected to situational intensities, such as how competitive the situation was and how much it personally meant to a player. This highlights both the influence of affective investment (Grossberg, 1992) and the situated and situational nature of instances of gaming (Apperley, 2010; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023), as elements both internal and external to players fed into negative social interactions.

## Affordances and norms facilitating negative behaviours

In this theme we explore the affordances and norms that online gaming spaces provide for negative behaviour. Features brought up in the interviews could be divided into two categories: affordances stemming from game and platform design, and online gaming conduct norms that enable, encourage, and discourage different

types of behaviours and social interactions. These two dimensions were often interwoven.

## Affordances

Affordances for negative behaviour were provided by game features such as anonymity, chat, and elements such as competitive gaming modes. For example, whether through written chat or voice chat, anonymous in-game communication both made it technically possible to direct abuse at other players and made it mentally and socially easier (see Suler, 2004). Here, we return to the quote at the start of this article:

> **Ariel**: I kind of think that it doesn't matter if I'm angry in-game and get mad easier than in real life, because it's like ... now that I think of it, for me there's the thing that if I yell at someone in real life, it's bad if you see that you make that person feel bad. When in a game I tell someone that they're fucking shit at this game, I don't see that they feel bad. I don't see the reaction so that might be like one [contributing thing].

The design of some team-based competitive games led to so-called 'clutch' situations, in which the outcome of a round or the entire game rested on an individual player's performance. These situations made a single player the focus of the game, and were often both emotionally and affectively charged, and were mentioned by interviewees as common instances of negative behaviour.

> **Airi**: For example, you're like in a clutch situation and then some sexist men start shouting into the mic and try to keep you from concentrating. So you easily say something pretty nasty back, yeah.

> **Erik**: But for example, I had this situation, I lost a friend because of it, because we played CS:GO [*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve & Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012)] together, and then ... I didn't succeed in a clutch situation, so they got mad at me and started yelling at me, and I put up with it for two rounds and the situation repeated. So I told them what I thought of it, and they left.

Comments on game design often placed the responsibility for curbing negative behaviours on game developers, and illuminated how social interactions are interwoven with design elements. While they were seen as positive in general, our interviewees held conflicting views on the effectiveness of technological solutions (see also Kou & Gui, 2021).

> **Airi**: Gaming companies, before they release any game to the public, should make sure that if there's some sort of a chat option, voice chat or whatever chat, that it's monitored. Like for example when there have been death and rape threats before, *Valorant* got the system where they started recording voice chats, the people saying shit like that in the voice

> chat got no feedback reports or anything. … If you give that kind of platform to players and people, you should also monitor it because not all people are going to change and change their habits and be friendly or non-toxic. So, I think that it's also the game companies' responsibility to make it a safe place for gaming.

> **Erik**: Actually I have to say about *Valorant*, I like it because you can't really say anything wrong in the chat because you're immediately banned, but e.g. in CS [*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve & Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012)] or something like R6 [*Rainbow Six: Siege* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2015)], they don't have this option.

Communicative affordances, such as voice chat, could also facilitate discriminatory behaviour, as sometimes a feminine voice would be enough to elicit verbal abuse (see Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). The women players we interviewed recognized this and would also tactically employ this to avoid ('dodge') playing with potentially sexist players.

> **Anne**: I usually start like, "Hello!" [in a high-pitched voice], and I'm like if there's no answer, then, "Hello!" [low-pitched voice], and someone responds something like "Hi." I'm like, now I can pick my character, I first want to make sure before I fucking have to play for half an hour with them, like how do they respond [to me].

In a similar manner, affordances related to game modes could also make it more difficult to escape harassment situations. Regardless of the conditions, leaving the game would usually lead to losing one's rank or another kind of sanction.

> **Ariel**: This one that has stuck in my mind, when there was this person who was really toxic towards me, he was really, really mean to me, he threatened to find my address and come and rape me, and it really started to bother me and I wanted to leave that game halfway through, but then I didn't dare when it was ranked [a competitive game mode] and I didn't want to lose my rank for this.

## Norms and the social contract between players

While games may also have explicit conduct rules, social game play relies on a mostly implicit social contract that governs in-game conduct; for example, in a competitive game, players on the same team are assumed and expected to be working together for a shared win. Many instances of negative behaviour discussed by our interviewees, whether they were perpetrators or victims, were related to the breach of implicit social contracts or norms between players. Different assumptions about the gaming situation, such as its 'seriousness' or appropriate conduct, were a major source of friction, frustration, and consequently negative behaviour (see also Karhulahti, 2022; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2022; 2023).

> **Ira**: [Playing *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020)] I write in the chat like, "Hey, can you do your job, I'm Killjoy [a character in the game], it's not my job going to the site, I can't get there. You have the abilities." And [they say] "it's just unrated" [a more casual gaming mode]. I'm like, I don't care, that even if this game is unrated, you've chosen duellists, play like goddamn duellists play, and it boiled over so badly, really for the first time I disconnected and just left the game … like whatever, I'm leaving, if I get a penalty for this then so be it but I just can't.

In this situation, Ira's comment suggests she considers her reaction somewhat justified, even though she acknowledges that her reaction is excessive and is conscious that she may be penalized for her action. Despite hostile behaviour often being normative in many online gaming spaces (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020), our interviewees had strong views on what was appropriate behaviour and what was not. Responding to a question on whether they personally drew any lines on the expressions they use, Greta and Airi say the following:

> **Greta**: Like, no slurs.
>
> **Airi**: No KYS [online acronym for "kill yourself"]. No stuff like "autistic" or …
>
> **Greta**: Yeah, nothing. Nothing that concerns the person's background or gender. Well ok, gender is a little stupid.
>
> **Airi**: I've called people "bitch". Not women or assumed women though.
>
> **Greta**: Yeah, yeah, yeah, but something like no[thing related to] nationality, religion, race or anything like that. They're an absolute no. I'd never even dream of saying something like that.

Despite drawing these lines, when discussing their reactions to negative behaviour they received, they also told us the following:

> **Greta**: Well, one thing that I say very often, but it's also very defensive. I often tell someone that I played video games when you were still in diapers. I like to use that a lot on some boys, but like …
>
> **Airi**: Sometimes, when it is really extreme, we say "choke on a sausage".

"Choke on a sausage"—referring to performing oral sex on a penis—said as an insult to an assumed heterosexual man has a homophobic message: it frames homosexuality as something undesirable. As these interviewees self-identified as "LGBTQ", it is important to ask what the function of the comment is in this context. While on the surface homophobic, the main function here does not appear to be discrimination,

but provocation. However, regardless of intent, it is simultaneously a public homophobic comment made without any knowledge (or concern) of the recipients or their sexuality. The example underlines the importance of context and considering different framings of negative behaviour: the comment can be viewed as homophobic, as a weaponization of heterosexual men's homophobia, or as an example of discriminating expressions used without a discriminating intent; all are viable readings.

## Players' navigation of negative behaviours

Especially when playing competitive games, our interviewees had dealt with negative behaviours in diverse ways both as perpetrators and as victims, before, during, and after instances of negative behaviour. Depending on the instance, interviewees could for example escalate or de-escalate situations or address them afterwards with other players involved.

While previous research (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Passmore & Mandryk, 2020) has addressed players' coping as victims of negative behaviours, our interviewees also discussed coping as perpetrators, including addressing feelings of shame over their own behaviour. In the quote below, Airi discusses getting into a conflict with another woman while playing:

> **Airi**: This reminds me of an example, when there was kind of a bad atmosphere when we were playing and there was a random chick. And then the atmosphere got a little toxic and salty from the get-go and there was arguing and stuff like that. After the game we added each other [as friends on the gaming platform], first talked over messages and then we went into the same lobby and settled it because for both ...like there were us three women there and we all felt bad that in a game like that where it's already difficult to be a woman, we were toxic and nasty towards each other, so we settled it and we've played together afterwards.

In what is likely a rare occurrence, the players elect to discuss their negative in-game behaviour after the game. Finding solidarity in recognizing the shared difficulties faced by gaming women (e.g. Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018), the parties involved settle their argument and Airi mentions them gaming together afterwards. However, this requires one or both of the players involved to reach out and address the situation, and the game design also needs to technically allow this. Providing context, Ariel's comment shows how it can take a great amount of conscious effort to go against both the intense negative affect and the game cultural norms that encourage a hostile response.

> **Ariel**: It's like if someone's toxic at me in games, I fire back with the same energy, because I'm kind of thinking like, why should I be the "bigger person" in the situation if the other person is being annoying.

Although negative behaviour could be a near-automatic response (see Kordyaka et al., 2020) and a source of regret, it could also serve an empowering function for the women in our study. This was also problematized, as negative behaviour that interviewees perceived as justified was still seen as contributing to overall hostility.

> **Greta**: Sometimes it's like a reflex, like you say something like "shut the fuck up" or call someone an incel or something, like you're just so tired of all the "get in the kitchen blah blah" stuff but every now and then you somehow manage to slap them with a clever comeback and it feels like … well that shut them up, this feels nice.

> **Ira**: In normal life [as opposed to gaming] if I'm in a normal social situation like this, I don't dare to say fucking anything. I'm just there like "can I go already?" … Like in normal life I can't stand conflict. No, no I just can't do it.

> **Airi**: It's ok to defend yourself, but you also need to remember that there are limits to that too and even if someone is saying really nasty and disgusting things, it's not worth it going down to that level. And if you have and you've sometimes been toxic or you're still toxic, it's ok to admit it and then maybe like do a little self-reflection, why is it like this.

The distinction of private versus public was also discussed by interviewees. Private environments such as a friend group's Discord channel provided outlets for negative emotions and kept them from spilling out into the public space of the game. Several of our participants streamed their gaming, and paid extra attention to their behaviour, wanting to set a positive example. The increased self-awareness combined with a seemingly genuine intention to set a positive example helped our interviewees regulate their behaviour. By streaming, the interviewees also relinquished their anonymity, raising the threshold for negative behaviour.

> **Erik**: Now that I stream a lot and people have started watching me, I have to be a bit like … and I also want to be like calm. … privately I can let fly some words that I might not be allowed to say on stream, but nowadays I try to be much more calm and, like, non-toxic.

> **Anne**: Even if I sometimes feel like I can't be bothered, I kind of have this thing that because I'm streaming, I want to be a role model. That if someone like this [behaving in a toxic manner] enters the game, I'm like the hand of justice …

> **Kirsti**: No but it's good that we streamers are kind of against this toxicity. Like the more we do that, the more our viewers start to understand that hey, this is ok and secondly that you can say something, you can intervene. Maybe you can change it, so we are kind of changing this. Little by little, maybe not very quickly.

**Ira**: But like baby steps. That's better already.

## Discussion

What sits under the umbrella of toxic behaviour is a complex interplay of different factors, as players navigate affectively charged online environments and emotionally intense gaming experiences. Next, based on our analysis we discuss the implications of our findings and end the article with suggestions for reducing negative behaviour in online gaming.

Our analysis frames negative behaviour as a phenomenon produced by individuals based on their past and present experiences and shaped by affect, societal and game cultural norms, intersectional variables such as age and gender, and the different affordances provided by the gaming situation. Many issues and contributing factors that have been identified in previous research were present in our interviewees' comments, such as online disinhibition (e.g., Kordyaka et al., 2020), norms of hostile behaviour (e.g., Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020), the influence of competition (e.g., Adachi & Willoughby, 2011), and systemic discrimination (e.g., Ortiz, 2019). However, rather than making up a tidy model, a variety of factors come together to produce each individual instance and our analysis shows the multitude of ways players negotiate their own behaviour in this complicated matrix.

We especially want to highlight the roles of affect and intensity in relation to negative behaviour, particularly in competitive gaming, both of which continue to be under-theorized within the current literature. For our interviewees, negative behaviour was often related to the emotional intensity of gaming. In their comments, the digital gaming environment—an online lobby, a match, or a server—presents itself as a space charged with affect. This charge finds different outlets, manifesting as intense emotional reactions that players consciously and unconsciously direct in various ways, from breaking gaming equipment to unloading to friends on a private Discord server. When directed in a negative manner towards other players, we arrive at what is often called toxicity.

In light of the long and troubled history of aggression linked to gaming (e.g., Mathur & VanderWeele, 2019) as well as the documented hostility of especially competitive gaming cultures, we also wish to draw attention to the crucial distinctions between emotional reactions, aggressive conduct, and malicious behaviour. Intense positive and negative emotional reactions will often occur during competitive games, and for many players they are a key part of gaming's appeal (e.g., Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023). These reactions can sometimes manifest as aggressive cognitions and conduct (Kahila et al., 2022; Moreau et al., 2023) which, assuming that they are expressed in a manner that is not hurtful to others or oneself, are not particularly problematic and can sometimes be argued to be morally justified and even empowering, such as when pushing back against discrimination. Both emotional reactions

and aggressive conduct are distinct from intentionally malicious behaviour, although they might often appear together. It is thus important to differentiate between these different behaviours, their motives, and outcomes in academic literature, and avoid examining them as one homogenous phenomenon or through one concept, such as toxic behaviour, as it can hide important differences.

Our results both support and complicate some of the previous research on toxic gaming behaviour. Toxic behaviour has been framed in some previous research as an automatic and even subconscious reaction to stressful in-game events (Kordyaka et al., 2020). Although this appears to hold true for some toxic behaviour, our interviewees also brought up very intentional harassment and griefing that sometimes started already before the actual game, in a multiplayer pre-game lobby. This behaviour, obviously intended to insult and sabotage another player's game experience, clearly sits under the umbrella of toxic behaviour, at least as the term is used in everyday parlance, yet cannot be argued to be subconscious or automatic (see Liu & Agur, 2023; cf. Kordyaka et al., 2020).

For the understanding of the phenomenon, it is important to note that the distinction between a perpetrator and a victim, or a 'toxic' and a 'non-toxic' player is often not a dichotomy, nor is 'toxicity' an essential quality. Player behaviour is not a constant, and those players who consider themselves well-mannered may also get swept up by the intensity of the gaming situation and at times conform to gaming culture norms that encourage hostile and aggressive behaviour (Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023), use hostility as a form of self-defence or resistance (Gray, 2018), resort to hostility in defence of others, or behave in a different manner when playing with friends than when playing with strangers. Echoing findings on traditional bullying (Walters, 2020) and cyberbullying (Ballard & Welch, 2017), there is considerable overlap between perpetration and victimization (Kordyaka et al., 2020).

In a similar vein we encourage diverse and nuanced interpretations of perceived instances of structural discrimination in gaming from the perpetrator's point of view. Negative behaviour, most blatantly when it is expressed as explicit discrimination (e.g., Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Gray, 2018; Ortiz, 2019), can be symbolic violence, a way of wielding power, and of gatekeeping and boundary making (Gray et al., 2017). However, to seek solutions to systemic discrimination in gaming rather than simply illuminating it (see Sedgwick, 2003), we also need to understand the reasoning and intent, or lack of intent, behind discriminating acts.

## Solutions to negative behaviours

Finally, our results suggest several concrete ways to address different negative behaviours that occur in online gaming. We have elected to focus on ways that are specific to gaming, rather than address broad societal issues such as systemic discrimination. As we have discussed above, there are distinctly different varieties of negative behaviour in games and accordingly they warrant different solutions. There are seven ways we consider especially important. Suggestions 1 and 2 focus on the

individual level of players behaving in a negative manner, 3 and 4 are primarily industry solutions, and the final three are broader, joint game cultural efforts encompassing different actors.

1. *Developing emotional skills*. Online gaming environments can be extremely affectively charged, and our interviewees almost unanimously brought up the need for self-regulation, self-reflection, and empathy. As some negative outbursts are near-automatic reactions to in-game frustrations (see also Kordyaka et al., 2020), or stem from existing causes such as having a bad day (e.g., Kahila et al., 2022), the skills to explore and regulate intense emotions brought on by gaming situations are important in preventing hostile actions. It is important to note here that for example feelings of frustration and disappointment are normal human reactions to in-game events, and not inherently problematic. The vitally important distinction is whether they are expressed as abuse towards other players or addressed in private, such as with friends on Discord or simply by shouting at the screen.

2. *Developing social and communication skills*. Closely related to emotional skills in this context, social and communication skills are needed for correctly reading social gaming situations and responding to them appropriately. The normative nature of hostile conduct in online gaming (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020) combined with the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004; see also Kordyaka et al., 2020; Liu & Agur, 2023) easily gives rise to negative readings of neutral situations or leads to minor mistakes quickly escalating into full-blown conflict in a vicious spiral.

3. *Matching players with similar expectations*. Players may come into games, especially competitive ones, with different expectations in terms of both competitiveness and acceptable conduct. For example, if players looking for a casual game and players looking for serious competition end up on the same team, the different expectations can result in frustration on both sides, and escalate into hostility (e.g., Kou & Gui, 2021; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2023) as both sides may perceive and accuse the other of breaching an imagined social contract. Similarly, what some players experience as extremely hostile speech may for the other party be routine, strategic trash talk, perceived as appropriate for the competitive situation (Karhulahti, 2022). Games already have mechanisms that sort players of roughly similar skill levels into the same games and different game modes that cater to different intensities of play. Developing these approaches and providing spaces for different gaming mentalities and conduct preferences could help reduce conflict.

4. *Robust software and policy solutions*. Software solutions such as reporting and chat monitoring play a part in the curbing of negative behaviour. However, this also requires that said tools work and importantly are perceived to work,

making perpetrators accountable (e.g., Passmore & Mandryk, 2020); for example, players may not bother reporting inappropriate behaviour if they assume their report will not result in action being taken. Reporting systems are also open to uses contrary to their intent, such as revenge reporting or instrumental, strategic use (see Kou & Gui, 2021). Despite these drawbacks, low threshold approaches to tackling unwanted behaviour as well as automated content moderation (e.g., chat filters) likely help reduce negative behaviours, or at least their visibility (e.g., Cote, 2017). As Passmore and Mandryk (2020) note, developers need to design and implement features grounded in equity and an understanding of privilege differences (see also Cote, 2017).

5. *Promoting positive behaviour*. Rather than accepting that gaming culture is irreparably hostile and that more strict surveillance and heavier sanctions are the main way of keeping it under control, there need to be positive examples and contesting of normative hostility. This should take place not only as concentrated drives and initiatives, but also on an individual level. For our interviewees, receiving positive and constructive feedback helped alleviate negative feelings and prevented situations from escalating, contributing to an overall more pleasant atmosphere. Despite the prevalence of negative behaviour and discrimination in gaming cultures, there has also been intense pushback against this behaviour (e.g., Boudreau, 2022; Maloney et al., 2019; Nakamura, 2012), reminding us of the potential for positive change.

6. *Cultivating game cultural understanding*. Negative behaviour in gaming happens at the intersection of many factors as discussed above: affect and personal feelings, game cultural norms, societal attitudes, age, gender, and game technologies. Making players aware of how they are situated in relation to all of these could make it easier for them to consider and, when necessary, regulate their behaviour. If, as previous research and our interviews suggest, a considerable part of negative behaviours can be attributed to lack of consideration and unquestioning adherence to norms of negative behaviour rather than malice, increasing this consideration and making player more aware of their role in sustaining negative behaviours could help reduce such behaviour. It is also extremely important to educate players in privileged positions on issues related to sexism and racism and other discriminatory behaviours, to avoid burdening groups experiencing discrimination with additional labour (see Cote, 2017; Passmore & Mandryk, 2020).

7. *Creating safer spaces for play*. Our analyses show how in particular women players use various techniques to try to make gaming spaces safer for them. In line with earlier research (Taylor & Hammond, 2018), this demonstrates the importance of creating safer spaces of play, in particular to groups that are in more vulnerable positions in game cultures. These spaces can be created by gaming communities themselves both on- and offline but can also

for example take the form of supervised spaces (e.g., gaming clubs or spaces) by public or private actors.

## Strengths and limitations

A key strength of our study is its rich interview data, as our interviewees candidly described their experiences of gaming and conduct that they themselves viewed as unsavoury. Many interviewees were passionate about the topic, some even describing talking about it as therapeutic and as sparking self-reflection on their own behaviour. This said, in some of the early interviews we were perhaps rushing a little, as we tried to avoid taking too much of the interviewees' time spent at the gaming event. While we achieved good gender representation in our sample, all of our participants were White, which meant that we could not assess experienced racism as a facet of negative gaming behaviour.

As a small interview study, our results are not intended to provide a representative or broadly generalizable view of young people's negative gaming behaviour. Instead, they unpick the diverse dynamics of what is commonly called toxicity. A feature of study is that our interviewees did not appear to be particularly malicious: for them, negative behaviour was typically more about emotionally charged reactions rather than intentional being hurtful, and even when being hostile, they sought to for example avoid discriminating language. Interviews with players who enjoy and embrace negative behaviour online could therefore yield very different findings.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that games as affective spaces and designed game affordances play key roles in both enabling and intensifying negative behaviour but can also offer ways to combat it. Our results demonstrate that while negative behaviour is sometimes quasi-automatic, players also reflect on their behaviour and change it. Importantly, our study shows that negative behaviour in gaming can have multiple functions, including resisting and responding to harassment and discrimination: thus, the division between victims and perpetrators is not clear-cut.

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# Appendix 1

Interview questions (translated from Finnish).

1. Background questions.

- Age?
- Gender?
- [Optional] Which of the following describe you (you can choose more than one):
    - I was born in Finland.
    - I was born elsewhere than in Finland.
    - One or both of my parents were born elsewhere than in Finland.
    - I belong to a linguistic or cultural minority—what?
    - I belong to a sexual minority—which one?

2. Mention 1–3 games you have played that describe your gaming habits and preferences. Why did you choose these games?

3. Do you behave the same in and out of games? (e.g., Is it allowed or right to behave differently in games than in everyday life? Would you like to behave differently in games? Do you think about your own behaviour?)

4. Describe a gaming-related situation where you behaved in a toxic manner or others said you did. What happened? How did the situation start and end? How did you feel during the situation? What about after it?

5. Think more broadly about your toxic behaviour in games and gaming communities. (e.g., What is it like? Why or in what situations do you behave like that? Has your behaviour changed over time?)

6. Have there been consequences for your behaviour in games? (e.g., Has your own behaviour upset you afterwards? Have you lost or gained friends or gaming company? Have you been banned from games or gaming communities? Have your friends, parents or other loved ones commented on your behaviour?)

7. Do you think something should be done about toxic gaming behaviour? If so, who should do it and what should they do? If not, why?

8. Anything else you would like to add?