

# Grand Theft Troll? Anonymity encourages bad behaviour in online computer games, but group discipline wins the day

January 9 2014

---

Flaming. Trolling. Griefing. Cheating. Most players of massive multi-player online games, such as GTA Online, have been victims of activities like these. New research from the journal *Behaviour & Information Technology* investigates the drivers and group dynamics of these kind of behaviours.

A study of the habits of people who play 'massive multi-player online games' (MMOGs) shows that anonymous users are more likely to cheat, but their behaviour is significantly tempered by the culture and dynamics of the group of players, suggesting that other forms of online 'bad behaviour' – such as flaming and trolling – can be modified by the attitudes and behaviours of other group members.

Researchers at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, investigated the gaming habits of over 900 teenagers (13–18s) and found that the frequency of gaming with online strangers (anonymous gaming) significantly predicts the frequency of cheating. They also observed significant gender differences:

More significantly, however, the researchers conclude that:

"... deviant behaviors online, such as [game](#) cheating, are largely influenced by the online social groups people feel they belong to. An

online group, despite its fluid, unstable and imaginary nature, is powerful in constructing and changing its members' attitudes and views on behaviours. Hence, a behaviour that is perceived as problematic and deviant can be reconstructed with a different interpretation."

The study by Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen and Yuehua Wu, published in the current issue of the journal *Behaviour & Information Technology*, is the first of its kind to deliver empirical evidence that the sociological phenomenon known as SIDE (Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects) has a role in online behaviour.

The SIDE theory, first put forward by Reicher et al in 1995, argues that anonymity does not necessarily lead to the loss of self-awareness or weakened internalized behaviour controls, as had previously been thought. Instead, anonymity increases the importance of social/group identity, and hence leads to greater conformity within a group. In other words, when people play games under anonymous conditions, they are more likely to follow the behaviours they believe other players are exhibiting.

While this study has important lessons for those who are concerned about bad behaviour elsewhere in cyberspace (in chatrooms and public social networking spaces, for instance), its findings are also of considerable importance for the companies that develop MMOGs and other social games, because persistent cheating and other bad behaviour among players of MMOGs can result in financial losses – in terms of both loss of subscribers and loss of company reputation.

Chen and Wu's findings are the result of a 2009 survey of online gaming behaviours among 941 teenagers (mean age 16) who reported playing MMOGs for, on average, 14 hours per week. They also conducted six follow-up focus group sessions among participants who were experienced gamers and very familiar with game cheating. Their data

were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis, and the published report also makes detailed reference to an extensive review of literature on the topic.

In addition to the headline findings, the authors note that academics who are interested in studying deviant or anti-social behaviours may find that online video gaming is a good testing ground for their theories, because:

- the online gaming community is easily accessible and highly dynamic;
- participants can be observed continuously without intrusion; and
- gamers are typically willing to report and explain their behaviours in video games they play, especially if the researcher(s) are part of the gaming community.

However, they also note that their findings are based on a self-reporting survey, and it is possible that some over-reporting of cheating may have occurred because [cheating](#) is highly regarded in some gaming circles.

**More information:** Group identification as a mediator of the effect of players' anonymity on cheating in online games, Vivian Hsueh Hua Chen, Yuehua Wu. Taylor & Francis 06 Dec 2013. [DOI: 10.1080/0144929X.2013.843721](#)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

Citation: Grand Theft Troll? Anonymity encourages bad behaviour in online computer games, but group discipline wins the day (2014, January 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-grand-theft-troll-anonymity-bad.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.