



Workshop on Understanding and Combating the Problematic Side of Play

Julian Frommel
j.frommel@uu.nl
Utrecht University
Utrecht, Netherlands

Guo Freeman
guof@clemson.edu
Clemson University
Clemson, South Carolina, USA

Janelle E. MacKenzie
janelle.mackenzie@qut.edu.au
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Daniel Johnson
dm.johnson@qut.edu.au
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Regan L. Mandryk
reganmandryk@uvic.ca
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

Digital gaming and playful environments are often viewed as entertainment computing technologies that aim to create fun, engaging, and positive experiences for children and adults alike. Yet, there is an increasing interest in research that protects players from the problematic side of gaming and playful environments, such as toxicity and harassment, dark patterns and deceptive design, problematic gaming and addiction, discrimination, incubation of extremism, and ethical considerations. However, behaviors that some consider negative or harmful may not be intended or even perceived as such by others. Therefore, this workshop aims to encourage researchers, industry practitioners, and game designers to bring in a wide variety of perspectives on how to articulate problematic play, what factors lead to the subjective nature of the problematic side of play, and approaches to combat harm across gaming and playful contexts while reinforcing potentially beneficial aspects of what can be ambiguously defined as problematic by others.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **Computer games**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**; **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

KEYWORDS

problematic play, ethics in games, online toxicity, online harassment

ACM Reference Format:

Julian Frommel, Guo Freeman, Janelle E. MacKenzie, Daniel Johnson, and Regan L. Mandryk. 2023. Workshop on Understanding and Combating the Problematic Side of Play. In *Companion Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play (CHI PLAY Companion '23)*, October 10–13, 2023, Stratford, ON, Canada. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 2 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3573382.3616025>

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the owner/author(s).

CHI PLAY Companion '23, October 10–13, 2023, Stratford, ON, Canada

© 2023 Copyright held by the owner/author(s).

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-0029-3/23/10.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3573382.3616025>

1 WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

There is an increasing interest in research that protects players from the problematic side of gaming and playful environments, including but not limited to: toxicity and hate in online games [1, 11, 20]; harassment in social VR [2, 3, 10, 22]; ethical considerations of monetization [5, 9, 17]; dark patterns and deceptive design [21]; problematic gaming, obsessive passion, and addiction [6, 13, 14, 16]; discrimination in playful contexts [19]; the incubation of extremism within gaming [15]; tensions between economic benefits and the focus on artistic and cultural values in game development [7]; and unethical practices of game studios [18]. These concerns are heightened when children enter these gaming and playful environments, for various reasons, including that children often have greater difficulty with making considered and well-evaluated decisions [4], and may still be learning to self-regulate [12].

However, behaviors that some consider negative or harmful may not be intended or even perceived as such by others. For example, game studios may have the need to incorporate monetization into games to make money because it is a business that creates jobs; players may like the opportunity to spend money on loot boxes rather than viewing it as exploitative or gambling because it improves their gaming experiences and performance [9]; players may consider high engagement with games as dedication or professionalism while others view it as obsession and addiction [8]; some players may normalize or even enjoy trash talk as an essential part of their online gaming experience while it can disrupt other players' experiences [1]; and some people may view children creating content as enabling children's creativity, independence, and self-agency, whereas others may question how these children are being used as laborers for game studios [18]. We understand that people have diverse perspectives and feelings toward the problematic side of games and play, but also that there is an urgent need to combat the harm to players and communities that result from these damaging practices and community norms. Therefore, we are conducting a workshop to gather a wide variety of perspectives and foster conversation that will facilitate forward progress in this community of researchers interested in combating harmful practices and norms.

2 MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKSHOP

- Understand what behaviors, designs, or social interactions are considered harmful (i.e., problematic side of play) to

various players (e.g., adults and/or children) in gaming and playful environments

- Investigate why some players consider the identified behaviors, designs, or social interactions negative or harmful while others do not
- Better understand situations in which gaming and playful environments are the main (or sole) source of need satisfaction for players and explore how (and whether) to help players broaden such sources
- Explore approaches to combat harm across various gaming and playful contexts, including policy approaches, design approaches, grassroots player approaches, research approaches, and technical approaches (including AI approaches).
- Consider potentially beneficial aspects of the problematic side of gaming and playful environments

3 ORGANIZERS

Julian Frommel is an assistant professor in Interaction/Multimedia at Utrecht University. His work focuses on the design and implementation of interactive digital systems that provide enjoyable, meaningful, safe, and healthy experiences for users, including research on how to mitigate the negative effects of toxicity and harassment in online games and other online social spaces.

Guo Freeman is an Associate Professor of Human-Centered Computing at Clemson University. Her work focuses on how interactive technologies including multiplayer online games, esports, live streaming, and social VR shape interpersonal relationships and group behavior, such as fairness of in-game purchases, harassment in social VR, and sociotechnical challenges for indie game developers.

Janelle MacKenzie is a Research Fellow at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. She is interested in the impact of videogames on children, including research on how to harness game experiences that provide opportunities for enhancing wellbeing, as well as identifying methods to minimize negative videogame experiences.

Daniel Johnson is a professor of Computer Science at Queensland University of Technology. His work focuses on how videogames influence wellbeing, often through the lenses of Self-Determination Theory and the Dualistic Model of Passion. Most recently, he has begun to explore the ways in which obsessive and problematic play may be a compensatory response to a lack of need satisfaction in other areas of life.

Regan Mandryk is a professor of Computer Science at the University of Victoria. Her work focuses on how people use playful technologies for social and emotional wellbeing, how toxicity, problematic gaming, and discrimination can undermine the connection and recovery benefits provided within multiplayer games, and how to harness in-game behaviours for assessment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nicole A Beres, Julian Frommel, Elizabeth Reid, Regan L Mandryk, and Madison Klarkowski. 2021. Don't You Know That You're Toxic: Normalization of Toxicity in Online Gaming. In *Proceedings of CHI '21 (Virtual)*. ACM, 1–15.
- [2] Lindsay Blackwell, Nicole Ellison, Natasha Elliott-Deflo, and Raz Schwartz. 2019. Harassment in Social Virtual Reality: Challenges for Platform Governance. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, CSCW (2019), 1–25.
- [3] Lindsay Blackwell, Nicole Ellison, Natasha Elliott-Deflo, and Raz Schwartz. 2019. Harassment in social VR: Implications for design. In *2019 IEEE Conference on Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces (VR)*. IEEE, 854–855.
- [4] James P Byrnes. 2002. The development of decision-making. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 31, 6 Suppl (2002), 208–15. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x\(02\)00503-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1054-139x(02)00503-7)
- [5] Jie Cai, Donghee Yvette Wohn, and Guo Freeman. 2019. Who purchases and why? Explaining motivations for in-game purchasing in the online survival game Fortnite. In *Proceedings of the annual symposium on computer-human interaction in play*. 391–396.
- [6] Jessica Formosa, Daniel Johnson, Selen Türkay, and Regan L. Mandryk. 2022. Need satisfaction, passion and wellbeing effects of videogame play prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Computers in Human Behavior* 131 (2022), 107232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107232>
- [7] Guo Freeman, Lingyuan Li, Nathan Mcneese, and Kelsea Schultenberg. 2023. Understanding and Mitigating Challenges for Non-Profit Driven Indie Game Development to Innovate Game Production. In *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–16.
- [8] Guo Freeman and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2017. Social support in eSports: building emotional and esteem support from instrumental support interactions in a highly competitive environment. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*. 435–447.
- [9] Guo Freeman, Karen Wu, Nicholas Nower, and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2022. Pay to Win or Pay to Cheat: How Players of Competitive Online Games Perceive Fairness of In-Game Purchases. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6, CHI PLAY (2022), 1–24.
- [10] Guo Freeman, Samaneh Zamanifard, Divine Maloney, and Dane Acena. 2022. Disturbing the peace: Experiencing and mitigating emerging harassment in social virtual reality. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6, CSCW1 (2022), 1–30.
- [11] Julian Frommel, Daniel Johnson, and Regan L. Mandryk. 2023. How perceived toxicity of gaming communities is associated with social capital, satisfaction of relatedness, and loneliness. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 10 (2023), 100302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2023.100302>
- [12] Steven J Howard and Kate E Williams. 2018. Early Self-Regulation, Early Self-Regulatory Change, and Their Longitudinal Relations to Adolescents' Academic, Health, and Mental Well-Being Outcomes. *Journal of developmental and behavioral pediatrics* 36(6) (2018), 489–496.
- [13] Alexandre Infanti, Carlos Valls-Serrano, José C. Perales, Claus Vögele, and Joël Billieux. 2023. Gaming passion contributes to the definition and identification of problematic gaming. *Addictive Behaviors* 147 (2023), 107805. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306460323002009>
- [14] Daniel Johnson, Jessica Formosa, Ryan Perry, Daniel Lalande, Selen Türkay, Patricia Obst, and Regan Mandryk. 2022. Unsatisfied needs as a predictor of obsessive passion for videogame play. *Psychology of Popular Media* 11, 1 (2022), 47. <https://doi.org/doi/10.1037/ppm0000299>
- [15] Rachel Kowert, Alexi Martel, and William B Swann. 2022. Not just a game: Identity fusion and extremism in gaming cultures. *Frontiers in Communication* (2022), 226.
- [16] Marc-André K Lafrenière, Robert J Vallerand, Eric G Donahue, and Geneviève L Lavigne. 2009. On the costs and benefits of gaming: The role of passion. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 12, 3 (2009), 285–290.
- [17] Lingyuan Li, Guo Freeman, and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2020. Power in Skin: The Interplay of Self-Presentation, Tactical Play, and Spending in Fortnite. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*. 71–80.
- [18] Simon Parkin. 2022. The trouble with Roblox, the video game empire built on child labour. *The Guardian*, January 9 (2022). <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2022/jan/09/the-trouble-with-roblox-the-video-game-empire-built-on-child-labour>
- [19] Cale J Passmore and Regan L Mandryk. 2020. A taxonomy of coping strategies and discriminatory stressors in digital gaming. *Frontiers in Computer Science* 2 (2020), 40.
- [20] Selen Türkay, Jessica Formosa, Sonam Adinolf, Robert Cuthbert, and Roger Altizer. 2020. See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: How Collegiate Players Define, Experience and Cope with Toxicity. In *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '20)*. Association for Computing Machinery, Honolulu, HI, USA, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376191>
- [21] José P Zagal, Staffan Björk, and Chris Lewis. 2013. Dark patterns in the design of games. In *Foundations of Digital Games 2013*.
- [22] Qingxiao Zheng, Shengyang Xu, Lingqing Wang, Yiliu Tang, Rohan C Salvi, Guo Freeman, and Yun Huang. 2023. Understanding Safety Risks and Safety Design in Social VR Environments. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 7, CSCW1 (2023), 1–37.

Received 2023-06-22; accepted 2023-08-03