

RAN C&N

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CONCLUSION PAPER*RAN C&N – Digital grooming tactics on video gaming (adjacent) platforms**15-16 March 2021, Online event*

Digital Grooming Tactics on Video Gaming & Video Gaming Adjacent Platforms: Threats and Opportunities

Key outcomes

The online world is more and more a part of everyday life. Just as in the offline world, online threats and pitfalls are present that can harm people or, in this context, try to radicalise them. On the other hand, many positive and empowering things are also happening online, just as they are in the offline world. During the RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (C&N) meeting on 'Digital grooming tactics on video gaming (adjacent) platforms', the threats were discussed, as well as the opportunities to use the online video gaming platforms in a positive way. This paper first discusses the threats regarding grooming tactics on video gaming and video gaming adjacent platforms by providing background information on different models of grooming that were shared during the meeting. The similarities and differences found between grooming for radicalisation purposes and other purposes (in particular, child sexual abuse and cults) are discussed. The second part of the paper highlights recommendations that have been made to use positive and empowering ways to prevent and counter grooming through video gaming.

The key outcomes of the meeting are:

- In different types of grooming, the groomer tries to feed on (the need for) certain **emotions of the potential victim**, e.g. loneliness, insecurities.
- On video gaming adjacent platforms, a groomer for extremism could talk to a gamer during gameplay and try to **steer the conversation towards feelings of anger**.
- **Awareness-raising campaigns** targeted at youth and their parents about grooming tactics on gaming (adjacent) platforms can help to build resilience against radicalisation.
- **Engaging role models through gaming** can also help. These could be popular gamers, influencers or offline leaders.
- Practitioners need to take into consideration the possibilities video games and adjacent platforms offer as an **online outreach tool** to reach individuals at risk of radicalisation.

Threats

As identified during the exploratory C&N meeting on Extremists' Use of Video Gaming, extremists use video games for recruitment and propaganda purposes ⁽¹⁾. Two of the strategies identified during the exploratory meeting related to grooming and recruitment have been further explored during this meeting: **grooming through in-game chat**, and **grooming through gaming adjacent communications platforms**, such as Discord and Twitch.

The RAN Health & Social Care Working Group (H&SC) 2019 meeting on grooming ⁽²⁾ already identified some models and stages for grooming. Some of these have been developed in the context of other fields, like child sexual abuse, but can and are also used in the context of radicalisation as there are some similarities between these fields. Building on the findings of the 2019 H&SC meeting, some lessons learned from adjacent fields and grooming in an online context were shared during the meeting at hand. The following models were presented:

- One of the first models developed to better understand the interaction between sexual offenders and (young) victims is the **four preconditions model, developed by David Finkelhor in 1984** ⁽³⁾. This model describes the steps a sexual offender takes when committing sexual abuse:
 1. The first step is the offender's **motivation to abuse**. Several factors can contribute to this motivation (e.g. specific sexual interest, emotional congruence to children).
 2. The next step is that the offender has to **overcome internal inhibitors**. For instance, they may create a storyline in which it is acceptable to impose oneself on a victim (sometimes combined with substance misuse by the offender).
 3. Then, the offender has to overcome **external inhibitors**: how can they create a situation where there is no supervision and the offender will be alone with a potential victim?
 4. The last step in this model is overcoming the **victim's resistance**: this is the moment where grooming can take place in order to deal with the victim's potential resistance. Grooming here is described as "a process in which the older and more experienced offender uses manipulation, lies, flattery and praise, while also conferring on the victim a sense of responsibility and guilt, in order to get the victim (seemingly voluntarily) to take part in sexual activities aimed at gratifying the offender."
- A more recent model that was presented is the **model of sexual grooming by Ian A. Elliott** ⁽⁴⁾. By combining different theories, an integrated universal model of illicit grooming is presented by Elliott. The model is founded in control theory and self-regulation approaches to behaviour, assumes a goal-directed protagonist, and comprises two distinct phases. The first phase is rapport building, incentivisation, disinhibition and security management. The second phase is a disclosure phase in which goal-relevant information is introduced in a systematic and controlled manner in order to desensitise the target.

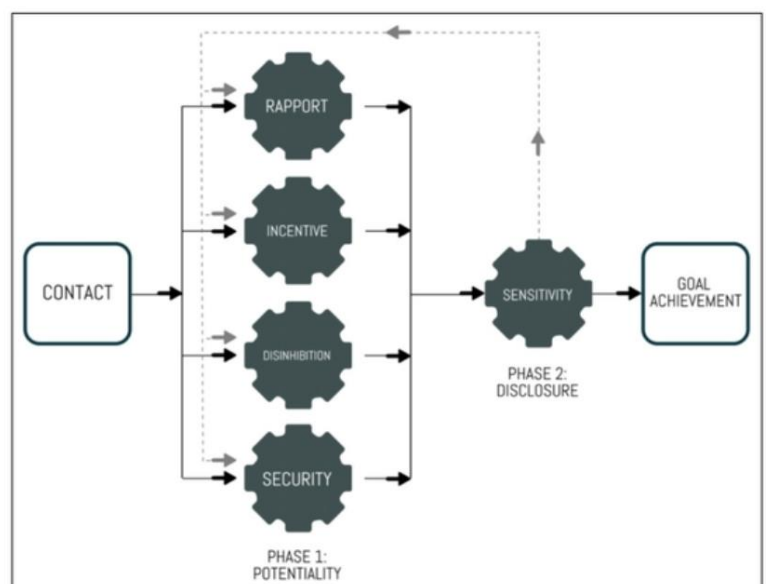


Figure 2. A self-regulation model of illicit grooming. Black solid lines/arrows indicate progress through the model; gray dashed lines/arrows indicate feedback loops.

⁽¹⁾ RAN C&N Conclusion Paper, 2020: [Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives](#)

⁽²⁾ RAN H&SC Ex Post Paper, 2019: [Grooming for terror – Manipulation and control](#)

⁽³⁾ [A BRIEF SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE OF DAVID FINKELHOR'S PRECONDITIONS MODEL](#)

⁽⁴⁾ [A Self-Regulation Model of Sexual Grooming](#)

- The third model presented during the meeting is that of the **Six principles of influence**, first published in 1984 by Robert Cialdini in his book "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion" ⁽⁵⁾. This model is not aimed at grooming but explores factors that affect the decisions that people make, particularly in relation to sales and purchasing. The model is also applicable to other areas and was presented during the meeting in relation to the process of luring someone into a cult. At the core of this model is the idea that decision-making can require a lot of effort, so individuals use a lot of rules of thumb and decision-making shortcuts when deciding what to do, how to behave or what action to take in any situation. Cialdini has **identified six core principles** that affect these decision-making shortcuts. The main message that he delivers is that if you understand these six principles, then you can use them to your advantage when trying to persuade others to take a specific action. The six principles are: **Reciprocity** (if you give someone something, that person feels obliged to return the favour); **Scarcity** (the less of something there is, the more people tend to want it); **Authority** (when we trust people we are more likely to follow them); **Commitment and consistency** (if I get you to do one little thing, then I can get you to do one more little thing that's similar); **Liking** (people are much more likely to be influenced and persuaded by those who they like than those who they don't); and **Social proof** (when it comes to decision-making, we often look around us to see what others are doing, before making our mind up).
- During the meeting, a model of **seven phases of online grooming** was presented: **Contact** (normal talk; vulnerability is scanned, what the environment is, where access is); **Friendship** (groomer tries to make friends and tries to lure the child away from their surroundings); **Risk assessment** (evaluating whether or not the groomer has a correct view of his/her victim); the **One and only** (groomer creates a special bond with the victim). In the phases of **The existential phase – The mission** and/or **Prove your solidarity**, the groomer takes it one step further. In the case of sexual abuse, the groomer goes more and more into 1-on-1 personal conversation; in the case of grooming for radicalisation, the conversation will be about the belief in the "real truth" that both groomer and victim share. Finally, in the phase of **The secret society – Grooming of others**, the victim becomes a groomer.

Grooming tactics on video gaming (adjacent) platforms, compared to stories and models from other types of grooming

During the meeting, after the examples and theories from adjacent fields were presented, there was a discussion on grooming tactics used on video gaming (adjacent) platforms and how these differ or are similar to examples from adjacent fields. During this discussion, the following insights were gathered:

- Speaking about the comparison between different types of grooming, it became clear that concerning **the tactics to engage with possible victims** a similarity was found, where the groomer tries to feed on (the need for) certain **emotions of the potential victim** (e.g. loneliness, insecurities). However, an important difference in this respect is that when it comes to sexual grooming or grooming for a cult the perpetrator uses "affection" and "love" to persuade a potential victim who is vulnerable and has a need for this kind of attention, whereas someone who is looking to recruit for extremism during gaming is trying to feed on emotions like anger or hatred.
- When it comes to grooming on video gaming adjacent platforms, it is important to realise that gaming involves all kinds of emotions; depending on the game, this could involve excitement, fear, anger or other emotions. Digital groomers try to use these to create an opening for persuasion, also because the gamer is distracted by the game during the conversation providing an opening to speak about all sorts of things. They could for instance talk to a gamer during gameplay and try to **steer the conversation towards feelings of anger** by asking how things are going in school and when the gamer talks about receiving low grades or being angry at a teacher, then the groomer will speak more about the grievances that are making the gamer angry in order to further explore this anger and maybe steer it into the direction of being angry at (certain parts of) society. In this way, playing video games can open up "emotional pathways" to extremism that groomers can use to interact and connect with the gamer.
- In certain gaming communities, **humour is used to connect to people**, for instance by using memes that can also be associated with the extreme-right subculture ⁽⁶⁾. Using humour can help to make communication easier and provides the possibility to defend oneself against criticism ('it was just a joke'). The line between what is funny and what is discriminatory can get really thin and mainstreaming of radical ideas or "hiding" behind this use of humour is a risk worth noticing.

⁽⁵⁾ See, for instance: [Cialdini's 6 Principles of Persuasion: A Simple Summary](#)

⁽⁶⁾ Also see the RAN paper on [extremists' use of humour](#)

- **Differences between extremist groups:** the use of humour and the targeting of big groups of people seem to be more associated with right-wing extremism, whereas Islamist groomers seem to use a more individual approach online, according to practitioners present at the meeting.
- **The target audience of digital groomers:** groomers seem to seek out mostly young people ⁽⁷⁾, but also adults who are present on gaming platforms. Like grooming for other purposes, groomers seem to target people with certain vulnerabilities and grievances they can tap into.
- **Where does online grooming for extremism take place?** Over the last years, it has turned out that any type of game and platform can be used by groomers. Not only first-person shooter games are being used, but also other types of games (e.g. Minecraft) are being used to make contact. Besides the games themselves, different types of adjacent communications platforms are also being used (e.g. Twitch, DLive, Discord, etc.) for online grooming.

Opportunities : Recommendations

Even though groomers are actively trying to recruit new members on video games and video gaming adjacent communications platforms, the activity of gaming as such should not be seen as problematic. At the meeting it was discussed how practitioners and policymakers can use the positive effects of gaming to combat or build resilience to these “bad influences”. Several recommendations, including some specific actions, on how to use gaming and gaming adjacent platforms for positive interventions were given. These are grouped below, based on different perspectives for a preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approach.

Raising awareness & building resilience

Given the great number of people who play video games, in particular but not limited to young people, video gaming and gaming adjacent communications platforms provide numerous opportunities for interventions that focus on raising awareness and building resilience to some of the negative encounters that can occur on these platforms, just like anywhere else on the internet. When trying to reach a certain audience, it is important to know how you can reach them. If they are known to play certain video games and/or use certain adjacent communications platforms, these would provide good platforms to reach your target audience ⁽⁸⁾. According to the first-line practitioners present at the meeting, some suggestions for interventions focusing on raising awareness and building resilience are:

- **Awareness-raising campaigns** targeted at youth and their parents about grooming tactics on gaming (adjacent) platforms can help to build resilience against radicalisation.
 - Such awareness raising or alternative narrative campaigns can **make use of (non-)existing gaming characters or gaming elements** to make them more attractive and appealing for a target audience that is used to playing video games.
 - Gamers themselves are also an important audience for such campaigns, so they are made aware of the risks and are able to recognise potential signs of grooming. This will allow them **to take responsibility as a gaming community** to report or ban potential groomers.
- Try and **engage the parents** so the parents and child can discuss a child’s online activities together, as often parents are often unaware of their child’s online gaming experience. An example of how this could be facilitated is through organising parent and child gaming sessions.
- Teaching children about influential methods online and in games in particular (potentially through the use of P/CVE games, see below). This could be integrated in a broader programme on **building digital media literacy**.
- **Engaging role models through gaming.** These could be popular gamers, influencers or offline leaders. It is important not to forget that these role models often do not possess the knowledge and skills that first-line practitioners do possess regarding risks and signs of grooming and radicalisation. Therefore, when engaging such role models it is crucial that they are accompanied by practitioners who do possess expertise

⁽⁷⁾ See, for instance, this article: [How far right uses video games and tech to lure and radicalise teenage recruits](#)

⁽⁸⁾ See RAN C&N, 2019: [Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model](#), and RAN C&N, 2017: [Guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns \(GAMMMA+\)](#)

on grooming processes, for example. These could be youth workers, social workers, psychologists and even police officers.

- **Engaging gamers:** An example was given of 'Beast' — a gamer who was born and raised in Kenya's largest slum and is one of Kenya's best Mortal Kombat players. In an interview, he has indicated to "choose gaming instead of crime" ⁽⁹⁾. Engaging such a role model shows how gaming can help someone to stay on the right path, and might encourage others to do so too. 'Beast' is, for example, also giving talks about how he became a professional gamer, thus presenting himself as a "mentor" and being able to teach and show a positive (career) pathway for others.
- The Dutch police have partnered up with a game developer to organise weekly online talk shows, live streams discussing a variety of topics and gaming tournaments on different consoles ⁽¹⁰⁾. For these talk shows, aimed at youth, they invite DJs, artists and other influential people to join them. In addition, a digital hangout on Discord is available for chatting with each other.
- In addition to the sports tournaments and activities already organised by schools and youth centres, the **use and promotion of e-sports** can be of added value for P/CVE interventions and in particular to increase societal resilience and empowerment. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has developed a guide for the use of sports in PVE ⁽¹¹⁾, which consists of five steps or zones that are key preventive factors that predict societal resilience and empowerment through sports. These zones could be adjusted to fit the e-sports and broader video gaming context. The five zones as well as how they can fit an e-sports environment are briefly described below.

Five zones and their potential use in e-sports

Zone 1: Safe Spaces. Providing youth with institutionalised protection and creating safe spaces for meaningful game interventions (which help to stay away from radicalisation) by using their own definition of problems and their participation in gaming as a starting point.

Zone 2: Social Inclusion. Within the safe space, people are included in the group and are provided with a positive peer group they can relate to. Messages of celebrating unity in diversity can be fed in here, in the form of tailored gaming ads.

Zone 3: Education. Given gaming's popularity, it can serve as an effective tool for connecting to youth culture and subcultures in society. Other practitioners can be brought into the safe space, for instance the police. This marks the start of going from online contact to offline contact with mentors, role models and gamers.

Zone 4: Resilience. This zone focuses on the capacity and ability to "bounce back" from challenges or setbacks. It enhances critical thinking skills, knowledge about grooming, having empathy, tolerance and understanding. It represents a shift from mental ideas around violent extremism to more local, context-specific ones. Meaning, once the player is offline... what is their life world like? Video gaming communities can build the resilience of players through social awareness, cultural understanding and physical self-restraint.

Zone 5: Empowerment. Represents a transformation from thinking to doing. Gamers will have acquired new knowledge and education to make better-informed decisions, have a positive sense of self, build their capacities and lead to an increased responsibility, leading to empowerment.

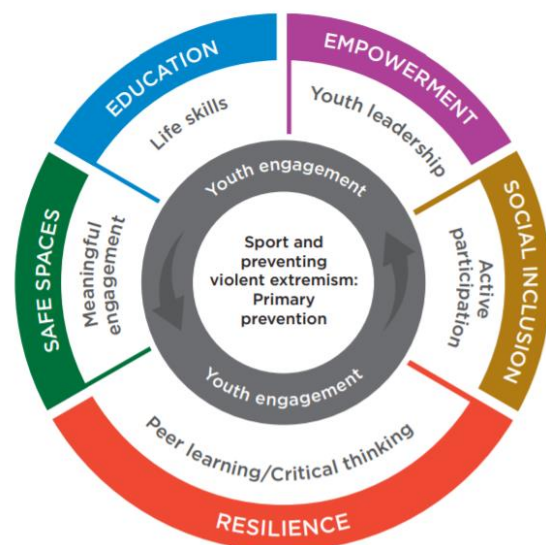


Figure 1: Five zones for using sports in PVE. Collison, Al-Khalifa & Sambili in UNODC 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport - Technical Guide'. (2020)

⁽⁹⁾ [Esports is on the rise in Africa and these two Kenyans are leading the charge](#)

⁽¹⁰⁾ More information (in Dutch only): <https://u-night.nl/>

⁽¹¹⁾ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport - Technical Guide, Criminal Justice Handbook Series, Vienna, 2020](#)

Online outreach by practitioners

- Practitioners need to be active online in order to stay in touch with their target audience. They need to take into consideration the possibilities video games and adjacent platforms offer as an **online outreach tool** to reach individuals at risk of radicalisation.
 - This can be facilitated by the development of practitioner guidelines and tools (like a **gaming “dictionary”**) that can be used to teach and train practitioners in not only knowing more about games and gaming but also how to become aware of problematic behaviour in this diverse field: what are signs to look for, how or by whom can they be detected and when, and how and who should take action when necessary?
- **Practitioners can organise gaming sessions and tournaments** during which they can talk or chat with people who join the session or tournament while gaming. **Gaming (including e-sports) can be used as a vehicle or tool to discuss issues** that young people might have, and thus also has great potential for P/CVE interventions.
 - Using gaming as a vehicle to discuss issues was also mentioned to be of potential benefit to use for people who have **mental health issues** such as autism spectrum disorder and might not engage in conversation as easily.
 - Tournaments with people from different backgrounds could help **build bridges** between them, as they can be a way of bringing forward similarities (gaming preferences). This of course requires a solid programmatic design and accompaniment from practitioners.
 - Through **cooperation with gaming platforms and companies**, the potential of gaming for P/CVE approaches can be further explored and strengthened. The Dutch police have such a collaboration in place for their weekly online talk shows and gaming sessions (also see the practice *Gaming with the police* below).
- Practitioners can also develop or make use of **“P/CVE games”**. These can be virtual reality games or games in which the player chooses their own adventure. The player makes choices that guide him / her through the game and which lead to a pathway of radicalisation or not. Playing such games helps to understand that the choices you make have consequences and these games can also be an example of how to find your way out once you’ve made a regrettable choice. An example of such a game is developed by DECOUNT and can be found in the Relevant practices box below.

Countering grooming efforts by extremists

In addition to preventive efforts (including the positive use of video games) to raise awareness and build resilience to grooming efforts made by violent extremists on video gaming and video gaming adjacent communications platforms, some recommendations were given to counter these grooming efforts. As practitioners cannot do this by themselves, these suggestions mostly concern cooperation with game providers to place all efforts in a comprehensive and cohesive strategy.

- **Cooperation between practitioners, policymakers and gaming platforms**, industry and companies to discuss the problem of grooming through video gaming and adjacent communications platforms. In order to have a comprehensive approach, it is important to discuss what **providers** can do, how they can be involved, what responsibilities they have, and what reporting options they have or can offer to flag harmful or disruptive behaviour — including the limitations of reporting.
- Using the **Redirect Method** ⁽¹²⁾ or other **tailored gaming ads to offer (mental health) support** upon detection of certain key words.

Follow-up

Some additional research is needed to gain more in-depth knowledge on grooming on video gaming (communications) platforms in the context of radicalisation. It would be interesting to know in particular to what extent the models that are applied for grooming in adjacent fields like child sexual abuse are applicable in this context, as well as whether people with mental vulnerabilities like ADHD and autism spectrum disorder are more

⁽¹²⁾ See: <https://redirectmethod.org/>

vulnerable to being targeted online by groomers for extremism. This could be further explored in a follow-up meeting within the RAN Mental Health Working Group.

Relevant practices

1. Gaming with the police

During the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020, the Dutch police started this pilot as a tool for the police to stay connected with young people. They currently have 21 teams of police officers who engage with young people at least once a week by playing popular video games (like FIFA, Fortnite and Call of Duty). Whilst playing, they talk about subjects that are brought forward by the young people themselves. Compared to the offline world, police are more accessible online for some young people, as group hierarchy isn't present in the online setting. The police can have one-on-one conversations with a youth and where necessary guide a troubled youth to other local practitioners.

2. DECOUNT – The Game

This video game developed as part of the Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP) DECOUNT interactively shows how teenagers and adolescents can get drawn into radical scenes and spectrums. Marco, Jasmin, Jens and Franziska find themselves in difficult situations and make decisions that end up driving them — or not driving them — towards radicalisation. The player has a say and helps them decide which paths to take. This video game reenacts radicalisation processes, stimulates critical thinking and is accompanied by a guide for use in youth centres and schools. More information can be found on their website: <https://www.extremismus.info/spiel-en>.

3. Reconquista Internet

In response to the extreme-right Discord channel *Reconquista Germanica*, which was most active in 2017 to disrupt the German elections by promoting an extreme-right ideology⁽¹³⁾, a civil society movement that is acting against hate speech on the internet has been founded: **Reconquista Internet**. Also organised through a Discord channel, the movement has been actively challenging hate speech on social media to make the internet more friendly again. After the creation of the initiative by a popular comic on German television in April 2018, the movement reached a peak of 60 000 people who joined the Discord channel⁽¹⁴⁾. Even though the Discord channel has recently been closed due to the reduced engagement, the organisation behind Reconquista Internet is continuing its efforts of providing a popular platform (hassmelden.de) for reporting online hate speech that is punishable by law and through awareness-raising activities. In March 2021 Reconquista Internet renamed themselves to [forum:neuland](https://forum.neuland.de).

⁽¹³⁾ Davey & Ebner, 2017: [The Fringe Insurgency. Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right](#)

⁽¹⁴⁾ See (in German): <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article176031426/Reconquista-Internet-Jan-Boehmermann-ruft-zu-Teilnahme-auf.html>

Further reading

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