Towards a Framework for Assessing the Mechanisms that Contribute to Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviour in Esports

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ABSTRACT

Toxic culture undermines the potential of esports. In striving towards a more inclusive and welcoming sector, however, it can be tempting to focus on dampening rather than reinforcing mechanisms, or upon adding new mechanisms rather than removing or transforming existing ones. Building a conceptual framework that is holistic in nature could guard against such pitfalls. Thus, helping stakeholders in esports to parsimoniously address the challenges that confront them. Using prosocial and antisocial behaviour as lenses, this position paper sets out the foundation for such a framework and some of the vocabulary which may contribute towards an operational taxonomy. Then, using Blizzard's Overwatch as a case study, strategies that evoke, extinguish, worsen, or dampen toxicity are investigated. This illustrates that antisocial behaviour takes multiple forms, which are often ambivalent and require multifaceted interventions. Systematic analysis is necessary to unpack the complex network of actors which give rise to toxicity. Though the conceptual framework is still undergoing development, in the future, it could have several applications. These include evaluating systems for competitive play, analysing policies that shape esports events, and informing educational provision.

1 INTRODUCTION

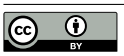
The esports industry is nascent but is receiving increasing attention [14]. Playing games professionally has captured the imagination of younger generations, and many events now command a large audience [1]. Competitive esports play can yield positive outcomes and provide new career opportunities [3]. However, the sector is undermined by a trend of toxic behaviour [13], which narrows participation [6, 11] and compromises business models [5]. To realise the benefits of esports and see it grow, it is essential to tackle this challenge. Toward this end, this paper suggests a framework based on actor-network theory that could help to assess the mechanisms contributing to prosocial and antisocial behaviour in esport contexts.

2 UNPACKING TOXICITY

Toxicity, as a term, is useful for identifying a class of phenomena but can often be inclusive of a range of very serious and harmful behaviours such as racism or 'swatting', to less clearcut cases that are comparatively less harmful such as griefing, bad manners, or 'feeding' [16]. Toxicity also tends to draw focus as conduct that is raw, unrefined, and inherently offensive. However, the literature illustrates that within the esports context, there is ambivalence in interpreting certain actions, both within and outside games. For example, 'teabagging' is traditionally seen as griefing. Though, depending on the context, it can also denote intimacy and respect for another player [10]. As such, there is a spectrum, mediated by socio-cultural facets, that spans the obviously inappropriate through to the ambiguous and the innocuous. This makes toxicity tricky to operationalise and tackle; except in extreme cases.

Game developers, esports organisations, and media platforms presently seem to take a deontological view. This is evident in codes of conduct that focus on the unwelcome and the welcome. Twitch, the dominant platform for esports streaming, has community guidelines that forbid many behaviours [17]. The British Esports Association and other organisations make value-orientated statements such as 'be a good sport whether I win or lose' [4]. These do, however, have their limitations. On the one hand, they emphasize what *not to do* with less attention on what *ought to be done*. On the other, there is ambiguity in the extent one views their behaviour as (un)aligned to the values. Even with advocacy to espouse them [15], there is often little incentive for players and spectators to actively seek these guidelines or adhere to their codes [13]. Furthermore, they confound what seems to be, at least in practice, a notion of toxicity that might be grounded in social consequentialism and exceptionalism. In their attempt to understand what contributes to prosocial behaviour in MMOs, Zhu, Zhang and Qin [19] found that interpersonal relationships may have more impact than what was previously thought.

This work strives towards a working definition of toxicity using prosocial and antisocial behaviour as a frame. These, respectively, correspond to conduct that draws one into a community, evoking a sense of inclusion and belonging, as opposed to conduct that repels one from a community, evoking a sense of exclusion and estrangement. This centres on what seems to be a relative model where impact is a function of a complex interaction between social actors. It also posits a wider spectrum, with antisocial and prosocial at the extremes, and null or ambivalent around the centre. This then indicates communal impetus; the extent to which behaviour affects others, for better or worse. Although it lacks a similar collective term, such momenta could become *nutric* rather than toxic. These are actions which are intended to be of benefit to others [19]; typically, being supportive and nurturing. Taking such a holistic view is worthwhile in considering how prosocial behaviours can be maximised at the same time as how antisocial behaviour can be minimised.



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3 BUILDING A FRAMEWORK

This initial conceptual framework is proposed as the foundation for a heuristic tool. Such a tool could then be used to assess how the confluence of various forces influences prosocial and antisocial behaviours which, subsequently, then influence the experience of those participating in esports. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory [9] a closer look at technology is necessary to understand how non-human actors can mediate human action and return moral prescriptions. These technological 'mechanisms' are what will be examined under the lens of this tool and it is hypothesised that many of them could be antecedents of the toxic and the nutric, whether reinforcing or dampening. Mechanisms could also have various qualities and characteristics, including being nullifying, punishing, or rewarding in nature. It is also likely the case that complex interactions can occur to form a complex network of pathways which mediates and moderates the impetus to and from prosocial and antisocial behaviour.

Using Blizzard's *Overwatch* series as a case example, it has incorporated several mechanisms to dampen toxicity through nullifying and punishing actions. Additionally, there are also mechanisms to reinforce nutricism through rewarding actions. An example of a nullifying action is a filter which translates insulting terms such as "gg ez" into mild statements such as "Ah shucks… you guys are the best". An example of a punishing action is a temporary ban. The game now also incorporates audio transcripts for when episodes of toxic behaviour occur in the game voice channels. Violations lead to bans from the game. As new players need to link a valid phone number to their account. In theory, this will reduce toxicity as players will avoid getting their main accounts banned and being unable to create a new one. In addition, new accounts have more barriers to access to the full competitive gaming experience. An example of a rewarding action is the endorsement system, which works across both teammates and those in the opposing team. Initially, it was a virtual 'pat on the back' as it didn't impact gameplay besides allowing to filter players when looking for a group. Now, they serve to rack up points towards obtaining a pass that unlocks in-game cosmetics for a player. When coupled with transmedia storytelling through animated clips, comics, and short stories, the game paints an optimistic world in which most of its characters inspire others to fight for the greater good. So, becoming part of that ought to motivate people into being prosocial so they can expand and improve their gameplay experience. However, using extrinsic motivators for behaviour change has its limitations [2]. The motivation to be prosocial disappears once all game content is unlocked.

4 FUTURE WORK

These initial explorations of Overwatch suggest a complex relationship between sociocultural dynamics and various mechanisms which combine and contribute to weakening antisocial and strengthening prosocial behaviour. There are many opportunities within the game's design, its peripheral tools, the technologies, and the fiction as well as virtual-world and real-world social contexts. The proposed conceptual framework and heuristic tool touch upon ways of assessing whether this vast array of mechanisms reduces antisocial or promotes prosocial behaviours. However, much further work is required to develop these into a working and applicable model. An important consideration is how The taxonomic classification of 'esportsmanship' or toxic behaviours is still emerging, and understanding how technologies might respond to promoting prosocial or reducing antisocial behaviour requires organised guidance in the form of such taxonomies [5, 7, 8, 10, 12]. Likewise, understanding the underlying social structures and players' perspectives and shared identities within them will help to understand what reinforces or extinguishes specific values or behaviours [16, 18]. The impact of such work would not only be beneficial to the study of player behaviour and moderation of esports and other online games, but would have rich practical applications to helping manage community events, education on esports, and general moderation tools development.

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