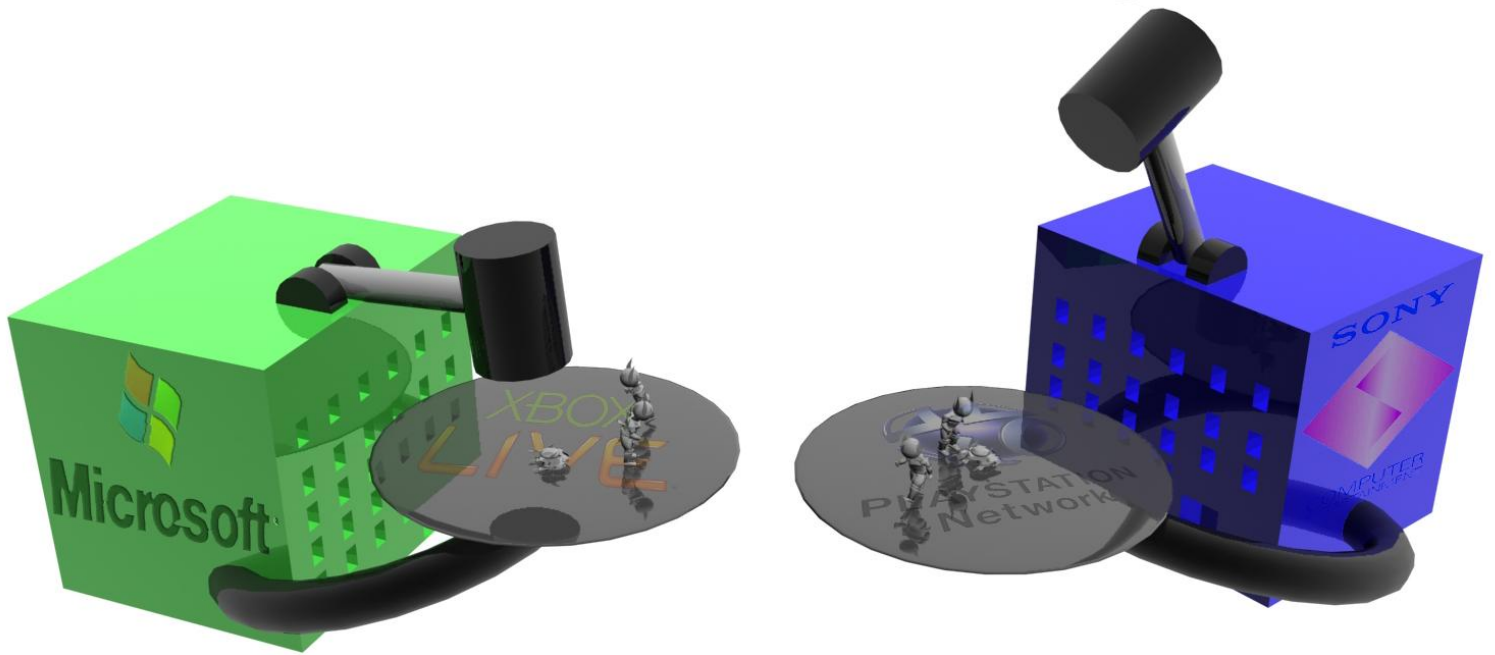# The end of griefing is nigh

Name: Rens Wiebenga
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Contents

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, a new phenomenon started to manifest itself across several platforms on the internet. Online communities were faced with a growing scourge which played an increasing role in the world of online communication and multiplayer games in particular. This phenomenon is called trolling or griefing and will be the focus of this essay.[1] In the context of online communities, trolling is the practice of purposely disrupting the efforts of the community with the intent to lure potential victims into a nonsensical debate, discussion or flame war. By acting counterproductively and messaging inflammatory, naïve or off-topic messages in an online community, they hope to disrupt the communication and combined efforts of that community (Adrian, 2010) (Brandel, 2008) (Schwartz, 2008) (Herring, 2002).

Ever since its inception in the late 80s, trolling has grown from a small nuisance to something that is considered a social disease (Adrian, 2010). Cultural scholar David Porter who is the author of the 1997 book *Internet Culture* describes trolling as a creative form of cooperative anarchy; a form of deadpan humor that thrives on being elusive. But since the first appearances of trolling the academic debate, it has taken a turn for the malicious. This malevolent turn has caused the phenomenon to attract attention of both popular media and the academic world. They both deplore its growth and malice in numerous reports and articles in which they attempt to warn the public of its destructive power.

However dystopian the recent notions of academia and the popular media are, I will argue in this essay that the end for the most malicious types of trolling is near. In previous papers I have shown that anonymity of the web has facilitated the strange moral compass that is used by trolls and griefers (Wiebenga, Morele verwerpelijkheid in de online wereld, 2011). This paper will show that the new platformed business model of the game industry results in lower levels of anonymity which means that the wiggle room for malicious use of online platforms will decrease. The focus of this essay thereby is on both game culture and game technology and is a combination of both game-centric and player-centric analyses. This essay is game-centric as it also discusses console/PC-platform and their affordance[2] for griefing and trolling through their essential characteristics.

By drawing on my own previous papers, I will illustrate what is required to consider trolling morally acceptable by the trolls themselves. When I have clearly established the fundamental mechanics of trolling, I will place it in the context of the growing service based ecology of the game industry. By doing so, the paper will disprove the previously uttered dystopian notions regarding the excessive growth of trolls and nefarious practices in online communities in general.

Griefing and Trolling

In order to clarify the terms griefing and trolling, the following section will focus mainly on its defining aspects, its characteristic behavior and the mechanics that allow this behavior. An in-depth analysis of the griefer/troll will be presented based on manifestations in popular media and

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[1] The main object of study is the role of trolling in multiplayer games. The act of trolling in games is also referred to as *griefing* as is explained in the next section.
[2] Affordance is in this case derived from the works of cognitive scientist Donald A Norman. Affordances are those qualities which allow users to use object in a certain way.

academia. Firstly, an analysis will be given on the term troll before explaining how griefing is derived from (and very similar to) trolling.

In 1997, David Porter wrote about trolling as part of the growing internet culture at the time. He explains that trolling used to be part of the old Usenet message boards and that it can be understood as a method of weeding out *newbies* from the usual members of the community. By purposely posting mistakes in logic and reasoning, they hope to be thoroughly corrected by a *newbie* who is unaware that he is being trolled. The *newbie* is then led to believe that he is more intelligible than the one who posted the mistakes whilst being ridiculed by the rest of the members (Porter, 1997). However, since the late 90s trolling has taken on several different forms. What Porter seems to describe here is just the *naïve troll* while there are many other more malicious forms of trolling (Wiebenga, Trolling als manifestatie van identity play, 2011). The term troll and its associated behavior have grown more general and describe all forms of detrimental behavior manifested in online communities.

A definition of a troll is therefore a difficult one, popular media seem bent on warning us about the inherent dangers of online communities for children which causes them to mainly focus on the most detrimental acts of trolling. This is exemplified by the TODAY SHOW from the MSNBC television station which did a report on the act of trolling. In their report they showed the cases of Alexis Pilkington and Nikki Catsouras. Nikki died in a car accident while Alexis committed suicide. When this news reached the trolls, they decided to collectively cause even more pain to the grieving family and friends by posting derogatory remarks and mailing the leaked police pictures of the accident to the bereaved. This behavior is obviously met with the appropriate scorn in popular media (Today Show, 2010). The New York Times decided on a similar method of representation in their presented case of Mitchell Henderson who also committed suicide. Similar derogatory remarks were made over the phone while Photoshopped images were made to insult the bereaved.

The reports made in the popular media have a clear intention of warning the unknowing public of the dangers lurking on the Internet by scaring potential users. By only using the most malicious cases as exemplars for trolling, they give of an overly dramatized perspective. This is why I consider it a positive thing that this perspective is counterbalanced with a more demure perspective presented by academia.

In academia, most authors analyse trolling by using a case study to describe the behavior of the troll in the most general of terms. This is for instance the case for David Porter's 1997 book *Internet Culture*. However, since Porter's account of the *innocent* side of trolling, academia has increasingly reported a more negative stance on trolls, a point of view that can be substantiated by the expanding set of tools employed by the trolls.

In 2002, professor of information science Susan Herring wrote her article "Searching for Safety Online: Managing "Trolling" in a Feminist Forum". In this case study on trolls in feminist forums she describes how trolls are capable of drowning out actual conversation pieces by constantly occupying a large part of the forum through naïve trolling. "A common phenomenon in online discussion groups is the individual who baits and provokes other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group." (Herring, 2002, p. 371)
She thereby illustrates that this is also considered the goal of the troll, to purposely occupy and waste the time of many, and doing this as efficiently as possible. Herring's report thereby shows a more misanthropic troll than mentioned in Porter's book.

However, in 2007 Mary Brandel reports in her article "Blog Trolls and Cyberstalkers: How to Beat Them", that trolls have extended the range of actions associated with them. More nefarious

manifestions are being presented while it is being discussed in the same manner of negativity as cyberstalking. She illustrates several levels of trolling; ranging from the relatively innocent *Spammer* to the *Psycho* who thrives on the pain of others. She thereby also opens up the term trolling into something more general, a more overall description of the nature of the troll.

Then in 2010, Pnina Shachaf en Noriko Hara wrote the article "Beyond vandalism: Wikipedia trolls" in which they go into a more in-depth analysis in the behavior of trolls. They conclude that the troll charactises himself through solitary, intentional, harmful actions that are based on a destructive community involvement. This is either done for fun, to get attention or simply with misanthropic tendencies to *watch the world burn* (Shachaf & Hara, 2010).

So far we have seen that trolling used to be described as quite an harmless phenonmenon restricted to the virtual world. However, as trolls started appropriating ever more creative means of disrupting communication, the reports on trolling thereby also turned from innocent to malicious. This constant development in their behavior has also made it a difficult term to grasp. This is made especially illusive due to its appearent sincerity. The only common denominator of all recent types of trolling seems to be their disruptivity. This is also prevalent in older forms of trolling, but now that the *art of trolling* has exceded the process of posting naïve messages, a more general definition is required. I will therefore consider all behavior that is purposely detrimental to the psychological well-being or efforts of an individual or community as trolling. This ranges from the reletively innocent *naïve troll* to the *schadenfreudetroll/psychotroll* who is concerned with causing the most amount of emotional pain among his victims (Brandel, 2008) (Wiebenga, Trolling als manifestatie van identity play, 2011).

The term griefing is similarly afflicted in its difficulty of finding a singlulardefinition since it is a subgenre of trolling. In the scope of this analysis, griefing is considered to be trolling that is restricted to online multiplayer games. The term griefing is commonly associated within games as those people that abuse, flame, cheat and exploit bugs (Adrian, 2010). Similar to trolling, they thrive on negative comments directed towards them. They hope to annoy and occupy the rest of the players by posting abusive or naïve statements or generally behaving in a manner that is counterproductive to the teams efforts. Blocking the paths of teammembers, teamkilling, flaming and appropriating undeserved precious virtual items are all actions associated with griefing (Foo & Koivisto, 2004). Similar to trolling, griefers are intentionally busy disrupting the efforts and mental well-being of other players. By behaving in this manner they hope to anguish other players through counterproductive or disruptive actions.

But we are then left to wonder, why is it that trolling is done so excessively online? What essential characteristics of the online platform allow trolls to shift their moral compass in the way they do? The author Matt McCormick, who is mainly concerned with ethics and new media, describes the following: "[T]he faceless anonymity of the Internet makes it easier to disrespect people's values as humans. We are all prone to do things to people over the Internet that we would never consider saying or doing to them in person" (McCormick, 2001, p. 282).

He shows that anonymity is the key factor in immoral behavior over the internet. This is also the factor taken into account in my final bachelor thesis in which I describe that trolls are governed by egoistic ethics instead of deontological, utilitarian or virtue ethics (Wiebenga, Morele verwerpelijkheid in de online wereld, 2011).

The ethical egoist is someone who will act according to his own future benefit and will try to achieve the best balance of good over bad for himself. This does not mean that the ethical egoist is per definition a bad or uncaring person; it might be that this person is very benevolent and nice because he expects to have these niceties returned in the future (Frankena, 1973). However, the ethical egoist only judges his actions on his own balance of good over evil. The anonymity of the internet has

thereby allowed his actions to go unpunished which causes the troll to shift his moral code to encompass this lack-of-accountability and consequences.

This notion of lacking accountability on the internet is also illustrated by the computer and information scientist David Davenport in his article "Anonymity on the Internet: Why the Price May Be Too High". He claims the following on mechanics of accountability to correct deviant behavior: "Obviously, resolving any unfairness, whether involving individuals, groups, or the state, requires that those responsible for the problems can be held accountable. In a free and fair society, justice must exist, and be seen to exist" (Davenport, 2002, p. 33). Without accountability, society has no method of correcting itself which allows the ethical egoist to behave as a troll.

In the next section we will look at how implementation of service based platforms have altered the situation in online gaming, given that lack-of-accountability and anonymity are the essential aspects of the Internet which have allowed trolling to occur on such a frequent and persistent basis.

Service based platforms and the rules of conduct

In the past decade there has been a shift in gaming culture. Where the PC-games used to have a market share of 24%, it has now dropped to 9% as described by Game Journalist and academic David Nieborg in his dissertation "Triple-A: The Political Economy of the Blockbuster Video Game". There seems to be a displacement of gaming platforms from the PC to consoles. This notion is validated by freelance writer for City Weekly Charlie Deitch as he claims that the internet connections to the console caused a 14% percent drop in PC game sales between 2007 and 2008 alone (Deitch, 2009). Even First Person Shooter games, which were once the domain of the PC market, are now transferring to consoles. This is illustrated best by the 4.9 million sales on Xbox 360 and PlayStation3 as opposed to the 400.000 copies sold on the PC (Stevens, 2011). These sources show that the console market has grown in size and revenue while the PC game sales are declining. But what does this shift mean for the player and their ability to troll/grief others?

The fundamental relevant distinction between console market and the PC game market is best described by David Nieborg and Alison Mary Humphreys in her PhD thesis. They show that the PC is different from consoles in the sense that "the PC is made out of non-proprietary, standardized hardware components, an end-user can take over the role as platform provider. Companies such as Dell, HP or Compaq are also platform providers of non-proprietary PC hardware; their hardware is open in a legal sense and does not exclude non-proprietary software use" (Nieborg, 2011, p. 145). This means that third party developers are allowed to develop software without consent from the hardware manufacturers. This has created a situation where consumers are easily capable of changing their respective hardware providers without being restricted access to any application. However, this is no longer the case in the growing console market (Nieborg, 2011).

The last generation of the console market has turned over a new leaf with regards to its business model. Instead of supplying the public with finished products that they can simply put into their console to play, the console market has turned to a platform based business model. Corporate behemoths like Microsoft and Sony have been able to integrate and control most of the value chain of consoles. For instance, the digital storefront has allowed retailers to be removed from the chain while they are being legally protected from unwanted third party application developers. This indicates that they are integrating the value chain above and below themselves which allows them to exert complete control over their respective platforms (Nieborg, 2011). This control is however not limited to the realm of corporate enterprise but is also translated to the consumer in the form of surveillance and access restriction to these platforms such as the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360

(Xbox.com Service Agreement, 2010). In the following paragraphs I will show how these new developments relate to the act of trolling.

By surveilling all player information "[t]he publisher has access to a vast array of information about each player - able to monitor every keystroke and access financial information through credit card dealings – so that the possibilities for surveillance and profiling are greatly intensified" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 200). When their surveillance and report systems indicate a user unwilling to follow the code of conduct, access is denied. Because the console market is now platform based, the publishers are granted the ability to render the physical console virtually worthless by restricting access to online play. This power is exercised when players do not adhere to the stringent *Code of Conduct* supplied by the publisher. The game publishers on consoles have thereby added community surveillance and management into their already ample frame of power (Humphreys, 2005). These systems of surveillance and community management have made it very difficult, for those who do not adhere to the code of conduct, to remain undetected and unpunished[3].

This is because the codes of conduct of both Xbox Live and the PlayStation Network (PSN), are very similar in the nature that they will not tolerate any deceptive, abusive or otherwise negative behavior. Once the player is reported, which is done by other players or surveillance techniques, the player stands a chance of having their access either temporarily or permanently removed from the platform (Xbox LIVE Code of Conduct, 2010) (PSN Terms of Service, 2011). This of course grants an enormous power to these corporate behemoths in the respect that they can identify and punish you if needed with either access restriction or legal action. Although legal action is usually only reserved for relatively extreme situations, we cannot underestimate the level of power it has on a conceptual level. It is hard to be non-conformist when you feel like you are constantly watched, judged and potentially punished even beyond the virtual world. These developments are thereby conforming player behavior through their ability to punish deviant behavior such as trolling.

To summarize, in the past sections I have first shown what trolling is, how it relates to griefing and what is required for a troll to be able to behave in their disruptive manner. I have thereby analyzed trolling in the field of academia, popular media and my own work to show that anonymity and a lack-of-accountability are essential characteristics for trolling and griefing to exist. After this initial analysis of trolling and griefing, I have shown that game culture is increasingly controlled by the industry through its platformed business model and codes of conduct. These developments are slowly conforming player behavior to industry standards by punishing behavior such as trolling with restricted access and legal actions. We can therefore conclude that the end of griefing and trolling is nigh since anonymity and lack-of-accountability are lost in the growing console market.

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[3] Especially since even other players can report behavior unfitting of their platforms respective codes of conduct.

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