

Online players beware the video game police

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By Peter Nowak [CBC News](#)



Stephen Toulouse, lead program manager for policy and enforcement for Xbox Live, plays several hours of video games a day as part of his job.

If you speed on the highway, you might get pulled over by a traffic cop and given a ticket. Similarly, if you use obscene language while playing online, you may get kicked off by the video game "police."

Many gamers aren't aware of the fact that at any given time, they may be playing with one of these cops, whose job is to patrol and make the online world safe from video game miscreants. But they are there, and they're willing and able to dispense their own brand of justice.

Stephen Toulouse, lead program manager for policy and enforcement for Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox Live service, discussed his job in a keynote speech at the SecTor security conference in Toronto on Wednesday.

After his speech, he sat down with CBCNews.ca to talk about maintaining law and order in Microsoft's online world.

CBCNews.ca: What does a typical day on the job consist of for you?

Toulouse: My team really handles three key things for the Xbox Live service. The first thing, which is our sort of bread and butter, is the terms-of-use stuff. I have a team that does that 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and what they do is pull complaints out of the complaint system. These are complaints that users have filed against other users.

It could be that their gamer tag is offensive, it could be that their profile text is offensive, so what we do is go in and look at every one of those. Unfortunately, some of our users don't use the complaints system properly, like maybe they've been defeated in a game or something of that nature.

So every day my agents process the complaints literally by hand in a tool and they choose one of several different options. They either agree with the complaint, in which case action is taken, and that could be a voice ban, a temporary service lockout or forcing them to change their gamer tag.

The second choice that they can make is that the complaint was reasonable and by that I mean the text doesn't violate our terms of use but one could view it as being offensive. And the third case is that it's an

inaccurate complaint meaning that someone said "Joe" is an offensive gamer tag. We take those and discard them but we remember that the complainer was not accurate.

They also go out and game in the system. They go out and play Uno, Halo, Call of Duty, all the top games and they're looking for bad behaviour. They're not enticing it, but when they see it, they're capable of taking action to make it a safer place.

The second thing they handle is some of the policies around privacy and security-of-user information. As I mentioned in my talk, it's a little bit about what are the reasonable expectations that a user might have about being marketed to and when are we going to hand that data over and when are we not. Those policies and procedures are basically subsets at the corporate level.

The third thing my team takes care of is any law enforcement requests. Subpoenas or things of that nature, where we might be able to help in an investigation. Maybe an Xbox is stolen, maybe there's information on the Xbox that law enforcement might need.

A typical day for me is overseeing the team to do those three key things.

CBCNews.ca: Have there been cases where law enforcement has requested gamers' personal information to use in investigations?

Toulouse: The incidents that we usually deal with is, a user comes to us and says, "My Xbox was stolen." We really can't give the usage information to the customer, so the subpoena we see from law enforcement is usually around that, tracking a stolen Xbox.

Occasionally, there might be a case where somebody claims they did not commit a crime because they were playing Halo, in which case the subpoena might take the stance of, were they playing Halo at the time? It's that type of stuff, but it's pretty rare.

CBCNews.ca: So you'd be able to show with logs that the person was playing at a certain time?

Toulouse: I can't go into the details that we provide to satisfy the subpoenas but in general we can provide law enforcement with the information they need.

CBCNews.ca: I'm assuming that's the sort of thing a user agrees to when they accept the terms of service?

Toulouse: Yes, that's correct.

CBCNews.ca: What sort of volume of complaints do you get?

Toulouse: It's a tiny fraction of the overall user base [of more than 12 million]. I remember it was less than one per cent of the total user base, but it's something we process every day. There are a lot that are inaccurate and we try to get that out to the user base, that they're wasting their time [if they make inaccurate complaints].

CBCNews.ca: How many people do you have dealing with complaints at a given time?

Toulouse: We usually don't go into specifics on the team, but what I can say is that across the worldwide service and all those different locations I've got several dozen people who are doing stuff at all times. We add more periodically when we get spikes in service, like at Christmas when there's more people playing and we get more complaints.

CBCNews.ca: You mentioned in your keynote that part of your job is getting online and playing. How much of that do you do?

Toulouse: I view my role as I'm kind of always on duty, so I play a couple of hours a day, maybe more. I'm usually too busy for that to be business hour work, I usually do that when I'm at home. It helps that I

happen to be a very passionate video gamer, so it's not really work for me. You would think that given my rather public role that people would figure out not to misbehave but, unfortunately, I may have to take action at times when I'm playing.

CBCNews.ca: Are there certain games that are more prone to misbehaviour than others?

Toulouse: It's hard to tell you there is a set of games.... The short answer is yes, but there's no set one that I can describe.

I'll give you an example. Let's talk about a game that's a slower-paced game, like Uno, where there's a lot of time in between rounds. It's more social because you're not necessarily doing a whole lot, you're waiting for the other people to do stuff. That might be a case where there's more opportunity for there to be a miscreant.

But if you go and look at like a first-person shooter, it might be more difficult because there's so much going on that you have to pay attention to, especially if it's a team-based game. In team-based games, you might see that opposing teams have tension and there may be bad behaviour there, but in the team there's not, because usually people are working together. There's no one thing I can point to.

CBCNews.ca: What do you particularly enjoy playing?

Toulouse: I'm a huge fan of Rock Band, Guitar Hero. I'm usually playing the latest that's out, so right now I'm playing The Force Unleashed and Mercenaries 2. My games that I play repeatedly are Rock Band, a little Halo, Tiger Woods Gold, Rainbow Six. I play a lot.

CBCNews.ca: When you pop a typical game into your Xbox, you generally get a message that the game's rating may not apply while online. Xbox Live has been around for about six years now, so how is it that online gaming has managed to elude the Entertainment Software Ratings Board?

Toulouse: That's a really interesting question. When we think of behaviour in the form of content, and that behaviour can manifest itself as voice or text or something you create, we call it user-generated content.

In general, a lot of the ratings boards are still trying to grapple with that problem of user-generated content. Inevitably, if you provide someone the tools to create something, some small subset of the population will create something negative, or in violation of the rules. If you take a step back, online gaming is another form of communication. The internet being a communications medium, some of that communication is going to be negative, so how do you grapple with it?

We believe the way to grapple with it is in three key ways. The first is to provide you with good parental controls to keep the child aspect out of all the bad behaviour. That's something we've invested in and other consoles have as well.

The middle part is providing you with the tools to control your experience immediately, so you're able to mute people or block people. The third is when the content is so egregious that you want us to step in and do something, which is the complaint system that my team handles.

In terms of rating it, it's really, really difficult, so one of the things we're looking at is adding new complaint categories for user-generated content. We've already got them for voice and things of that nature where you can flag it and tell us, but for things where a map that this guy created in Halo is in an obscene shape when you look at it from it above, that's the type of stuff that we really have to get a handle on.

From a lot of people's perspective, the safest thing to say is just "be warned." We have to get better at ensuring the community understands there are consequences to actions. There's no real way to rate it.

CBCNews.ca: You mentioned during your speech that you toyed with the idea of creating a child profile....

Toulouse: It's not toyed, there actually is a child profile you can set up. You have to start with a [Microsoft] Live ID. Once you do, the system will treat that account very differently. It won't be allowed to do friends lists stuff, it won't be allowed to play M-rated content, it won't see ads for R-rated movies on the dashboard.

Your first account has to be an adult account, then you go and create a child Live ID and you chain it to your adult account, which you can add to the Xbox with a bunch of parental controls.

CBCNews.ca: On the technical side of things, what sorts of crazy things have people done in trying to hack Xbox Live?

Toulouse: I can't go into specifics, but one thing that is popular is router glitching, where people try to change and their connection to the internet in terms of latency and things like that. To be a good system, we have to deal with all manners of latency and bandwidth, so the system is intelligent enough to try and make that a seamless experience where if someone has a momentary blip in their bandwidth, that doesn't affect everyone else.

CBCNews.ca: You must have seen the *South Park* World of Warcraft episode. Have you ever had a situation like that, where one player tries to take over the online world and you've had to go in and destroy him?

Toulouse: [Laughs] Live doesn't work quite in the way that a virtual world does. We've never had any type of breach like that.

There have been cases where a game may have a cheat or a glitch that until it's addressed, a user can be that way. But because we're not a [Massively Multiplayer Online world], it's probably not a good analogy. It was a great episode though, particularly because Blizzard was able to run with it and have fun with it.

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[Toll2440](#) wrote: Posted 2008/10/09

at 12:20 AM ET Yeah i kind of had to agree to the terms before I could play, and oh look at that, I had nothing to do so I read them too. What I'm saying is people that are more sensitive than others have to stop crying and trying to make the world bend to them. It is pretty stupid that people can mess with something you paid for by simply reporting that you used the word danm after eating your own frag grenade in CoD4. (I know they said they filter out the crap complaints) So Microsoft DOES have a code of conduct, I'm cool with that, I'm not ok with people abusing the code of conduct out of spite or pure idiocracy. Like i said, mute me, don't throw a fit and have something I paid for screwed do to anyones overly conservative attitude.

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[Syklone](#) wrote: Posted 2008/10/09

at 11:51 AM ET Toll2440 wrote: "just because you don't like what they say doesn't mean you have ANY RIGHT to tell them what they can and cannot say."

Actually, they DO have a right. It says so in the TOS. Even your posting here in this forum is subject to a terms of use. You agreed to behave in a certain manner, and in exchange, you are permitted to make use

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[Brad Robinson](#) wrote: Posted 2008/10/09

at 11:00 AM ET Patrick O'Reilly is exactly correct. Your personal opinion about freedom of speech and whatnot does not apply. You agreed to the Terms of Service therefore, if you want service follow the terms.

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[Patrick O'Reilly](#) wrote: Posted 2008/10/09

at 1:25 AM ET @Toll2440:

Microsoft has a code of conduct to which Xbox Live users agree to adhere to. If a player does not like the code of conduct, they can choose not to play, or they can choose to ignore the code and suffer the consequences. That's the deal players agree to, and they have EVERY RIGHT to follow through. It's true people have the right to say stupid things, but Microsoft also has the right to refuse service to these people.

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[ath1337](#) wrote: Posted 2008/10/09

at 12:30 AM ET Interesting. And great to see CBC putting out some good in-house content.

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