Episode 5: Transgressive/Toxic Play

Just like in physical contexts, not all of the social interactions that occur in digital games are positive and fun. An emerging approach to understanding this "dark" side of digital gaming is through the lens of transgressive play, which is explored in depth in the new edited collection *Transgression in Games and Play*. A key contribution to this discussion is found in the works of Dr. Kelly Boudreau, an Associate Professor in Interactive Media Theory & Design at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology (Pennsylvania).

Dr. Sara Grimes 0:00

For the most part, digital gaming has totally flourished over the past year, both in terms of sales, and in terms of its increased presence in people's lives. Stuck at home for days, weeks or months at a time, many of us turn to gaming as a source of fun, social connection, and let's be honest, escape. Emerging research shows that gaming among children increased significantly during COVID-19. Connected games like Fortnite and Roblox provides crucial opportunities for kids to hang out and play with their friends, while educational games like Scratch and Minecraft are used to supplement virtual school programming.

A global study conducted by Simon-Kucher & Partners reported that as of June 2020, teen and adult respondents around the world reported their time spent gaming had increased massively since the start of the pandemic, up to 52% for players in Latin America. Meanwhile, in the US, the game industry broke several records this past year, in terms of game and content sales, in terms of audience sizes for game related media, and in terms of unprecedented consumer demand for the newest gaming consoles. I still don't have my PlayStation 5. The social dimension of gaming has been a deeply important factor in the rise and spread of digital play, both before and during the global pandemic.

Blockbuster hits like *Among Us*, which amassed over a billion players worldwide in 2020 alone, show us the games can provide a unique space for interacting and being together, even when we're physically distance. But not all the social interactions that happen in games are rewarding, or even all that pleasant. For years now, academics in the media have documented incidents and trends that many would call "toxic", from disrupting others gameplay to bullying, to doxing and even death threats. A recent survey conducted by the US-based Anti-Defamation League found that more than half of multiplayer gamers aged 18 to 45 reported that during the previous six months, they'd experienced in game harassment relating to their race, ethnicity, religion, ability, gender or sexual orientation. How do we make sense of this phenomenon? And why do some games become forums for such harmful behavior?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau, Associate Professor in Interactive Media Theory and Design at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology in Pennsylvania, is a sociologist and leading expert on toxic and problematic player behavior. She is also a contributing author to the recent collection, *Transgression in Games and Play*, edited by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen and published in 2019 by the MIT Press. The book features work conducted as part of the games and transgressive aesthetics or GTA project, a three year international research collaboration led by Professor Jørgensen, Dr. Boudreau's chapter entitled, "Beyond fun, transgressive gameplay toxic and problematic player behavior as boundary keeping" establishes an innovative and nuanced framework for understanding why some players engage in toxic behavior, the role it plays in sub-cultural boundary keeping and identity formation, and its relationship with the much more mundane forms, problematic play that most players engage in at one point or another, sometimes accidentally. This chapter builds on Dr. Boudreau's previous published work in this area, including the chapter "Toxic Gamer Culture, Corporate Regulation, and Standards of Behavior among Players of Online Games", which appeared in *Video Game Policy* in 2015, as well as several articles examining identity formation, sociability, and co-play among family members, appearing in journals such as *Information, Communication & Society* and *Game studies, the International Journal of Computer Game Research*. Dr. Boudreau has presented her research on toxic and problematic gameplay at conferences and interviews around the world, including a keynote speech at the Digital Games Research Association or DiGRA, Nordic 2018 Gaming Research Conference at the University of Bergen in Norway.

I'm Sarah Grimes, Director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto, and host of the Critical Technology Podcast. Today I'll be talking to Dr. Kelly Boudreau about her ongoing research on transgressive, problematic and toxic behaviors in digital games and digital culture. Before we dive too far into your research, what is toxic gaming culture?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 4:49

In terms of it being a culture, it expands way beyond any particular game. It may be manifested in certain gaming communities, some more prevalent others, we can talk about that a little bit later. But it's really, behaviors and attitudes that not just are problematic or disrupt other people, but that really causes a toxic and negative environment that actually pushes people out of that particular community. So I think that in terms of a very general understanding of toxic gamer culture, that's really the focus. I do want to highlight that there's a broad scope of literature written, Adrian S, S. Chest, Kishonna Gray, Mia Consalvo, Torill Mortensen, and a whole lot of others who go really deep into defining toxic gaming culture. But I think on a broad level, it really is about purposefully harming other members of the potential community.

Dr. Sara Grimes 5:49

So you mentioned that it's not just problematic player behavio. How is it different from problematic behavior? And what would you qualify as problematic player behavior versus toxic?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 6:01

I think when we're talking about the difference between toxic behaviors and problematic player behaviors, there's a couple of fundamental differences. One is that something that's problematic in gameplay is more about the ways in which it may impede another player's experience of that of that game. For example, in particular, online role-playing games, players can behave in different gameplay types that disrupt other people's play. So they may choose to get in their way when they're killing a mob or a monster, they may try to follow characters so that their gameplay is not as fun or engaging. And so this is

problematic in that it impedes somebody else's social time, but it doesn't necessarily lead to internal harm or emotional harm of the person on the receiving end.

In terms of toxic gameplay. This is where there really is an intent to drive somebody away. So that's one of the main differences between in gameplay between toxic and problematic behaviors. Outside of game spaces problematic can just be behaviors that are taunting or teasing in online spaces, such as message boards or Twitter, kind of what could be considered good-natured, goading from one participant, which may not be as well received by the other. And again, it may lead to a toxic environment for the player who's on the receiving end, but it doesn't always necessarily so lead to that toxic culture. Obviously, the types of problematic play can lead to a more toxic environment absolutely.

Dr. Sara Grimes 7:46

All of that seems very focused on serious social relationships. But what makes this a form of transgressive play?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 7:56

I think, when we're talking about the concept of transgressive play, the very basic definition of transgression and transgressive play is that it's defined as something that goes against the norms of the game player community. So transgression is really going against the acceptable social norms or the acceptable norms of behavior. And again, coming back to that problematic play. If you are doing something that the community doesn't necessarily support or want to encourage, it could be considered transgressive because it's pushing that boundary of what is acceptable within that particular player community.

One of the things I think that's really important to distinguish between transgressive play and problematic and toxic gameplay is that there is not always or necessarily an attempt to harm or to discourage players in transgressive play, the same way there is in toxic gaming culture and toxic gameplay, and sometimes in problematic gameplay. There's a different viewpoint in transgressive play, so people like to push the boundaries, they want to see how far they can go, they want to play the game by a different set of rules;

there may be designed or maybe acceptable within that player community. And again, that transgression, those transgressions can lead to problematic and toxic cultures, but that's not typically the intent. And the *Transgressive Games and Play* book by Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen, the chapters really go into exploring different aspects of transgressive play, and where it pushes that boundary between fun, between harmful play, and and all the kind of the different nuances of transgression and transgressive play.

Dr. Sara Grimes 9:48

I'm glad you mentioned the book, because I wanted to delve a little bit deeper into your chapter. So in the chapter you use theories of subcultures as a way of unpacking and understanding gamer culture, and these different categories that can sometimes emerge in and around games, toxic behavior, problematic behaviors, transgressive play behaviors. But games are arguably incredibly popular and played by people of like all these different ages and genders and geographical locations. Why does it still operate as a subculture, despite this mainstream appeal, and who belongs to that subculture?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 10:29

If we're going to go into the literature, or the specific theories of subcultures, which of course this chapter draws from, it's really defined as those who feel that they're not part of a dominant culture. So it's not necessarily that video games and game play are mainstream, therefore, these players aren't part of a subculture. It's really about the behaviors and attitudes that these players engaging to try to kind of maintain their social group that existed before it became mainstream. And so you know, a lot of different hobbies and communities have this similar subcultural behavior when it comes to expansion into the mainstream. And so, you know, video game play has been around for a long time. It has been diverse over several decades, to different extents. But there have always kind of been, I would say, a group of players. And this isn't, this is not a group that have all that all get together, and agree that this is who they are. It's sort of a collective of behaviors that lead towards defining their group as an, I hate to use the word, gamer. And I use air quotes on that around it. But those who identify as gamers who feel that their interests and their hobbies are being kind of taken over by this, this move towards this mainstream.

And so using the literature on subcultures and the tactics that they use to distinguish and separate themselves from this movement into mainstream, I think it's really helpful to get an understanding of where some of these people are coming from. And I want to flag that some of them may engage in toxic and problematic gameplay, but there is a difference between those who are trying to keep their subculture, and keep the games that they know and love, and keep the playing experience that they know and love exactly the way it is without any change, versus those who use it as a catalyst to exhibit broader, problematic behaviors, you know. And kind of just want to jump really quickly to that, that first question about toxic gamer culture, you know, the work of the previous authors that I've mentioned, really dive into things like misogyny, and homophobia, and Islamophobia, and a whole bunch of other broader problematic perspectives, and perhaps ideologies that gets embedded into their behaviors around video games.

And so looking at the subculture literature allows us to kind of disentangle some of that a little bit, not everybody who participates in problematic and toxic culture are necessarily part of these more harmful and, and I, I don't think I can emphasize the word harmful enough, you know, there's lots of news stories of some very horrible things doxing and death threats and some very extreme behaviors, to protect this gaming culture in this gaming community that they that many players seem see as their own. But by separating out that broader group of people who use gaming as a catalyst to express all these other problematic perspectives, I guess is the word I'm going to use, we can start looking at a different sub group of players through the subculture lens, and see how that impacts the ways that they play, impacts how they keep others out, or perhaps bring others in. There's a whole process of, of in and out groups, and rituals that allow people into communities and I think looking through that subculture lens really helps us understand problematic player behavior at a, at a different and nuanced level.

Dr. Sara Grimes 14:39

This seems to really touch on practice that you describe in your work using the term "Boundary Keeping". Can you tell us a little bit more about "Boundary Keeping" and its practices and who engages in them and what that larger function is of that dynamic?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 14:56

As social structures, all communities have a sense or a definition of who is in their group and who is out of their group. And this goes well beyond gaming communities. This, we do it. you know, in our friend groups; we do it in our hobby groups, any sort of community that we participate in. No, there's, there's a sense of who's in it. And there's a sense of who's out of it. And in order to determine who's in and out, it's usually defined by the set of social norms that that group considers acceptable. If there's a newcomer who'd like to participate or join the group, there's usually some sort of trial period, or some sort of invitation to join on a temporary basis. Part of that is about making the the newcomer engaged in a sort of behavior to prove that they are part of a particular, that particular community. And so boundary keeping is really a way to figure out what belongs in the community and what doesn't belong in the community.

Dr. Sara Grimes 16:04

So I was hoping that you might be able to tell us a little bit more about the role, that identity plays in all of this.

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 16:11

Yeah, a lot of boundary keeping and community belonging really is about who we are, and it shapes who we are. And so having these, these, I don't want to say strict, but having these social norms that we can live by, that we can accommodate helps us shape who we are, by working with what we accept, and pushing against those things that we don't accept. A lot of people identify themselves through their hobbies. And I think that that's kind of that circle back to one of the explanations of who engages in problematic and toxic game culture has a lot to do with the identity of these particular individuals, and how this concept of some cultural identity, it's their identity, that they are a gamer. And anybody who comes into that space, who doesn't hold the same values, positive or negative, depending on which side of the fence that you're coming on. If you don't know the rules of that particular community of what's acceptable behavior, what's not acceptable behavior, it challenges their own identity, it makes them look inward and say, do I want to identify with a community that behaves this way, or represents these other norms.

And, of course, we would like to think that in toxic and problematic gameplay, you would say, oh, they're engaging in this negative and harmful behavior. Surely, if somebody comes in trying to push against that, it would cause some sort of introspection for reflection, and perhaps identity shaping in a more positive way. But being a gamer is part of their identity, and having somebody try to redefine what that is can be a challenge to how they see themselves. And so it kind of, you know, belonging to a subculture is part of your identity; being a gamer is your identity. And if somebody tries to change those boundaries, I think that that is part of the resistance that these problematic and toxic players are engaging in.

Dr. Sara Grimes 18:31

These practices are often part of identity and belonging, as you say, does that mean that there's a level of acceptability of toxic play or toxic behavior within certain contexts? Or games? Or more acceptability than in others? Or are places where they're normalized? Or would that defeat the purpose?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 18:52

So I want to start by saying that it's actually a really complicated or complex and delicate question. What I don't want to do is kind of, you know, carte blanche be like, absolutely, there's a role for all of this in society, and be as toxic as you need to be. But there really is a sociological role for toxic behavior. Again, going into the sociological literature on deviance, and the role that deviance plays in shaping society. It comes back to those social norms, it comes back to how do we know what we support if we don't have anything pushing against us. And so, while I don't think there's ever good cause to cause bodily harm or or emotional harm to others at all, I really do think that out of these toxic cultures is born a resistance to them, that helps redefine and helps reshape those boundaries.

So on the one hand, we can talk about the positive influence or the positive outcomes, such as the Pixelles group out of Montreal, and I can share some links for their organization that has a mentoring system for people who are interested in games and games development, who are not traditionally included into the community. GAMERella,

which is an inclusive game jam that happens annually at Concordia University in Montreal, and that was really born out of this desire to have a space and a place for people, who are not normally included in these gaming communities, to create games in a game jam fashion who felt included and accepted. And so I don't want to say without toxic culture, these things would never have happened. But these things were born out of resistance to accepting that type of toxic behavior. So from a sociological perspective, it really, it's a push and pull between deviance and positive social change. And so I think that's really important to keep in mind. Again, this is not to say that the toxic behavior is welcomed or, or encouraged. It's that deviance has always played a role in the shaping of social norms and communities and cultures.

In terms of the second part of the question about is there a level of acceptability of toxic play in certain games or forums, more so than others, I do think that there's contexts where these practices, I don't want to say are necessarily normalized, but they may be part of the play. And again, I think this comes back to the transgression that we were talking about. There's some games that are that encourage you to be perhaps more aggressive in the game than you would normally be in your actual life. I know, there's been research about, you know, *Call of Duty* as a as a gaming series, and how there's within the gaming communities, this level of acceptance of perhaps problematic teetering on the border of toxic behavior that is more related to military culture. So it's almost like, well, it's contextual to that type of game, into that genre of game, whether that's a realistic attribution or not, or something we should accept or not. But it really sometimes offers players a space to perhaps be a bit more transgressive, or to let out some of their aggression in ways that they don't normally have an avenue. And I do want to say that it should stop where it harms other people full stop, I really want to be clear that while I do think that there's a role that problematic play may have for those who engage in it, I think that when it starts to impede somebody else, there definitely is a line both socially, that we do need to reflect on and make sure that we're aware of it.

Dr. Sara Grimes 23:09

My next question is how does all this help us to better understand broader social structures, and how we build or negotiate identity in our everyday lives?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 23:21

I think one of the interesting aspects of toxic and problematic play is that it really is, I don't want to say a microcosm of society, but it really is a case study, it's a, it's an example it happens. It illustrates that this is a set of behaviors that exists within a particular structure of social and human behavior that is relatively natural, and part of the development of social structures, and of individual identity. It is very much possible to take the work that is been done, and there has been a lot of it done on toxic gaming culture, and extrapolate it to look at different types of communities, online communities, there are absolutely some aspects of this that the digital element plays a central factor, but it really helps us have a good strong example of the ways in which boundary keeping exists in a particular context and how we can understand that in other contexts. So you know, if you look around you, you can see that this happens in almost every aspect of our lives.

And it helps us understand I think, to some extent the ways in which young people negotiate their, their behaviors, and their identities, and their communities, and in groups and outgroups. As these behaviors occur, predominantly in a digital space, it helps us reflect on the ways in which perhaps youth are also participating in, in these forms of boundary keeping, that they're being influenced or being exposed to these types of boundary keeping and community development, and norm creation, that they have a space that they can negotiate a sense of who they are, and in resistance, perhaps to some of this toxic culture. Because you're right, games are mainstream, and they are only getting more widespread. And I think understanding these types of behaviors help us understand the broader scope. I think that we, as a society, develop who we are.

Dr. Sara Grimes 25:42

So what are some of your other major conclusions from this research?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 25:47

I think that one of the biggest takeaways for me, one of the biggest conclusions is that not all problematic and toxic behaviors are intended to be harmful. I think that there's a need for more research on the roles in which this type of behavior plays in community

development, both positive and negative. I think that a big takeaway is that there's so many people who engage in these problematic behaviors.

And a story that I'd like to share, and I've shared it in a few talks, is understanding that we all participate in this to some extent. Many years ago, my partner and I were playing *Dark Age of Camelot*, which is an online role-playing game. And my daughter, I think, was 11 at the time, maybe 10. And she really wanted to play, so my husband would let her fish on the side of the river, because that's what good parents do. And she was killing small spiders, you know, on her own. And then somebody came and asked her to join, and be in a group with her and she agreed. Now, this is a 10, 11 year old girl who's only ever watched us play, she's always wanted to play. But she was not part of that community. She didn't really know what the inside expectations and norms of play were. And so she plays with this person, they kill a couple more spiders, he dies. So which means he disappears from her screen, he has, he responds, or, you know, logs back in a different spot, walks in. And in the distance on her screen, she sees somebody killing spiders, so she starts killing spiders, but this person who she assumed was her group mate. Unfortunately, it wasn't. And this other player took her as being problematic. She saw that she was encroaching on his play, right, she was coming into his area, killing his spiders. And so he engaged in behaviors that got her killed, got her character killed.

Because it's a little bit of a long story, but but there's, there's a good point. She really thought she was with her teammate, she wasn't. And so she engaged in behaviors that were unwittingly to her problematic to this other player. And so that player, encroach on her play, made it very miserable for her. So she kept dying and dying and dying. And then my partner who saw, you know, when he walked in, he saw that she was being harassed by this other player. So he logs in with his high level character, and goes in and terrorizes this this poor level, you know, low level player who was, you know, ruining the play fun for his daughter.

It was only after she had logged off that we had this whole conversation about what happened, and realizing that all of us engaged in various levels of problematic play that, that really broke the norms of what we were supposed to be doing. And part of it was because there was a disconnect between knowledge of gameplay and knowledge and expectations within those spaces. And I think that when we take, when I take that story

and think about it now, I think about as games become more and more mainstream, and more and more people are coming into these spaces, like my daughter at the time. They're coming to these spaces without really knowing what the norms of gameplay are, or what the community norms are, the social norms are. And so had she been familiar with what was expected of her and how the game was played. That whole sequence of events wouldn't have happened, she would have waited for her teammate to come back. They would have regrouped and she would have kept on playing. So I think the biggest one of the biggest takeaways is we need to understand that those boundaries, those social norms are constantly changing, the more and more the games are becoming mainstream.

Dr. Sara Grimes 30:06

So what's the next phase of this research for you?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 30:10

So the next phase that I've been working on some proposals at the moment is really looking at different types of gaming communities that engage in these same types of behaviors. So, so far, the dominant literature on toxic culture and problematic gameplay looks at a particular slice of players and playing culture. And, as you mentioned, and we both mentioned throughout, gaming is much more mainstream than that particular toxic culture, that misogynistic group. And the next project I'm looking at is the ways in which problematic and toxic culture arises in casual gaming in spaces that are your typical players and your typical gamers. But how do they engage in boundary keeping? What are their tactics to keep their in group they're in group if they're playing Candy Crush, for example, or any of these online social network games that they want to keep their community within themselves. So I'm really interested in the ways in which, you know, everyday toxicity kind of creeps into our play, even though we're not intending to be harmful. It's, it's much broader than we think, I believe. So that's my next project, I'm really excited about it, kind of looking at a different slice of the game community.

Dr. Sara Grimes 31:38

Now gonna ask you the question, I've asked all of my guests so far this season, how has all this changed with the COVID-19 shift to online everything?

Dr. Kelly Boudreau 31:50

I'm not sure if the behavior itself has changed. I think that with the increase of online living, I think for the most part, there's such an influx of new people in spaces that were not typically in those spaces before. So it, you know, very similar to the story that I had just told about my daughter and being unfamiliar, within that space. You have an influx of people coming into these communities, without perhaps an understanding of what the norms are, as a participant in that community. I had seen yesterday that Twitch viewing was up something like 60%, in the last month or so. And that just shows you the influx of people coming into these spaces, and engaging with them and using them for their own purposes. We have, you know, politicians using gaming spaces, in ways that weren't previously done, and for a large part of the community, that's a welcome. You know, seeing politicians playing Among Us with with their, with their voting base, can be a positive thing, but for others in that community, it may be seen as an encroachment on their own spaces. So I think there's definitely, with the influx of people. There's more potential for toxic behavior.

I don't, I haven't seen any, you know, data or hard data that has said, you know, with the influx of Twitch viewers, you know, gone up has the toxicity levels. But I think it's something we definitely can think about. But also I think having that influx of people online due the COVID-19 brings, brings an awareness to what is happening. So again, those people who would not normally part of the community, if they log in and they see this toxic culture happening with this toxic behavior. I think it brings awareness on a broader scope that wasn't there previously, because we weren't all online as much. So I really think that that COVID-19 has brought an awareness and an influx of people into the spaces that that they weren't normally in prior.

Dr. Sara Grimes 34:15

A big thanks to Professor Boudreau for joining us today. Please follow the links in the podcast description to find out more about Dr. Boudreau work her new book, *Transgression in Games and Play*, and the other publications mentioned in today's episode, as well as information on where to send your questions or comments. The Critical Technology Podcast is produced by me, Sarah Grimes, with support from the KMDI. Audio mix, music and sound design by Turner Wigginton. Theme song by Taekun Park. Original artwork by JP King. Please subscribe to stay up to date on new episodes and posts as they become available. And thank you for listening.