Regulating Anti-Social Behavior on the Internet: The Example of League of Legends

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Abstract

Anti-social behavior such as flaming is pervasive and problematic in many online venues. This behavior breaks established norms and unsettles the well-being and development of online communities. Therefore, regulating anti-social behavior becomes an important issue in online management. In this paper, we examine flaming in the context of an online game, League of Legends. We discuss an effort the game developer, Riot Games, presents to deal with anti-social behavior. The "Tribunal System" empowers players to judge misbehavior. We conducted an ethnographic study of the game to explore the reasons for anti-social behavior, and we analyzed the development of the Tribunal System.

Keywords: flaming, regulation, video game, League of Legends

Introduction

Anti-social behavior is a pervasive and real problem on the Internet (P. Davis, 2002). Researchers have suggested that the reduced social cues and social anonymity of computer-mediated communication result in anti-social behavior (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). One type of online anti-social behavior is flaming which indicates aggressive, hostile, sometimes profanity-laced interaction. Flaming is widely found in email, public newsgroups, discussion boards, and online video games (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003; Spears & Lea, 1992; Lea & Spears, 1991; Pizer, 2003; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000; Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Alonzo & Aiken, 2004; Thompsen, 1992).

To regulate people's online behavior, Lessig (2000) discussed four modalities: laws, norms, markets, and code. Laws regulate behavior by threatening a certain consequence if a law is broken. Norms regulate behavior by sanctions imposed by a community. Markets regulate behavior by pricing structures that constrain access. Code (i.e., software and hardware) regulates behavior by constituting a set of constraints on how people can behave. The constraints are experienced as conditions on people's access to cyberspace. For example, in some places people must enter a password to gain access. Lessig argued that laws are difficult to enforce on the Internet. So are markets due to the free nature of the Internet. The most common modalities people use are norms and code.

In this paper, we selected League of Legends to study online behavior because it is a widely played game and people must cooperate quickly with one another. A match is composed of two teams. Each team contains five players who do not know one another (see Figure 1). Matches last about 20-50 minutes. League of Legends (LoL) is currently ranked first in the world in terms of hours played for a PC game (Gaudiosi, 2012). There are about 32 million registered players worldwide (2011). The game is free to play.
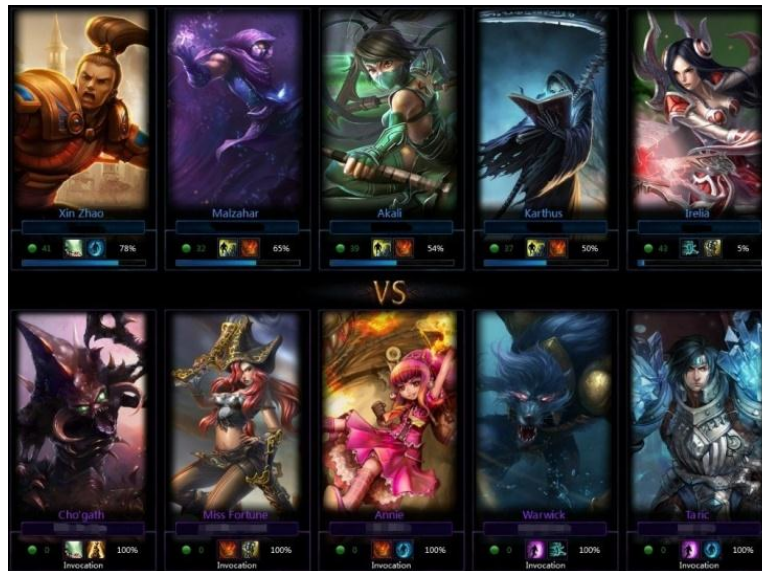
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Figure 1. Loading Screen of League of Legends.

Method

We studied League of Legends through immersive ethnographic fieldwork including participant-observation, interviews offline and online (through an instant messaging tool), the collection of game logs (the game logs are available through the Tribunal System which is accessible to the player community and we selected 100 game logs that were representative in terms of types of anti-social behavior), and documents such as LoL-related forums, websites and players' blogs. In October 2011, the first author created an account on the North American Server and played about 900 matches. We conducted ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews, including interviews with six players from China and four from America. We asked them when and why they started to play LoL, what they liked and disliked about it, what forms of behavior they disliked, what they did towards the behavior they disliked, what they expected to be done to those who behaved badly, and whether they themselves had behaved in a way they considered anti-social.

Findings

In this section, we discuss flaming behavior in LOL and the Tribunal System as a method to regulate flaming as well as other anti-social behavior.

Flaming

Our findings indicate that flaming occurs most when a team is losing their game. One or more players blame others whom they believe have performed worse than could reasonably be expected. Those who are blamed accuse back. At this point, blame escalates into a flame war. Below is an excerpt from our collected chat logs. Nidalee, Ziggs, and Shen are characters in LoL. At 28 minutes, when a game might be nearing its end, Nidalee began to flame Ziggs, who talked back:

> *Nidalee [00:28:13]: yea stop talking ziggs*
> *Nidalee [00:28:14]: you suck*
> *Shen [00:28:30]: plz just surrender*
> *Ziggs [00:28:33]: and you are pro or what?*
> *Ziggs [00:28:34]: haha*
> *Ziggs [00:28:35]: idiot*
> *Nidalee [00:28:37]: 3:4*
> *Nidalee [00:28:39]: better than 1:7*
> *Nidalee [00:28:41]: idiot*
> *Ziggs [00:28:48]: score says nothing*

> *Nidalee [00:28:55]: hahah so ur good*
> *Nidalee [00:28:57]: u just fed?*
> *Nidalee [00:29:02]: good players dont feed idiot*
> *Nidalee [00:29:13]: so shut ur baddie ass up*
> *Nidalee [00:29:14]: lol*

This conversation began when the team was going to lose the game, indicated from Shen's plea for surrender (players can vote to surrender if defeat seems unavoidable. But surrender is only successful when four or more out of five players in the team agree). In this conversation, Nidalee said his score is 3:4, indicating that he had killed three enemy players and died four times, which was a better score than Ziggs' 1:7. Then he blamed Ziggs for "feed," which is the act of being killed repeatedly, and thereby assisting the enemy team. In each match, there is of course always a losing team. At the moment of losing, flaming may erupt.

Flaming is sometimes started by minor, subtle triggers. Below is an excerpt in which Sion suddenly burst into a rage at the second minute of a match because he thought Fiddlesticks was positioned in the wrong place:

> *Sion [00:01:23]: fiddle go the fuck bot your retard*
> *Fiddlesticks [00:01:31]: dude*
> *Fiddlesticks [00:01:34]: watch the language*
> *Sion [00:01:37]: dont give a fuck go bot*
> *Fiddlesticks [00:01:38]: no excuse for that*
> *Fiddlesticks [00:01:40]: dude*
> *Fiddlesticks [00:01:42]: watch the language*
> *Fiddlesticks [00:01:45]: no excuse for that*
> *Urgot [00:01:53]: kids are here*

"Bot" is short for bottom lane, one of three lanes (i.e., top lane, middle lane, and bottom lane) between two teams in a match. Usually only one player from each team is in the middle lane. Sion found Fiddlesticks in the middle lane with him, so he spoke to him in an aggressive way to force him to move from the middle lane to the bottom lane. Fiddlesticks reminded Sion to watch his language.

Players in our study said that flaming is the most detrimental form of communication against developing an effective team. One interviewee said that:

> *It's fine even if one player is doing very badly, but the game is unwinnable if only one player is flaming.*

"It's fine" means the game is still winnable, which is most important to LOL players. But flaming upsets everyone on a team even if it happens only between two players. When players are no longer in the mood to play, they cooperate less and loss is nearly inevitable. Regarding the impact of flaming, one player wrote in a blog post that:

> *Flaming is perhaps the biggest reason for defeat in this game. Telling a person that he has made a mistake in a rude way, as if he doesn't know that he made it, this helps no one at all.*

This player realized that flaming does not compensate for the influence of a mistake. Instead, it can only make the situation worse by making the flamed player feel bad, which "helps no one at all."

On American and Chinese servers, players often assume flamers to be people who are young, immature, and not able to control their own behavior. On American servers, flamers are sometimes called "kids." Blow is an excerpt from our chat logs:

> *Renekton [00:36:05]: he cant even count to 4*
> *Sona [00:36:08]: hes so good at math*
> *Renekton [00:36:10]: holy shit*
> *Renekton [00:36:13]: worse than i expected*
> *Caitlyn [00:36:16]: man u kids need to get reported for being annoying*

Renekton, Sona and Caitlyn are characters in LoL. In this conversation, Renekton and Sona flamed Caitlyn, and then Caitlyn called them "kids," and said they were annoying.

In China, flamers in the game are called "pupil" in a metaphorical way. In Chinese Internet slang, pupil denotes a person who talks or behaves in an immature or irresponsible way as if they are too young to graduate from elementary schools. In LoL's Chinese official forums, some players mocked flamers by saying "Are you a pupil? Go home and do your homework instead of playing games!" Similarly, in Taiwan, flamers are believed to be junior high students or vocational school students (Sun, 2005).

The Tribunal System

Flaming, together with other anti-social behavior, cause Riot Games to implement a regulatory system in such a large player community. They knew they did not have the staff to clean up the community themselves, so they devised the Tribunal System as a way of letting the community police itself (Senior, 2011). This system combines player regulation and code regulation in one.

The Tribunal System allows a player to report other players he believes have misbehaved during a game. The player can select from a list of misbehaviors the game provides, and add additional comments (see Figure 2). However, currently reporters do not know if the reported players are actually punished. Reporting behavior is itself regulated as well. Players must select one kind of misbehavior from a list provided by Riot Games, and can only report misbehavior after a game ends.

Figure 2. Report Anti-Social Behavior.

The Tribunal System empowers players to judge reported players. Not all players have the right to judge other players. The system regulates eligibility by checking the identity of the players who log into the system. First, the players must own an account that is level 20 (the beginning level is one and maximum level is 30 and players receive "experience points" by playing games, which count toward reaching the next level). Second, the players should have never been banned before (ban is a temporary suspension from the game. It is incurred if the player has been reported to the Tribunal System and voted to be punished). If the proper conditions are met, a player can log into the Tribunal. After entering the Tribunal System, players must first agree to general guidelines that ask them to review cases in a rational and careful way. When reviewing cases, the reviewer can make a decision after 20 seconds. (Riot Games set this time constraint to prevent reviewers from reckless judging cases.) For each case, the reviewer has three options: to punish, to pardon or to skip the case.

Figure 3 shows a case in the system. A player has been reported by six players in two games. From top to bottom, the case page shows related information including game length and game type, reasons for reports, in-game chat log, and players on the same team, including the reported player The words of the reported player are underlined in purple. At the top right and the bottom right two buttons indicate whether to punish or pardon the reported player as well as a link to skip the case. Players must make decisions alone, and cannot discuss the case with other reviewers in the system. Each case will be randomly sent to reviewers (the number of reviewers is automatically decided by the system), and if the majority votes to punish the reported player, the Tribunal System will automatically send the reported player a warning email if it's the first time that the player is voted to be punished. From the second time, punishment is in the form of temporal suspension, which will continue to escalate if the player is punished again. Reviewers can find out the result of each case they have judged after a short period. The Tribunal System regulates reported players by suspending their accounts, and regulates reporters and reviewers by creating constraints and general guidelines for them to use these functions. This regulation is accomplished through code.

Figure 3. The Tribunal System.

During the first year of the Tribunal System Riot Games reported: "More than 47 million votes have been cast in the Tribunal; 51% of Tribunal cases resulted in a guilty verdict, with only 5.7% earning a permanent ban; 50% of players warned by the Tribunal just once never end up there again." Thus the system was active and seems a serious and at least partially successful effort to control anti-social behavior in an online space.

Discussion

To deal with flaming, as well as other anti-social behavior, Riot Games developed the Tribunal System that aims to bring human judgment together with code to regulate behavior. The code, in the form of the Tribunal, regulates players who perpetrate anti-social behavior, players who report misbehavior, and people those who review cases. Reporting may have a ripple effect beyond a single team, thus affecting the larger community. When a player violates established norms, his teammates will report him because he has ruined their gaming experience. They may also ask the other team to report the player, too. The community is made aware of the Tribunal System as a regulator. However, the code cannot work alone. It relies on the consensus of reviewers who do not know each other. By making reviewers anonymous to each other, Riot Games wants to guarantee that each reviewer's decision is not affected

by others, and the Tribunal System is not abused. The Tribunal utilizes human judgment, but minimizes the information reviewers know about the reported player and the information reporters know about the players they have reported. In this sense, reviewers and reporters are objectified (Ekbia & Nardi, 2011) as voting elements in the Tribunal System. The Tribunal System is a sophisticated platform that brings human judgment together with regulation through code.

In his book *Grief Play Management*, Foo (2008) discussed the possibility of a player judiciary system and pointed out three challenges in implementing such a system: the selection of appropriate players to assess their peers, the ability of players to arrive at fair assessment, and the full support any such will system would require of the game operator. These challenges are tackled in the Tribunal System by regulation through code along with human judgment. The Tribunal System seems effective in building a better environment as Riot Games' statistics showed that half of the reported players no longer misbehaved again.

The Tribunal System represents a promising approach to regulating anti-social behavior. We can envision designing regulatory methods for other online venues which could leverage the participation of ordinary people in regulation along with code.

Conclusion

Flaming has been problematic since the World Wide Web made internet services widely available. The Tribunal System tries to bring human judgment into code regulation and is reported to be performing well. But it is complex to combine human judgment and code regulation. There are still many challenging issues in designing such systems, such as deciding how much information should be made available to human judgment. There also exist questions such as how people use the system and how this information could be utilized in regulating anti-social behavior in other online venues. In future research, we will try to answer these questions to help design better regulatory systems.

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