

I Am Being Watched By The Tribunal - Trust and Control in Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Games

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ABSTRACT

Toxic gaming and griefing in online games are part of the everyday interaction of players around the world. Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games are notorious for their players' toxic behavior. League of Legends (LoL), one of the most popular MOBA games, uses the Tribunal system as a strategy to restrict and punish toxic behaviors. The Tribunal system is a neutral body of surveillance that influences the level of system trust for the different populations of players. In this pre-study the attitudes of two different player communities are investigated, with a focus on the Tribunal system. Through forum posts in Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2) forums and League of Legends forums, we analyzed the attitudes towards the Tribunal system from two different player communities. We found a more positive attitude towards the Tribunal system amongst the posts in the LoL forum compared to the posts in the Dota 2 forum, indicating a higher level of system trust for LoL players, and a higher level of personal trust amongst Dota 2 players.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.1.2 Human Factors

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Online community, Multiplayer Online Games, regulation, norms, sanctions, neutral body of surveillance, League of Legends, Defense of the Ancients 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

The social atmosphere in Online games sometimes bear negative consequences. Toxic gaming, griefplay, and other deviant behaviors, as part of everyday activities in digital games have been widely studied. These studies describe conflicts in Online games [25], intentionality behind griefing [11], the influence of anonymity [6] and immersion in games [4], the culture of and reasons for cheating [7, 9, 29], what values are threatened by

deviant behaviors [16, 31], flaming in forums of specific games [15], and norms and expectations of other players [13]. These publications focus on various aspects of online behavior, but typically do not address strategies for preventing or sanctioning deviant behaviors, behaviors that challenge the notion of an enjoyable game environment. One exception is presented in [14] with an analysis of a system for punishing rule transgressors in LoL through the Tribunal system.

In this pre-study we set out to explore the attitudes of MOBA players regarding the Tribunal system. The data collection consists of threads from two forums discussing the social atmosphere in MOBA games and the presence or the absence of surveillance and sanctioning mechanisms that monitor player behaviors. We will focus on two different populations of players:

1. Players that discuss their experiences in League of Legends forums
2. Players that discuss their experiences in Dota forums.

The reason for choosing these populations is that their discussions will indicate attitudes concerning the Tribunal system in LoL, a system not present in Dota2. The Tribunal is sometimes discussed as what divides these two games (excluding discussions on pure game mechanics that differs between these games), both in positive and negative terms. These groups will be able to discuss how the influence of the Tribunal system affects the gaming environment, from:

1. Having firsthand experience of the Tribunal system
2. Knowing that such system exists but with no firsthand experience
3. Having firsthand experience of playing with the Tribunal system, and experience from playing without the system.

Finally, the views on the Tribunal system from different player populations may serve as an indication of what measures game developers of social online games can take in order to prevent anti-social behavior that discourages new players. However, in order to understand the role of the Tribunal we need to address the concept of a neutral body for surveillance and its relation to this study.

2. A NEUTRAL BODY FOR SURVEILLANCE AND PUNISHING

Griefplay, cheating, and anti-social behaviors can be a threat to an enjoyable gaming experience. In [26] an enjoyable game experience is described in terms of commons. This claim is further

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discussed in [31] with reflections on how the *free-rider dilemma*¹ [3] and the *tragedy of the commons*² [12] need to be addressed in relation to social dilemmas and collective goods. Further, Smith [26] proposes three general solutions to protect the collective good or in this case an enjoyable game environment:

1. A neutral body for surveillance and punishing
2. Privatization of the commons
3. Use of strategies to regulate the use of the commons, including communities with a degree of permanence, the ability to monitor others and a prolonged interaction. [20]

As noted in [31] it is difficult to imagine how privatization of an enjoyable gaming experience is possible, leaving us with two other options; a neutral body for surveillances, and strategies to regulate the use of the commons. Strategies to distribute resources and communicate/create meaning to the players exists; Both norm systems [13] and ways to sanction unwanted behavior are present in various game genres, ranging from Massively Multiplayer Online Games to First Person Shooters, but often dependent on low levels of anonymity between players [10, 13]. What goes against the use of commons to discuss an enjoyable game environment for all games is that there is no way of creating (from a player perspective) a neutral body for surveillance and punishing, but can be created by the game developer.

In this paper we analyze the Tribunal system in LoL as an example of a neutral body for surveillance and punishing, monitoring the player's behaviors. Relevant to this discussion is the notion of *system trust* and *personal trust* [19]. MOBA games build on social interaction/exchanges and in cases of uncertainty in such situations individuals can either trust each other (personal trust), or trust the system (system trust). System trust reduces uncertainty caused by social complexity [19:75], where individuals believe that other people trust the system as well. This leads to individuals primarily putting their faith in system trust, on the basis that the system regulates social interaction, with additional effects in reduced costs of monitoring and sanctioning activities [5:115]. In order to understand the role of the Tribunal in LoL we will briefly describe the MOBA genre and the Tribunal system in the next section.

3. MOBA GENRE

MOBA games have gained popularity in recent years. Two major titles in this genre are *LoL* and *Dota 2*. LoL [22], have 67 million active players per month according to riot games. *Dota 2* [30], reached a peak player number of nearly one million in January 2015 [27]. LoL and Dota 2 are two distinct games and have two unique game communities.

MOBA games are often played by teams of strangers. These players must learn to collaborate in a relatively short period. Studies have shown that players prefer to play with friends rather than strangers to avoid potential social tensions [2, 17] where anonymity can be seen as one factor influencing players to invest their time with players they already know. Numerous studies

1 The free-rider dilemma describes situations where individuals may get benefits from the collective of which they are part without themselves contributing to it.

2 Tragedy of the commons describes a situation where individual use or misuse a shared resource without consideration for other individuals' needs.

reported widely observed deviant behavior among MOBA players [24, 21, 14]. The existence of deviant behavior is harmful to the wellbeing of the game communities and the profits of the game companies.

3.1 A neutral body of surveillance and punishing in League of Legends

To deal with the prevalence of deviant behavior in the LoL community, Riot Games developed the Tribunal system. The Tribunal works in the following way. Every player monitors fellow players' behavior and reports deviant players and toxic behavior immediately after each game (see figure 1). The Tribunal creates a case if a player has been reported frequently. A report includes the name of the reported player, the type of disruptive behavior, and comments (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Report of deviant behavior.

The Tribunal system automatically collects reports and game logs and organizes them into Tribunal cases. Game logs include in-game information such as game length, game type, types of disruptive behavior, and chat log (see Figure 2)

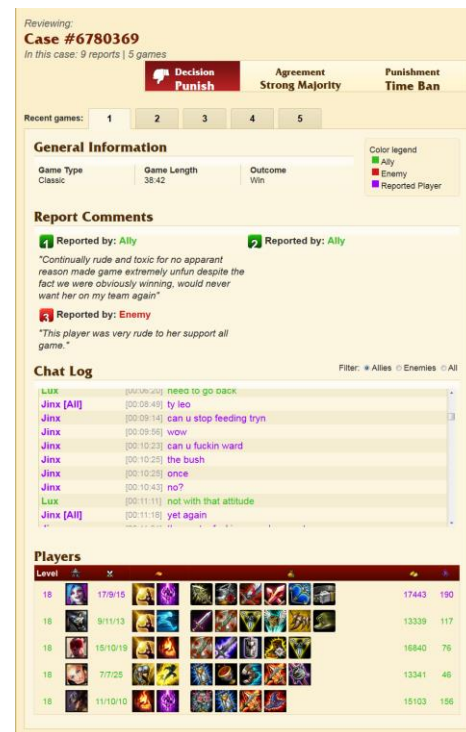


Figure 2. A Tribunal Case.

The Tribunal assigns each case to a certain number of judges (Riot Games does not disclose the number) and allows players to judge voluntarily if their accounts are of level 20 or higher (maximum level is 30). In each case, judges can choose to either punish or pardon the reported player. The judge can choose to skip a case if feeling uncertain. The Tribunal assigns a punishment if the majority of the judges vote to punish. The punishment of a disruptive player is an account suspension. The reported player receives a warning email with a reform card and Riot Games will suspend the punished player one day for a first offense and can do so permanently for later offenses.

Dota 2 does not have a similar surveillance system as the Tribunal in LoL, but Dota 2 players are aware of the existence of the Tribunal. Being victims of the prevalent deviant behavior as well, they often discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having such a system in their own community.

4. FORUM DATA RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The data in this pre-study was taken from the main LoL and Dota 2 forums. Threads containing the following keywords: "Tribunal," "surveillance," and "monitoring" were selected from the forums. The search returned 1621 different hits on forum threads from the LoL forum and 2727 from the Dota 2 forum. A convenience sample of the search result was taken, where the topic of the thread had a clear connection to the Tribunal. From these discussion threads we downloaded the first 10 pages of the discussion, or until saturation. These texts were stored in an Excel file, each entry mapping to a row in Excel. This amounted to 2769 entries of text in total, with LoL forum discussions representing 22 threads and 912 entries, and Dota 2, 40 and 1857 respectively.

The LoL and Dota 2 text files were then fed into AntConc [1], a free text and concatenation corpus analysis tool. In the first step, common words, or stop words in linguistic analysis, were removed. After this a keyword in context (KWIC) analysis was performed, using "Tribunal" as the only keyword.

The output of a KWIC analysis was a collection of all forum posts containing the keyword "Tribunal." This resulted in 887 text fragments for LoL and 340 for Dota 2. We analyzed each of the text fragments by hand and categorized them as either positive towards the Tribunal, negative or indifferent/other. The following table summarizes the data:

Table 1 Forum data

	Original # entries	Entries after KWIC	Positive	Negative	Other
LoL forum posts	912	887	165	92	739
Dota 2 forum posts	1857	340	44	80	226

As can be seen in table 1, a large proportion of the posts in both forums could not be tagged as either "positive" or "negative." Another result show a larger proportion of positive posts compared to negative posts regarding the Tribunal in the LoL forum (165 positive versus 92 negative). In the Dota 2 case, the

relation between positive and negative posts is reversed (44 positive versus 80 negative).

From this result many different interpretations are possible; first-hand experience with this kind of system can have a positive effect on the player experience, or the players that tolerate such a system plays LoL and the players that do not like the Tribunal ends up playing Dota. However, the data does not support a solid conclusion, rather it points towards an interesting follow-up study

The category tagged "other" in the data collection consists of discussions not directly discussing the Tribunal, rather they deal with topics such as: being monitored, the ethical impact of the Tribunal system, what can be improved in the games to prevent anti-social behaviors, concerns about the player community, and the reasons behind the need for a system that monitors and punishes deviant players

A remark regarding the relation between the "original # entries" in (Table 1) is that it reflects the slightly skewed distribution of threads chosen in this study. An interpretation regarding the relation between "original # entries" and "Entries after KWIC" where 912 entries was reduced to 887 in the LoL forums and from 1857 to 340 in Dota 2 forums after KWIC, is that the keyword "Tribunal" had a much higher relevance in the data from the LoL threads compared to the data from the Dota 2 threads. The keywords used to find the forums in this study are more relevant for the LoL community since they have a Tribunal system.

4.1 Tribunal negative

With LoL forum threads called "LoL mirrors Orwell's 1984," "The Tribunal has literally made the community 10x worse." and "End of civil rights" it is obvious that the Tribunal system as part of the MOBA experience is not only seen as contributing to the overall experience. On the contrary, some players feel monitored and that the Tribunal system infringes on their personal freedom as players when playing MOBA games.

In the LoL forum, players discuss the Tribunal system based on own experiences, often in relation to whether a specific case is judged correctly by the Tribunal. They share their thoughts about whether the game environment has improved compared to the time without the Tribunal system. They discuss how and why they decide to report certain types of players. Sometimes players discuss the perceived drawbacks of the Tribunal system, such as Tribunal rulings being not 100% correct.

In the Dota 2 forum, many of these posts indicate more of a fear of how a Tribunal system could change the interaction in the game, or simply that Dota 2 is better than LoL: "Community sucks here too, but at least you can do crazy stuff and talk shit to them and don't being afraid of some retarded tribunal. And of course Dota2 is better game for people, who likes to actually use their brain." The posts in the Dota 2 forums also a confidence in the player community and distrust in a system monitoring the game is expressed. Further, they discuss and express their views on the culture in Dota 2: "Calling out people is part of the Dota culture," indicating a high tolerance for, and a defense of, anti-social behavior.

While Dota 2 players do not always talk about a Tribunal system, they do discuss mechanisms for sanctioning toxic players, with the same mechanisms that are typically associated with the Tribunal system such as bans. These threads always represent competing views and it is difficult to judge where the sympathies of the majority of players are placed.

In both forums a common view is that, there are too many possibilities to grief other players. One such possibility is falsely reporting other players just to annoy them, and furthermore using the system against its original purpose. These posts are mostly debated with counterarguments that exploiting the system only leads to the player exploiting the Tribunal system ending up being punished.

What stands out in these discussions is the perceived accuracy of the Tribunal system, where even the most negatively charged utterances seem to agree that the Tribunal system is correct in approximately 90% of the times when a player is banned. The controversy seem to be focused around the remaining 10% when a Tribunal judges incorrectly, and that the Tribunal system in its entirety is a measure of laziness taken by the developers [22] in order to elude the burden of judging and banning bad behaving players. One frequently posted response in the LoL forums regarding negative utterances towards the Tribunal system is that players that are most negative towards the Tribunal system probably are the bad behaving players that have been reported on numerous occasions.

4.2 Tribunal positive

Related to the discussion in the previous section, players that are positive towards the Tribunal system, point out that 90% correct bans alleviates the negative consequences of players displaying deviant behaviors. Some posts also speculate if the Tribunal discourages toxic players from playing LoL: *“the Tribunal is not a failure. Thousands of toxic players switched to DoTA2 thanks to Tribunal kicking them out.”* However, other views points out that anti-social play styles are common in MOBA games, and that the Tribunal system is not the issue the community should be focusing on: *“Tribunal unbreakable? Hell no, it's broken, but its not the system that's broken, its the people.”* This forum post acknowledges the need for a control system, since the player community and the players are in fact the real problem.

In terms of positive attitudes towards the Tribunal system, LoL players often express views based on perceived effects of the Tribunal such as seeing toxic players being punished and witnessing an improved game environment. Dota 2 players recognize the potential benefits of having such a system and express a need for a friendlier atmosphere in Dota 2, where the Tribunal is discussed as a solution.

While some of the threads in the LoL forum discuss the negative impact of being monitored, a set of threads discusses how to make the Tribunal system more efficient. These threads often emphasize additional surveillance in that the Tribunal system should also record videos of all matches. These threads also discuss the involvement of the player community often citing that: *“Tribunal just needs more community involvement,”* but with the additional remark that players should not be in charge of the actual bans.

From the Dota 2 forum one view on the Tribunal system is that it would improve the game and that the system would discourage players *“ninja mass reporting”* other players. This post was followed by critical retorts that: *“I'd much rather have a group of responsible men undertake the task of banning/warning players,”* indicating a distrust towards being monitored by a Tribunal.

4.3 Other

The posts tagged *“other”* in the forum data can be summed up as posts that did not explicitly express a negative or a positive view

on the Tribunal system. These threads instead discussed the Tribunal system from the following perspectives:

- Considerations about being monitored and audited while playing a game
- Ethical considerations
- Reasons behind the need for the Tribunal system
- The well-being of the player community
- Preferences for one or the other game, excluding the presence of the Tribunal system

These threads did provide interesting views on the attitudes towards the Tribunal system but not directly relevant for the focus of this study.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The forum data in this study indicate that the Tribunal system not only causes discussions but also helps players reflect on their gaming environment and gaming experience. It further exemplifies the complexity of toxic gaming, grieving, and the implications of breaching the norms of a community of players.

The Tribunal system exists in LoL since deviant behaviors are common, while it is difficult to judge what behavior *“deserves”* punishing, it is also difficult to evaluate the intentionality behind acts being reported to the Tribunal system as leading to a worse gaming experience for the player being targeted, as has also been noted in MMORPGs [11].

When Dota 2 players discuss the Tribunal, they often put their trust in the community itself having ways of dealing with toxic players. Contrary to this view, LoL players are less likely to trust the player community to foster the behavior of its players. Thus, we argue that Dota 2 players have a higher level of personal trust, while LoL players have a higher level of system trust.

In our investigation of the Tribunal system as a neutral body of surveillance in games, the key finding is that the margin of error and the expectance towards that margin is limited from the player community. However, trends in the data also suggest that players are divided in their attitudes towards a system that monitors and infringes the freedom of rule and norm transgressors.

A final comment that is due in response to the findings reported in this pre-study is that we have just scratched the surface of the ongoing debate relating to the Tribunal system in League of Legends. Both Dota 2 and LoL players are engaged and sometimes passionate when they discuss their game. Simply providing a conclusion that some players are positive and some are negative towards the system does not really cover all the aspects of these online discussions. However, due to the engagement of the player community, the discussion about the Tribunal system should be taken seriously from a game designer perspective.

6. FUTURE WORK

Future work will be directed at a survey study addressing more specifically the questions left unanswered in this pre-study. A deeper analysis of the forum posts in the data collection using quantitative analysis will be made in order to provide an understanding for the player community and norms associated with the Tribunal in relation to the levels of system trust or personal trust. Other future work will include fully autonomous systems such as the Xbox reputation system compared to the semi-automated Tribunal system.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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