Virtual Community Support Officers:
Community Policing in the Digital Space

Christopher J. Headleand
School of Computer Science
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK
cheadleand@lincoln.ac.uk

Julian Free
Digital Policing Group
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK
jfree@lincoln.ac.uk

Sam Farndale
School of Computer Science
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK

Matthew Hall
Lincoln Law School
University of Lincoln
Lincoln, UK
mhall@lincoln.ac.uk

***Abstract*—This discussion paper introduces the concept of devolving digital policing to members of virtual communities. A motivation is presented that highlights some of the issues faced when trying to police digital content and virtual communities. This is followed by a case study where the the monitoring and enforcement of video games communities has been devolved to community members. We conclude by introducing the concept of a Virtual Police Community Support Officer, where trusted members of specific virtual communities could work with the police online.**

***Keywords*-Virtual Reality; Video Games; Visuo-haptic Feedback; Multisensory Integration; Sensory Perception;**

I. Motivation

Virtual communities are inherently complex social networks with mixed membership from a variety of backgrounds. They also produce a staggering amount of content; in 60 seconds, you can expect over 60 thousand pictures posted to Instagram, 400 thousand tweets on Twitter, and 3.3 million posts on Facebook. Policing that space using traditional policing methods would require more resources than could ever be practically mobilised. Furthermore, even if the policing resources could be mobilised, not all content is accessible to be monitored. Facebook posts (for example) can be locked down to a private membership that enforcement agencies do not have access too.

In this discussion paper we argue that the members of a virtual community are a resource that could be operationalised into a formal policing role. We explore a discussion about the online gaming community who have experimented with this model, before presenting the concept of an online Community Support Officer.

II. Virtual Communities

"A virtual community is defined as an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms [1]". Like communities in the physical space, their membership is not exclusive. Someone who participates in one community may also be an active member, or observer (known as a lurker [2]) in another community. These communities are often emergent, centring around specific platforms for digital engagement, such as a specific social media outlet, or an on-line video game.

These communities form in several genres of games such as Massively Multi-player Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) that often maintain a persistent virtual worlds populated by the virtual avatars of real people. Social dynamics are a key element of many of these games which are centred around a digital community as a key gameplay element [3]. Even games that don't contain a social element often have a forum to support discussion between players.

In some games, players will spend an average of 22 hours a week playing the game. Social units (often called guilds and squads) are used to force players to connect and work together to undertake tasks that would be too challenging for a single player to undertake, allowing individuals to achieve higher levels of in-game progression [4]. Put simply, games that include this social element provide a quantifiably different experience for the player when compared to solitary experiences [5].

As with real-world communities, there are often rules put in place which define how members may interact. These codes of conduct form the "law" of the specific digital community, and players that don't observes these rules can face various forms of punishment, including being exiled (commonly referred to as banning).

The established rules often vary between game titles, developers, and specific publishers. For example, players of the *League of Legends* game follow the Summoners Code[6], while games released by the publisher *Blizzard Entertainment* follow their specific Code of Conduct (*Overwatch*, *World of Warcraft* etc.)[7]. While there are several common features, these codes (and how they are worded) vary significantly. Communities tend to be told the rules that will be enforced without consultation, and membership consensus may or may not agree with some of the rules in place. These rules are generally not established through democracy, but are imposed by whomever controls the platform. In games, a focus of these codes has been to help prevent toxic behaviour.

2642-3596/20/$31.00 ©2020 IEEE
DOI 10.1109/CW49994.2020.00025

A. Toxic Behaviour

Toxic behaviour is a term that is difficult to define, and how it is interpreted varies wildly between community. The definition is often unclear due to differences in expected behaviour, customs, rules, and ethics across games, and across the cultures of the people who play them. However, the following definitions (and variations of) are often used in formal codes of conduct.

- Sending offensive messages, assisting enemy team [8].
- Whether or not a player enjoyed playing with another specific player [9].
- Deliberately bad in-game performance, offensive language, verbal abuse [10].
- The use of profane language by one player to insult or humiliate a different player in his own team [11].
- Behaviours which are socially unacceptable and disrupt other players experiences [12].
- Misogynistic behaviours [13].
- General short term aggressive behaviour brought on by the competitive nature of the game [14]
- Intentional harassment of other players with the intent. Utilising aspects of the game structure or physics in unintended ways to cause distress for other players [3].
- Profanity and verbal aggression [15].
- Negative in tone, hurtful in intent, mean, profane, and/or insulting. [16].
- A player who derives his/her enjoyment not from playing the game, but from performing actions that detract from the enjoyment of the game by other players [17].
- Cyberbullying, mischief, and cheating [18].
- Gamers who enjoy causing other gamers to enjoy their game less [19].

While this list varies in the scope and target of the definitions, there is a common theme of toxicity being actions designed to disrupt the play or infringe on the enjoyment of another player. However, we may see more standardisation of terminology in the future. This year several companies formed a collaborative effort to try and combat prolific toxic behaviours in their titles which may lead to more common standards and approached [20].

III. Policing Online Communities

As previously mentioned, the rules that players have to abide by are generally imposed on them by a controlling party. However, it is rare that that the individuals in charge of the platform actually police it. To do so would be a monolithic task in the case of large gaming communities (for example, *World of Warcraft* has 12 million players, and *Fortnite* has around 3.2 million concurrent players). It may also have negative implications for sales and growth as publishers have been accused of censorship (impacting their player base) through enforcement of codes of conduct. For this reason, Sometimes communities are entrusted to help enforce the rules they are told to observe [12]. In many cases this is a simple reporting mechanism, in other cases the community takes a more active role in policing the space.

Reporting systems are often manual. A user within the match may place a report against another individual within their game. These reports are normally also elaborated upon with a category of offence and/or written description. Automated systems may detect certain offences such as use of inappropriate language or hacking. If the individual is deemed guilty they are then issued to the individual, severity usually based on the category of offence committed and number of previous offences.

In many ways, the players act to police their on-line community in a similar way to how a community support officer works with their community in the physical world. However, in a number of cases, players take on roles beyond reporting.

For example, one bold experiment in digital policing is the Tribunal (now legacy) in League of Legends. Where Players review reports from others who have been reported with data on a map and vote to punish or pardon [12]. In this example the players take the role of a judge and jury when there is a report of toxicity.

In some settings e.g. individuals may be placed in a more formal role, such as a forum moderator being charged with monitoring content. However, no community driven report systems in mainstream games currently have a single leadership role, rather the decision making is devolved to a sub community.

However, expert players may influence decision making. For example, in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, players above average competitive rank are given the opportunity to watch game replays from a cheaters perspective and decide if they were cheating and, if so, in what way. In this way they are able to review evidence, and make an informed decision based on their expert position.

Devolving this level of authority to a community is not without its risks. It requires that the community know what the rules are, understand them, and are able to enforce them fairly. But this can cause issues wherever there is a level of uncertainty or interpretation around the laws in that community. As a specific example, the Summoner's Code (Riot Games official *League of Legends* rules [6]) is often considered vague and open to interpretation [12] which has led to complaints from players.

IV. Over Policing

There has been some controversy about the application of rules in digital spaces, specifically regarding how consistently rules have been enforces. One high profile example is that of a well known video games streamer Jarvis Khattri, known as 'FaZe' Jarvis [21]. Jarvis released some videos online of him using a cheating technique called an 'aimbot' in the popular online game Fortnite, this action resulted in

Epic (the games creators) issuing a lifetime ban to Jarvis. This prevented him from playing the game, or creating video content using it (which by this point had become his career). The community response to this action was interesting, many argued that this was an example of 'over-policing', or unfair application of the rules, specifically that the punishment was disproportionate to the offence. Interestingly, other users in the gaming community attempted to cite precedent about previous punishments of other players for comparative behaviour. However, Epic has stood by their decision to ban the player [22].

While this paper relates to how areas could be policed (rather than the enforcing of specific rules) the community response in this case is worthy of specific mention. Specifically the citing of perceived precedent, and the arguments from those either calling for the strict enforcement of the rules, or calling for a lesser punishment (or a reduced sentence), both camps arguing for their own definition of fairness. The lack of transparency from Epic regarding how those rules are enforced has been of specific criticism.

V. Virtual Community Support Officers

Most large scale virtual platforms have already devolved reporting responsibilities to their communities. These allow the community to report content and activity that is in breach of the platforms code of conduct. While this often has some legal consideration, that is generally based on the laws of the country that host the platform.

We argue that members of virtual communities could be recruited as virtual Police Community Support Officers (or VPCSOs). These trusted individuals could provide legal visibility online, and provide the police with a vital insight into the activities of specific virtual communities. We see the VPCSO serving in the following roles.

1) **Education**: As a member of the community a VPCSO would be well placed to inform creators of the legal issues related to their content. They would have the opportunity to challenge the content directly, or send the poster a message about the legality of their activity. This could help to address issues before they require police intervention. Notably Facebook have already implemented technologies that allow individuals to contact a poster to explain their concern as part of their reporting pipeline.
2) **Reporting**: Where a member of the community is behaving in a way that may have legal ramifications, then the VPCSO would be able to report directly to an appropriate branch of the police. As trained individuals they would be aware of the burden of evidence required for formal proceedings and could help expedite legal action.
3) **Visibility and Support**: A VPCSO could be a visible presence online, providing the community with a point of contact to discuss concerns. We are already seeing some examples of virtual communities reaching out to online police presences. A good example of this is the twitter accounts run by various groups within the police. With a more visible, and supportive presence online it is entirely possible that the community would be more willing to report behaviour with legal ramifications.

VI. Conclusion

Protecting individuals online is a persistent problem globally. Policing methods have evolved to support the physical world, and have not transitioned into the digital space effectively. The legislation that does exist for online communities has proven difficult to enforce. We have written this paper to add to the ongoing conversation about how policing and how online communities can be protected.

Though this paper we have first established the motivation for this discussion piece, and discussed a number of specific case studies from the gaming community to support the concept of a Virtual Police Community Support Officer. Online spaces have proven difficult to police, as they are often closed or obfuscated making access and evidence gathering difficult. Identifying individuals can also be difficult as online spaces provide significant opportunity for anonymity. Furthermore, the sheer scale of online platforms makes their policing a significant resourcing challenge. In this paper we have argued that the PCSO model could be applied to the policing of online spaces, and have argued that the policing of video games communities is one example of this concept working in practice.

The role of a Police Community Support Officer (in the physical world) is to reduce crime, fear, and antisocial behaviour. They are a visible presence in local police forces in the UK, patrolling a 'beat' and interacting with the public in their local community. They are a known figure in their community, and act as an approachable presence aiding in the reporting pipeline, and providing early intervention to deter people from committing offences in the first place. They also have a critical role in escalating matters when crimes do occur. A virtual PCSO could serve in a very similar capacity, but with their beat established as an online community rather than a physical one. The PCSO could be act as an approachable contact for community members to report crimes, or antisocial behaviour. Their visibility could also help to educate, and deter crimes before they happen.

References

[1] Constance Elise Porter. A typology of virtual communities: A multi-disciplinary foundation for future research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(1):00–00, 2004.

[2] Blair Nonnecke, Dorine Andrews, and Jenny Preece. Non-public and public online community participation: Needs, attitudes and behavior. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 6(1):7–20, 2006.

[3] Dorothy E Warner and Mike Raiter. Social context in massively-multiplayer online games (mmogs): Ethical questions in shared space. *International Review of Information Ethics*, 4(7):46–52, 2005.

[4] Jessica Brown. World of worry: Examining the dark side of world of warcraft. *IEEE Consumer Electronics Magazine*, 6(1):111–115, 2017.

[5] Kellie Vella, Daniel Johnson, and Leanne Hides. Playing alone, playing with others: Differences in player experience and indicators of wellbeing. In *Proceedings of the 2015 annual symposium on computer-human interaction in play*, pages 3–12. ACM, 2015.

[6] Riot Games Inc. Summoners code. http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/featured/summoners-code. Accessed: 2017-10-16.

[7] Blizzard Entertainment. Blizzard's code of conduct. https://us.battle.net/support/en/article/42673. Accessed: 2017-11-25.

[8] Daniel Johnson, Lennart E Nacke, and Peta Wyeth. All about that base: differing player experiences in video game genres and the unique case of moba games. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pages 2265–2274. ACM, 2015.

[9] Kenneth B Shores, Yilin He, Kristina L Swanenburg, Robert Kraut, and John Riedl. The identification of deviance and its impact on retention in a multiplayer game. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing*, pages 1356–1365. ACM, 2014.

[10] Jeremy Blackburn and Haewoon Kwak. Stfu noob!: predicting crowdsourced decisions on toxic behavior in online games. In *Proceedings of the 23rd international conference on World wide web*, pages 877–888. ACM, 2014.

[11] Marcus Märtens, Siqi Shen, Alexandru Iosup, and Fernando Kuipers. Toxicity detection in multiplayer online games. In *Network and Systems Support for Games (NetGames), 2015 International Workshop on*, pages 1–6. IEEE, 2015.

[12] Yubo Kou and Bonnie A Nardi. Governance in league of legends: A hybrid system. In *FDG*, 2014.

[13] Rabindra A Ratan, Nicholas Taylor, Jameson Hogan, Tracy Kennedy, and Dmitri Williams. Stand by your man: An examination of gender disparity in league of legends. *Games and Culture*, 10(5):438–462, 2015.

[14] Paul JC Adachi and Teena Willoughby. The effect of video game competition and violence on aggressive behavior: Which characteristic has the greatest influence? *Psychology of violence*, 1(4):259, 2011.

[15] Adrienne Holz Ivory and Christine E Kaestle. The effects of profanity in violent video games on players' hostile expectations, aggressive thoughts and feelings, and other responses. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 57(2):224–241, 2013.

[16] Sara Sood, Judd Antin, and Elizabeth Churchill. Profanity use in online communities. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pages 1481–1490. ACM, 2012.

[17] Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky. *Developing online games: An insider's guide*. New Riders, 2003.

[18] Haewoon Kwak, Jeremy Blackburn, and Seungyeop Han. Exploring cyberbullying and other toxic behavior in team competition online games. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pages 3739–3748. ACM, 2015.

[19] Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen, Henry Been-Lirn Duh, and Chiew Woon Ng. Players who play to make others cry: The influence of anonymity and immersion. In *Proceedings of the international conference on advances in computer enterntainment technology*, pages 341–344. ACM, 2009.

[20] Fair play alliance. http://www.fairplayalliance.org/. Accessed: 2020-05-19.

[21] Louise Griffin. Faze clan call for 'compromise' on jarvis fortnite ban as they speak out on 'devastating' situation. *Metro News Online*, 2019.

[22] Anthony Cuthbertson. Fortnite cheat faze jarvic quits la mansion after lifetime ban to 'figure out' his live. *Independent*, 2019.