Introduction

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Insults, harassment, threats, hate speech, aggression, and negativity – while the internet creates new and diverse communication and networking opportunities, more possibilities for the democratization of discourse (Habermas 2006: 554), it can also be a fertile ground for negative interactions. The high levels of toxicity on online platforms are therefore a recurring focus of public discourse and a current research topic in disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and adjacent fields (e.g. Mall et al. 2020; Fortuna 2020). As it is a complex topic that involves multiple actors, platform affordances, social norms, and semiotic means, "[r]esearch about toxic language, and by consequence also the detection of toxic language, is marked by its interdisciplinarity." (Gevers et al. 2022: 33)

The gaming market is growing and can no longer be described as a niche phenomenon (e.g. game Verband 2025: 74): It is already more substantial in monetary value than film and music industries combined (Dentsu 2024). This also contributes to an increased social and societal relevance of gaming and the discourses that take place in and around games. Gaming platforms are not only a space for entertaining leisure activities; they can also be significant for finding like-minded communities, forming political opinions, but also can have relevance for establishing new communicative practices – both in a positive and a negative (and potentially toxic) sense.

The public discourse on gaming in Germany initially began with the medium being stigmatized and digital games being associated with arcades and gambling (Montag 2021: 93). Media critics warned about potential negative impacts, especially with regard to young people – as is often the case with a new medium. Going forward, gaming continued to be stigmatized, as especially online gaming and the genre of first-person-shooters were associated with mass shootings in schools, though these accusations have since been refuted in many studies (see among others Garbe 2020; Bareither 2016).

Following this initial period of a negative discourse, gaming related content and communities have recently gained more positive recognition in Germany, while the phenomenon of toxicity – regarding online gaming as well as social media – is surprisingly not as present in the public discourse.

Shedding more light on the phenomenon of toxicity is vital, as 24% of players in Germany are 19 years old and younger (game Verband 2025: 9) and are often unsupervised when using communication in online gaming and related platforms. Experiencing toxicity can contribute to mental health issues and even suicide (Anti-Defamation League 2019: 27). Toxic content can be met with counter speech strategies (see for example the linguistic project Hasskompass). However, it is contested whether counter speech is actually a productive tool in reducing toxicity or if it may in fact contribute to an increase in uncivil behaviour (Sponholz 2024; Liemann in this volume).

Both in public debate and in academic research, concepts such as hate speech – which only partially coincide with the phenomenon of toxicity – have increasingly gained attention (Weitzel, Mündges 2022; Sponholz 2020). The term 'toxic' – in its meaning relating to social behaviour – has only been introduced about a decade ago in German discourse, gaining popularity in connection to concepts like toxic masculinity (Hoffmeister 2023; Zifonun 2023). This offers the chance to facilitate an increase in public discourse on toxicity that is grounded in scientific understanding of the phenomenon, and that is therefore better equipped to be more mindful of prejudices against gaming communities and their platforms.

But what advantages does the term 'toxicity' offer, apart from being a keyword that can attract attention in public discourse (see Hoffmeister, Sörries-Vorberger in this volume)?

The concept of online toxicity can be useful to help identify toxic actions in the content users are exposed to or produce themselves, though the normative and evaluative character of the term must be critically reflected. The accusation of toxicity, which is repeatedly directed at gaming communities in particular, might overlook the different conceptions of communicative norms in different domains. Certain ritualized forms of supposedly toxic behaviour, like for example, reclaiming negative terms, can also be read positively in terms of the formation of group identity and a sense of community through shared communicative practices (Saleem et al. 2016). By presenting different interdisciplinary approaches that investigate the phenomenon of toxicity, especially in relation to gaming communities, we aim to create awareness about the phenomenon as well as a basis for further research and exchange. Another objec-

tive of this anthology is to counteract the blanket stigmatization of communities and their practices by examining the phenomenon on an empirical basis

In the following, we will give a brief definition of toxicity by contrasting the term with relating concepts like *hate speech*, *incivility*, *flaming*, or *shitstorms* to create a theoretical basis for the upcoming papers as well as further linguistic and interdisciplinary research. Following this introductory definition will be a concise overview of current research on the toxicity of online gaming. This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the individual contributions to this anthology.

Defining Toxicity and Relating Concepts

In German-language research on the metaphorical concept of *toxicity*, the collocations "toxic masculinity" and "toxic relationship" have been highlighted in particular (Hoffmeister 2023: 424). The former is closely linked to toxicity in gaming since "[t]oxic gamer culture is an evolution of geek masculinity" (Adams et al. 2025). Toxicity can be described as "negative behavior" (Dreier, Pirker 2023) that harms others (Hoffmeister 2023). *Toxic communication* – the focus of this volume – refers to the harmfulness of a comment to the conversation and its participants (Demus et al. 2023: 265). However, toxicity is not a static trait but develops dynamically within the communicative context (ibid.). Despite the negative connotations of toxicity, its attribution is productive, for it is only by labeling a practice as toxic that its problematic nature is recognized and exposed (Hoffmeister 2023: 447). While insults and denigration are generally regarded as disruptive factors within a society, they can also contribute to the stabilization and formation of communities (Ellerbrock et al. 2017: 3). Taking action against a shared enemy contributes to the formation of identity within a group and reinforces shared values and norms.

The concept of toxicity can be used as an umbrella term for various phenomena in online discourse that can be described as negative communication practices, such as *online backlashes*, *shitstorms* or *hate speech*. *Online backlashes* occur in the digital sphere and can be described as outbursts of anger (Fischer 2025). A *shitstorm* is characterized by the sudden appearance of a large number of negative comments directed at individuals, institutions, or companies within a short period of time, usually on social media (ibid.). The comments are often insulting and/or aggressive (ibid.). Shitstorms are targeted, public, time-limited, usually follow a clear progression, involve many participants, and are

loosely coordinated (ibid.). Individual comments within a shitstorm are generally toxic and aim to harm the target. A shitstorm is thus a specific form of toxic discourse.

Hate speech and *cyberbullying* are also specific forms of toxic communication. Gevers et al. (2022: 35) "consider toxic language to be an inclusive term, encompassing subfields such as abusive and offensive language, hate speech, and cyberbullying." What all these phenomena have in common is that they primarily take place online. The anonymity that digital platforms typically enable allows for an increased prevalence of toxic and antisocial comments (ibid.), which is discussed under the term "Online Disinhibition Effect" (Beres et al. 2021: 3). Commenters hide behind the anonymity of the internet and often feel safe from direct (negative) social and/or legal consequences of their actions. This is also reflected in the current criticism of the coarsening of digital discourse cultures (Zollner 2022: 35). A major difference between toxicity and hate speech lies in their distinct legal implications. "While expressions of hate speech imply legal consequences, toxic language also includes utterances that cannot be prosecuted, but can still be harmful to the target." (Gevers et al. 2022: 33) Hate speech is defined as "communication that attacks a person or a group on the basis of identity factors, such as gender, race, or religion" (Sponholz 2023) and is used consciously or intentionally (ibid.: 149). Sponholz (ibid.: 144) criticizes the overuse and thus often incorrect application of the term *hate speech*, which causes loss in the clarity of the underlying concept: "The roots of hate speech are ideologies of inequality, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and Islamophobia, not affective action." (ibid.: 151) While hate speech occurs frequently in the data analyzed in this volume (see for example, the texts by Niegl and Bodden, Ahmed), toxicity can incorporate more linguistic phenomena.

The concept of *invectivity* is also closely linked to toxicity. Ellerbrock et al. (2017: 3) understand invectivity as communicative aspects that have the aim to belittle, hurt, or exclude. These can be realized in various ways, namely "verbally or non-verbally, orally, in writing, through gestures or images" (ibid., translation by the authors). It is important to note that invectivity must also be perceived as such by the participants in the communication and addressed in subsequent communication (ibid.: 8). A speech act does not, therefore, have to be intended to be hurtful in order to be considered invective; rather, it is the attribution that makes it invective (ibid.: 9). Invectivity is thus always performative and must be considered within the context in which it occurs (ibid.: 4).

Antoci et al. (2016: 1) "define online incivility as a manner of offensive interaction that can range from aggressive commenting in threads, incensed discussion and rude critiques, to outrageous claims, hate speech and harassment." Incivility as well as toxicity are umbrella terms that encompass a wide range of specific discursive practices. Incivility, however, emphasizes the aggressive dimension, whereas toxicity focuses on the harmful effects.

Toxicity can also be employed as a political and/or cultural tool. It can poison discursive spaces, hindering respectful discussion and excluding unwanted perspectives or individuals from the discourse. Ritualized toxic behavior can serve to stabilize a group and invite others to participate in toxic behavior toward certain individuals and positions, allowing participants to become part of the ingroup. This can currently be observed, for example, in anti-diversity movements, as discussed in the articles by Reinhold, Prinz and Liemann, or anti-feminist discussions, which are analyzed by Bau.

After distinguishing between various neighboring terms, we define toxicity as a communicative property of a comment or an act that does not have to be intentional and does not have to be attributed or identified as such by the participants of the situation. Even if not pointed out, toxic comments and acts nonetheless have a harmful effect on the recipient(s). Unlike hate speech toxicity is not limited to (but can include) identity-defining characteristics of communication partners. Toxicity may intentionally or unintentionally exclude individuals or groups from a discourse – either by targeting a person or group directly or by creating a generally negative atmosphere – and thus carries high political and cultural consequences. This can be observed in exclusionary or hostile practices carried out in games as well as in discourses about them.

Toxicity in Online Gaming and Gaming Discourse

Video games – like any other form of art – of course are not inherently or primarily toxic. On the contrary, they can have very positive impacts on players, helping with feelings of isolation or anxiety, and can be used for stress relief, as the global video games report "Power of Play" (Entertainment Software Association 2025) describes. Games can also tell diverse stories and allow players to empathize with identities other than their own through assuming the role of different playable characters or offer the possibility to experiment with the performance of gender (Liemann 2022). Nonetheless, gaming communities in particular are often suspected of toxicity in public discourse (e.g. Banaszczuk

2019). Just like many other communities or social media platforms, they are facing the problem of toxicity occurring in negative actions in (online) game play, live stream communication, or asynchronous gaming discourse on platforms like Steam, Discord, Reddit, Kick, Twitch, or YouTube.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a strong shift from analogue to online activities, and both positive and negative aspects of online gaming, as well as discourses surrounding games gained more attention (Anti-Defamation League 2020) which innately led to an increase of research on the topic. Platforms and game developers (see for example, Unity 2023) also started focusing more on the phenomenon of toxicity, as communities that are perceived as very toxic will inevitably repel new players and users. Platforms are also concerned with declining revenues that can be the result of users leaving a toxic space or brands fearing negative public perception when being presented in the context of toxic content (Nobata et al. 2016: 151).

Efforts from the gaming industry are therefore united in organizations like the *Thriving in Games Group* that supports gaming platforms like Discord and Twitch, as well as developers with resources to create safer online spaces and gaming experiences. The Anti-Defamation League directly addresses the gaming industry, calling for the implementation of more policies against toxicity, and for regular transparency reports on hate and harassment (Anti-Defamation League 2025). But they also highlight that governments must take a more active role in fighting toxicity in gaming contexts by creating legal frameworks that help victims of online abuse, and they suggest specific gaming safety task forces and stronger funding of research efforts (ibid.).

However, the often limited influence game developers, publishers, and platforms have over their userbases presents a significant challenge in combating toxic behaviour. The countless hours of daily gameplay content, verbal and multimodal interactions, make a constant supervision of potentially toxic interactions impossible and also pose the risk of over-policing discourse. While community guidelines are a common tool of proactive moderation (Seering 2020) and pledges of civil behaviour can have a positive effect on users (Cheng et al. 2017: 1227), safety settings like age restrictions can easily be circumvented, and platforms often create a structure of governmentality that does not necessarily reward the strict persecution of toxic users (Groen 2020, 103). Since polarizing discussions create an increased public interest and more interaction, participation in toxic behaviour can pay off for content creators since they can gain traction, which ElSherief et al. (2018) showed both for victims and aggressors of toxicity on Twitter.

While the usage of block lists that prohibit specific toxic terms is a common practice for many online social media platforms, they are not implemented in all gaming contexts, can be easily circumvented through Algospeak (Calhoun, Fawcett 2023), and the often multimodal communication further complicates automated detection. Even with limited communicative actions, users tend to find ways to be toxic, for example through the use of emotes, toxic playstyles, or sarcastic reinterpretation of positive voice lines (see Bodden, Ahmed in this volume).

A very common tool is the flagging system for toxic players in a game or on platforms, which enables users to classify content or a person as toxic and report this to the platform or publisher. This function can not only be misused for toxic actions (e.g. 'boob policing' on Twitch, see Zolides 2023) but it can also lead to problems such as a lack of transparency in moderation actions or the exploitation of low-paid staff (Seering 2020: 5–6) who must assess toxic interactions based on flagged content within a split second. For community-based actions like flagging, there also needs to be consensus on what is considered toxic, and even when classified as such, toxicity must be considered negative in the first place. As studies (e.g. Shen et al. 2020) show, toxicity is often seen as 'part of the game' and only resilient players stay in toxic gaming communities which reinforces these behaviours: "More toxic players are more likely to become experienced, and to reach higher levels within competitive games." (Lee et al. 2021: 4) Other factors that amplify toxicity in online gaming are the competitiveness of the games (Martens et al. 2015: 6) and the ranking systems that result in higher frustration over losses. To adress the problem of toxicity, there are different research approaches that especially focus on the automatic detection of toxic behaviour in the form of in-game actions as well as chat messages (see e.g. Murnion et al. 2018; for an extensive overview of current toxicity research see Anker Nexø 2024).

Of course, toxicity can be found not only within games themselves but also in the discourses surrounding them. Gaming has been instrumentalized as a battleground for right-wing and anti-diversity agendas, often in the context of supposed 'culture wars' (Proctor, Kies 2018: 127). Clear examples of this are the 2014 Gamergate movement (Braithwaite 2016), but also more recently recurrent complaints about supposedly too masculine and unattractive female characters in games, as could be seen in online discussions surrounding for example *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2020), *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) or *Ghost of Yōtei* (2025) (see Reinhold, Prinz in this volume). In such cases, toxicity lies not only in the often misogynistic, racist, queerphobic, and ableist

ideologies themselves, but also within the semiotic means through which these ideologies are pushed forward and undesired points of view excluded.

Contributions

As described previously, the current German discourse focuses more on attacks on identity-defining traits connected to hate speech, which differs from international approaches that use toxicity as an umbrella term connected to online behaviour on social media platforms. *Toke Hoffmeister* and *Lars Sörries-Vorberger* therefore investigate the concept 'toxicity' with a meta-linguistic approach by conducting a qualitative survey with 434 participants to assess the conceptualization of the term 'toxisch' (toxic) in German speakers. They show that toxicity is primarily connected to people, relationships, and masculinity, contrary to the focus on online toxicity in this volume. The survey is supported by a quantitative discourse analysis of 100 media texts that show similar definitions of toxicity.

As stated before, the online disinhibition effect and competitiveness of online gaming can increase toxic behaviour. Additionally, specific interfaces and platforms contain affordances that shape *how toxic* people tend to be and *how they can perform toxicity*. The classification of different types of toxicity is therefore a focal point of *Tamara Bodden* and *Ashhab Ahmed's* article that investigates multimodal toxicity in Twitch streams. Using a stream sample that can be seen as prototypical for potential toxicity (94,600 tokens), they differentiate between auditive and visual layers of the game, stream, and chat to characterize how different multimodal resources can be used for toxic actions. These findings are supplemented with a discourse analysis of both public meta discourse on toxic streamers and streamers community guidelines.

The public discourse around toxicity in gaming is also the empirical base for *Patricia Bau's* linguistic analysis of the discourse surrounding the game *No Mercy* (2025) that turns the taboos of incest and rape into playable experiences. Bau shows how taboos and toxicity are entwined in the discourse about the game and how toxic practices (like moralizing, whataboutism, and accusations of attention seeking), both from supporters and opponents of the game prevent productive discussion.

The exploration of the boundaries of what can be said is also a topic in a section of three contributions that focus on right-wing discourse connected with gaming.

Christina Liemann investigates toxic discursive practices in the Steam Group 'Woke Content Detector', which aims to identify and warn of supposedly woke games. Here, Detectors, who categorize the games, and Counter Speakers, who aim to disrupt the group's echo chamber, seemingly engage in mutual discussion, yet no conclusion or reconciliation is reached. In her linguistic study, Liemann shows how antagonistic personal references – as a more subtle form of toxicity – create this unproductive, poisoned discursive environment.

In his analysis, *Andreas Niegl* focuses on the discourse inside alt-history communities regarding the game *Hearts Of Iron IV* (2016) on platforms like Steam, Reddit, and Kiwifarms. He discusses how role-playing and post-irony as community-specific practices blur the lines of acceptable speech and open the forums to actual non-ironic support of fascist ideologies. While there is a notable difference in moderated and unmoderated forums, interventions against toxicity can lead to factions in the community and users switching to platforms that tolerate more toxic behaviour.

The article by *Julia Ueberlacker* and *Mick Prinz* from the Amadeu Antonio foundation examines these phenomena from a meta-discursive standpoint and describes why and how gaming communities and platforms can be effective in recruiting new members for far-right movements. Though the authors also stress the diverse nature of gaming communities, they emphasize the importance of understanding far-right codes, mechanisms, and structures to prevent gamers from unintentionally drifting into these spheres. The article additionally discusses various programs, potential for interventions, and the necessity of platform governance.

Lastly, *Marion Plank* provides insight into toxicity in the field of game development where toxic practices are already rooted in the stage of education. She examines the phenomenon of 'crunching' as an often idealized but toxic concept in both game development, and game development education, which is masked under the disguise of idealized 'industry-readiness'. Through guided interviews with both educators and students Plank explores this toxic practice and outlines five principles for a healthier curriculum.

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