

# The Good, the Bad and the Toxic

*How Norwegian Esports Students Experience and Navigate Toxicity*

Stian Overå & Niri Talberg

Postdoctoral Researchers,  
Norwegian National Advisory  
Unit on Concurrent Substance  
Abuse & Mental Health  
Disorders, Hospital Innlandet  
Trust, Norway

SNSUS, Oslo, 16.05.2025





*"There's been a lot of unwanted attention just for being a girl in gaming. Constant comments. It's been strange growing up with that, always getting remarks about your gender, often for no reason. Especially when you're really young. It almost becomes a habit... something you just have to ignore." — Sara (16 years)*





# Purpose and Approach

- **Postdoc** on esports, youth culture, and education in Norway
- **Esports?** *"Organized competitive gaming"* (Pluss et al., 2022)
- **This case:** Two rounds of interviews with twelve high school students (9 boys, 3 girls) in an elite esports programme, conducted one year apart.
- **Research question:** How do esports students understand, experience, and manage toxicity in their gaming environments
- **Method:** Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021)



# Main Themes



**1. Triggers and Manifestations**



**2. You Can't Play Online Without Being Harassed**



**3. Not Passive Victims**

# Triggers and Manifestations

## Main Insight:

Students viewed toxicity as an expected part of online gaming, most often triggered by frustration and anonymity. They distinguished between performance-based and identity-based toxicity—one targeting how you play, the other who you are.





*"It's really just that people are mean. I don't read more into it than that — they're just, like, toxic. They say nasty things and act horribly. So it's easy to just throw out that slang word and call them toxic."*

– Sara

*"Like, if you're playing badly but blame your teammates or external stuff – then it can be considered toxic.»*

– Julian



## **Performance-based toxicity**

*"It happens all the time. For every tiny mistake, you might be told to kill yourself. It's really brutal."*

– Max

## **Identity-based toxicity**

"When I first began playing CS and wasn't that good, I got tons of mean comments and people yelling at me on the mic. Just for speaking, I'd get sexual noises and stuff like 'cyka blyat' (Russian slang for 'whore'). I think there was one time I just began crying, left everything and walked away."

— Julie

# You Can't Play Online Without Being Harassed

## Main Insight:

Female students faced constant unwanted attention, objectification, and gatekeeping. Male students also experienced severe verbal toxicity and often felt it was under-recognised in public discourse. Across genders, toxicity was linked to emotional exhaustion and reduced motivation.





*"Half the people tell you to 'get back in the kitchen', the other half fall in love because you're a gamer girl."*

– Sara

*"The most successful girls in esports often do streaming – they wear revealing clothes and everything. But it shouldn't be like that. They should be allowed to wear hoodies and be really good, without people making disgusting comments."*

– Oscar





*"There was this study saying 77% of women had experienced harassment. We all thought: that's too low. It should be 100%. You simply can't play competitive games without getting harassed."* – Daniel

*"I don't know what's worse – being told to get in the kitchen and make a sandwich or that someone's going to kill your family with a rock."* – Noah



## Not Passive Victims

### Main Insight:

Despite being exposed to high levels of toxicity, students were far from passive. Instead, they developed a wide range of coping strategies — including psychological reframing, technical filtering, social buffering, and educational reflection — to protect themselves and others.





## **Technical Measures:**

*"I've found it's really important to keep your personal life out of gaming. Have a separate Instagram, a separate personality online – so they won't interfere with your real life." - Julie*

## **Educational Approaches:**

*"We just had a social studies session where the boys used voice changers and feminine names to see how people reacted. One guy in our class got the comment: 'Good job girl, man, dude, whatever' – from a random teammate who clearly didn't know what to make of him. That was the closest we came to sexual harassment today." - Daniel*



## **Social Strategies**

*"I like having classmates around me – people who take it a bit more seriously, if I can put it that way."* — Sara

## **In-Game Adaptations**

*"Apex has, like, 17 characters – and lots of representation. It's not just white soldiers like in CoD. There are women of colour, LGBTQ, autistic characters, trans, Indian, bisexual... It has a bit of everything."* — Julian

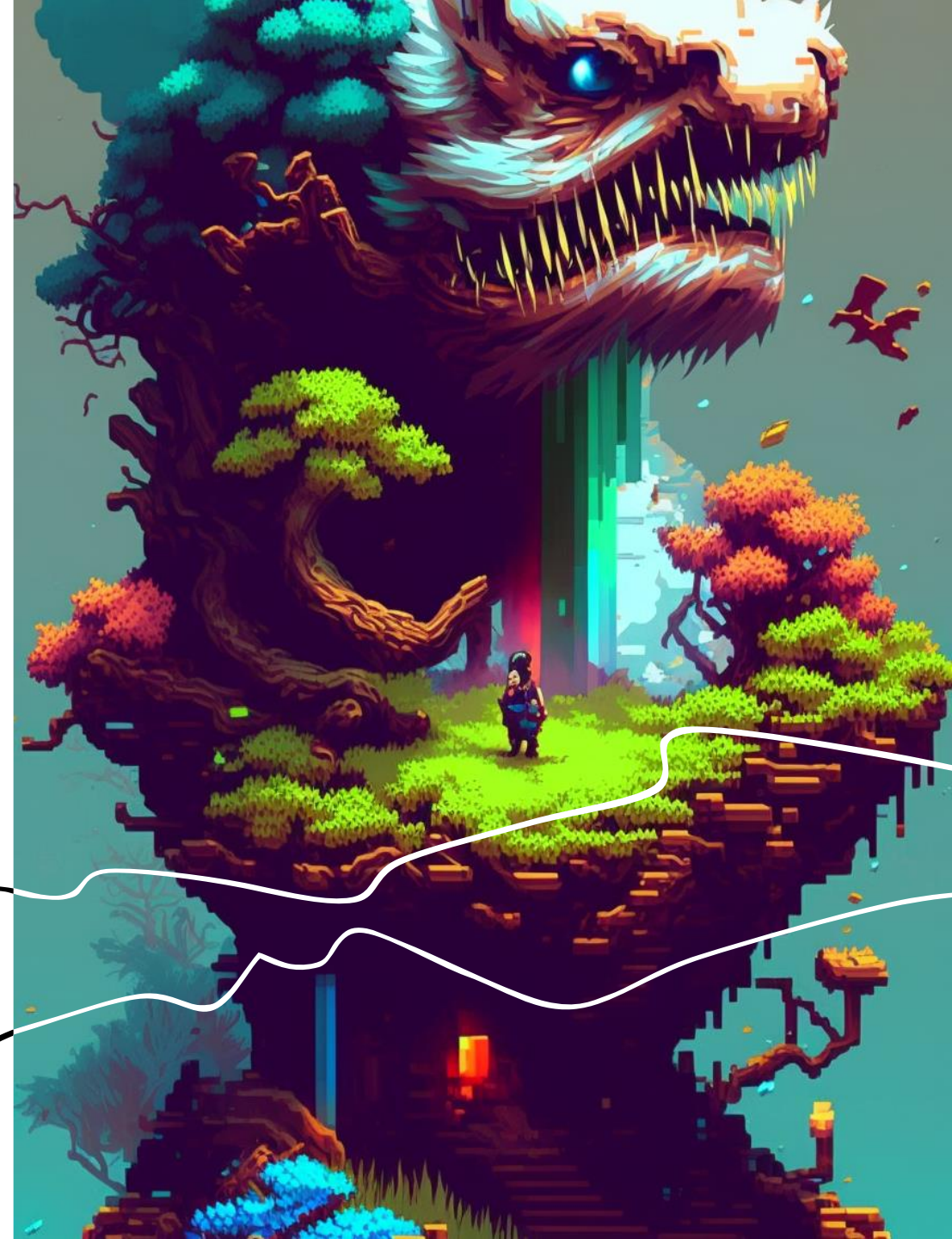
## **Psychological Perspectives**

*"You never really know what someone's going through. It could be anything – a diagnosis, problems, health stuff, whatever."* — Julie



# Final Thoughts

- Toxicity is widespread and often seen as “just part of gaming”
- Two main forms: performance-based (affects «all»), identity-based (targets girls)
- Undermines motivation, mental health, and sense of belonging
- Students are not passive: they develop technical, social, psychological, and pedagogical coping strategies
- School-based esports arenas offer safer, more inclusive environments and potential for positive intervention





stian.overa@sykehuset-innlandet.no  
niri@sykehuset-innlandet.no