



# The development and validation of the Grief Play Scale (GPS) in MMORPGs☆



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## ABSTRACT

A measurement of gamers' grief play behaviors in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) was developed and validated over three online studies (total  $N = 786$ ). In the first study, exploratory factor analysis indicated that the modified Grief Play Scale (GPS) was unidimensional. In the second study, the convergent validity of the GPS was supported through associations of the scale with measurements of the antisocial personality characteristics, sadism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and sub-clinical psychopathy. As hypothesized, the GPS and altruism were uncorrelated in Study 2, supporting the discriminant validity of the GPS. Finally, Study 3 further supported the convergent validity with predicted correlations between the GPS, a measurement of aggressive and competitive play styles, and with a measurement of gamers' willingness to suspend disbelief of the virtual environment. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, grief players did not report feeling less responsibility for their characters' wellbeing in Study 3. Possible explanations for this finding are discussed. Overall, the GPS appears to be a valid measurement of gamers' tendencies to grief others in MMORPGs. Additionally, the present study was the first to compile a preliminary personality profile of the grief player.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Online trolls

A gateway to information, commerce, communication, and entertainment, the Internet enhances the lives of some 3 billion users in many ways (International Telecommunication Union, 2014). It facilitates activities ranging from online shopping to positive political change in developing nations (Soengas, 2013). But while the Internet improves lives across the globe, it is also home to problematic behavior. Of the many forms of Internet-proctored misbehavior, online trolling is especially common (Hardaker, 2010).

Trolls are people who act in a disruptive manner while online. They toy with other Internet users for no obvious purpose other than to gain pleasure from their victims' discomfort and frustration (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Hardaker, 2010; Hopkinson, 2013). Trolling first began to receive serious academic attention only in recent years. In a content analysis of Usenet posts, Hardaker (2010) identified some themes common in online discussions

of trolls: trolls were considered by forum posters to be aggressive, deceptive, and disruptive. From these findings, Hardaker (2010) proposed a working definition of the troll as a person who deceives other users for the purposes of causing disruption or conflict in an online environment. Mirroring the findings of Hardaker (2010), themes of trolls as disruptive and deceptive are consistent in the literature (Buckels et al., 2014; Donath, 1999; Morrissey, 2010; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002).

However, no single definition of trolling is currently accepted. For the purposes of this study, we adopt the definition of Buckels et al. (2014): The Internet troll is a person who acts in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner while online, often with no apparent instrumental purpose. Trolls dwell among Internet discussion boards (Hopkinson, 2013; Morrissey, 2010), social media sites (Frost, 2014), webcam feeds (Kopecky, 2016), and more. The troll may cause minor irritation by luring others into answering a series of trivial questions (Morrissey, 2010), or by criticizing and arguing with others (Hardaker, 2010) when online. More seriously, the troll can sometimes cause acute emotional distress (Frost, 2014) through long-term campaigns of Internet harassment. Whatever the method, trolls sever the ties linking online communities together through acts of disruption.

### 1.2. Online trolls: personality correlates

In one of the few studies investigating personality and trolling behavior, Buckels et al. (2014) found that trolls scored higher in

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measurements of sadism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and sub-clinical psychopathy when compared to other Internet users. In another recent study, Tacker and Griffiths (2012) investigated the self-esteem of trolls and their victims in an online gaming context. Aside from these few studies, we are not aware of other research on this topic. The paucity of research in this area leaves us knowing little about the personalities of online trolls. Even less is known about the disruptive online gamer, a special type of troll.

### 1.3. Grief players

Trolling behavior within the context of online games is a phenomenon of special importance. The online gaming industry is rapidly growing and has a prolific influence on many aspects of modern life. As a leisurely activity, it appeals to a broad demographic of people (Martoncick, 2015). It also creates social capital, fosters a sense of belonging, and provides an avenue for healthy communication between people separated by vast distances of physical space (Brack et al., 2013). Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest*, and *EVE Online* are perhaps the most abundant (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Martin, 2015; Fuster, Chamarro, Carbonell, & Vallerand, 2014) and complex types of online video games, and are therefore the topic of the current study. Defined as persistent virtual worlds in which hundreds to thousands of players interact with one another and take on the role of their characters (Yee, 2006), MMORPGs attract a broad array of players (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004), generating billions of dollars in annual sales (Petitte, 2012).

For the purposes of this study, we consider disruptive online gamers to be a special type of troll called the *grief player* or *griever*. Like trolls, grievers have been described as people who disrupt the online experience of others (Foo, 2008). Grievers and trolls share notable similarities. Both have an interest in threatening the online experience of others, and both seem to enjoy eliciting reactions from victims (trolls; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; grievers; Foo, 2008).

### 1.4. Grief players: prior research

In one qualitative study of gamer and developer perceptions of grief play, Foo (2008) derived a 4-category taxonomy of grief play activities in MMORPGs called: *harassment*, *scamming*, *power imposition*, and *greed play*. According to Foo (2008), harassment is in-game behavior designed to impede another player's activities. Power imposition is an action which exploits another player's weakness to establish the griever's superiority. Scamming is the cheating of other players out of in-game money, information, or items. Finally, greed play is acting solely for one's own benefit and to the detriment of others.

Although grief players represent a small portion of the gaming community, they appear to affect large numbers of gamers (Foo & Koivisto, 2004), and griefing is an intense topic of player discussion (Rubin & Camm, 2011). In one study of the virtual world *Second Life*, Coyne, Chesney, Logan, and Madden (2009) found that 95% of surveyed gamers had experienced griefing to some degree. In another study of Internet gamers, Davis (2002) found that over 75% of those surveyed reported experiencing some kind of bad behavior in a gaming environment.

Grief players are a worthy candidate for study, in part, because they harm online communities. On average, the MMORPG player spends up to 20 h each week playing MMORPGs (Dupius & Ramsey, 2011; Yee, 2006), and they cumulatively spend over \$12 billion annually on this type of game (Petitte, 2012). Sometimes, their characters are even embraced as virtual extensions of their real selves (Vanacker & Heider, 2011). Furthermore, Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop (2012) argue that the commonplace belief that events within online gaming environments lack serious consequence in everyday (i.e., offline) life is erroneous, and that we lack the research needed to understand the full effects of unsafe and unpleasurable forms of play upon the gamer. However, we

do know that grief play victims, feeling unable to combat grief play, sometimes abandon the MMORPG along with all their investments, whether financial or emotional, in the virtual world (Davis, 2002; Foo, 2008).

Whether they commit serious fraud (e.g., Adrian, 2010) or cause minor irritation, grievers are a cause for concern. However, there is a paucity of literature addressing grievers. In addition to Foo's (2008) work, in which a 4-category taxonomy was derived from qualitative investigations, few explorative studies of grief play in MMORPGs exist. For example, Coyne et al. (2009) surveyed a sample of *Second Life* players and found that many (41%) of respondents believed that the harm caused by grief play equals or exceeds the harm caused by offline bullying. According to these *Second Life* players, grievers harmed others primarily because they were anonymous and insensitive to others' wellbeing.

### 1.5. Grief players: a need for research

Although some exploratory data regarding grief play exists, quantitative data regarding the personalities and behaviors of the grief player are absent from the literature, to our knowledge. For example, it has been suggested that a minority of MMORPG gamers are grief players (Foo & Koivisto, 2004; Rubin & Camm, 2011), even though players' exposure to grief play is apparently high (Coyne, et al., 2009; Davis, 2002). However, reliable estimates of the prevalence rate of grief play activities in MMORPG communities have not been established. Furthermore, while investigations into the personality traits of those who are disruptive in generalized online environments (i.e., trolls) have been conducted (Buckels, et al., 2014), grievers of MMORPGs have not been investigated in a similar manner.

### 1.6. Study aims

DeVellis (2012) argues that measurement is a fundamental activity of science, and that quantifying a phenomenon of interest often relies on the development of a valid scale. To promote the systematic investigation of grief players in MMORPGs, we developed the Grief Play Scale (GPS) and investigated its validity over three online studies.

Prior research has suggested that grief play falls into several distinct but related categories of behavior. In his preliminary work, Foo (2008) proposed four types of grief play labelled: harassment, power imposition, scamming, and greed play. However, this theoretical perspective is supported solely by qualitative analyses of participants' perceptions of what constitutes the act of "grief play." Foo (2008) did not measure player's assessments of their own behavior. We argue that one might characterize grief play as a more holistic behavior that centers on the common theme of disruption within a gaming context, rather than as a collection of 4 types of disruptive behaviors (i.e., harassment, power imposition, scamming, and greed play). Because our scale was intended to measure a single construct, we hypothesized in Study 1 that the GPS measured a single construct reflecting grief play in MMORPGs.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedures

Recruitment threads were posted to 22 online MMORPG forums. Locations of recruitment included the official *World of Warcraft*, *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and other MMORPG forums.<sup>1</sup> Threads advertising the study were also posted to several fan-created forums that catered to MMORPG players. Survey responses from 298 participants were

<sup>1</sup> Other official game forum locations were *The Secret World*, *Mortal Online*, *Darkfall Unholy Wars*, *Minecraft*, *Wurm Online*, *Xyson*, *Salem*, *Infestation: Survivor Stories*, *DayZ*, *Fallen Earth*, *The Repopulation*, *Perpetuum* *Gamma Frontier*, and *Rust*.

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