Draft synopsis – Anonymous monsters

It is more and more clear that being able to hide behind an anonymous username in online forums results in many people displaying what is generally referred to as toxic behaviour, that ultimately can result in harm to other people and even effect politics.

Whether or not this is showing true colours of the people behind the slur of anonymity, or if it’s the power of being anonymous that affects your behaviour is not something that we as software programmers can conclude or fix, this is rather a question for psychology. All we know is it’s happening, that it’s a problem, and what I’ll investigate is how we should address it.

Firstly, I’ll investigate the different forms of toxic behaviour, and certain internet forums that it occurs in. The two forums I’ll focus on mainly is social platforms, mainly Twitter and Reddit, and online gaming, here mainly in the video game League of Legends. The main difference between the two forums is that in social media, the receiver of the toxic behaviour is often not anonymous while the sender usually is, and in the video game both parties are more often than not anonymous.

From my own experiences, and from articles I’ve read on the internet it’s clear that there’s a huge problem. People have committed suicide over messages, in form of cyber bullying and the likes, and this affects both adolescents and adults. My first personal encounter of toxic behaviour online comes from video games. I’ve been playing video games since I was 2 years old (I’ve been told), so it has shaped me, and we as gamers has shaped the culture. I started playing online games around the age of 11-12 years old, which opened a whole new world, a community.

I remember the first time I experience something negative, where I was basically hustled by someone, in the same way someone would hustle you on craigslist (the American version of DBA) by taking your money and then not handing over the thing you purchased. Back then there were no solution for me, no way to get my (what felt like hard earned) money back. There were no police, no rules that he was violating in this new forum.

As the community grew larger, the toxicity spread like a disease. Game companies started introducing rules, punishment and admins/moderators to tackle these issues head on. But it quickly became apparent that the hardest punishment a gaming company could possibly enforce, which was banning you from the game, simply wasn’t enough. This became especially obvious with the release of League of Legends, a MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) game that was virtually free to play, where payments didn’t give you any strategic advantage over other players, but merely gave you options to change appearance or your name. This meant that if you were banned from playing the game, you could simply just create a new account and start over, without having to pay money.

This meant that punishment wasn’t as effective and resulted in the community becoming very toxic. While the toxicity is often caused by the game being very competitive, the toxic comments that are made by players are things most would never say to someone in person. There was especially a big issue in the region I played in, Europe, since it combined many countries, cultures and languages. I mention languages cause the main language used in gaming in mixed European servers is English.

Many of the countries in the region didn’t teach English at the same level as they do in i.e. Scandinavia at the time, which meant they sometimes had to try and communicate in their native language, hoping there was a fellow countryman that could translate, revealing their place of birth and thus becoming a more personal target for toxicity, and less anonymous. This lead to many prejudices and borderline racists comments towards non-English speakers. An example is people spamming “le baguette” in the game chat every time someone speaks French, due to a prejudice that most French people don’t speak English, and since League of Legends is a team game it relies on communication, I assume it’s frustration over not being able to communicate or understand what other people are saying that leads to this racist toxicity.

Another issue is that the game is mainly played by male gamers, which leaves women as a minority. In general, everyone assumes that all the players are males. Due to sexist comments and being a minority, women feel forced to try and stay gender neutral in order not to reveal that they’re female. They do this by having neutral names, and even attempting to play both male and female characters evenly. This is a conclusion from what I’ve observed and have been told by female friends who play the game.

This paper will investigate what it means to be anonymous and compare what being anonymous now means compared to being anonymous in the pre-internet ages.

I will look at a pre-existing form of software created to prevent cyber toxic behaviour, ReThink, that has showed promise in changing adolescents mind on deciding whether to post offensive messages on social media or not.

ReThink is an app that detects mean, hurtful embarrassing or other forms of offensive messages, and as the name implies ask them to rethink posting these messages before you can send them. Messages that could ultimately lead to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, even suicide in extreme cases for the receivers of the message.

I will also look at how Riot Games, the company behind the hugely popular video game League of Legends, has attempted to tackle online toxicity in their video game.

What I will discuss is whether it’s our job as software programmers to teach or force good behaviour on people, now that they’re able to hide behind an anonymous alias and not having to face the receiver of the messages eye to eye

I will try to suggest possible solutions on how to deal with toxicity online, referring to existing ideas and solutions, and also exploring extreme options in case they prove ineffective.

Sources/Relevant articles:

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