

UNDERSTANDING DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS IN ONLINE MULTIPLAYER GAMES

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Online games are designed and promoted as spaces of enjoyment, participation, and social connection (Lazzaro, 2009; Wu & Chang, 2025). Yet within these spaces, disruptive behaviors such as trolling have become visible and, in some contexts, normalized. Trolls have emerged as instantly recognizable figures in online gaming culture—circulating as memes, referenced in livestreams and chatrooms, and embedded in everyday discussions on platforms like Reddit or Discord (Lorenz, 2019; Vicente, 2020). Far from being isolated incidents of individual misconduct, trolling has emerged as a persistent and structured phenomenon that challenges our assumptions about what digital play is—and what it is for.

Despite the voluntary and “fun” nature often associated with play (Huizinga, 1944), many users actively engage in behaviors that sabotage their own teams, harass others, or intentionally derail shared objectives. These behaviors have negative consequences, undermining user well-being, accelerating player attrition, and eroding the cohesion of gaming communities (League, 2022). This tension between the intended purpose of play and its actual outcomes in contemporary game environments prompts an important question: why do individuals choose to disrupt an activity supposedly rooted in pleasure and free will?

Existing research has predominantly treated trolling as a psychological aberration, attributing it to antisocial personality traits, sadistic enjoyment, or thrill-seeking tendencies (e.g. Buckels et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2019; Ubaradka & Khangana, 2024). While these approaches offer insight into individual motivations, they fall short of explaining trolling’s prevalence across diverse player populations. As participatory digital culture continues to expand, more systemic and contextual approaches are needed to account for such behavior.

Therefore, this study adopts a socio-technical perspective, conceptualizing trolling as a situated, lived experience that arises from specific gameplay encounters mediated by players’ interpretations. Rather than treating trolling as a stable behavioral category, the research foregrounds how players interpret and justify their disruptive actions, framing trolling as a context-dependent form of deviance shaped by both social norms and systemic constraints. In this view, the study examines how players’ understandings of what it means to succeed, win, or contribute in a given gaming environment shape their willingness to engage in trolling.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. Under what circumstances, and for what reasons, do players engage in trolling?

RQ2. How do specific game mechanics and design elements interact with players’ strain experiences to facilitate or inhibit trolling behaviors?

SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT

The PhD student will undertake the following tasks. First, the student will understand the gaming literature, focusing especially on work relevant to the research questions. A critical review of the research on games, disruptive behaviors and trolling will be conducted. Next, the student will conceptualize the research studies by developing appropriate theoretical frameworks and data collection instructions. After obtaining respective IRB approval, the interview studies to address RQ1 and R2 will be conducted. Other methods (e.g. surveys) may be employed if the need arises. Following data collection, analysis to fulfill RQ1 and RQ2 will be performed. The student will also be expected to publish in peer-reviewed journals and present at international conferences in topics relevant to the PhD research. Finally, the student will complete the writing of the PhD thesis and fulfil all graduation requirements within the stipulated timeframe.