Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms

Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures

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Practitioners

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Introduction

In recent years, particularly since the 2019 livestreamed attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, video games, gamer communities, and online plattforms made for gaming and related activities, have moved to the center of attention of policy, practice, and academia working on preventing and countering (violent) extremism (P/CVE). The EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator recently warned of the potential digital gaming environments hold in supporting various terrorist and extremist activities, including the radicalisation of young people.[1] The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has classified gaming (adjacent) platforms as 'hotbeds' for radicalisation.[2]

Similarly, the 2021 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) details that both video games and gaming platforms are increasingly used to propagate extremist ideology and disseminate propaganda, especially by right-wing extremist actors. TE-SAT also warns that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent increase in screentime contributed to a rise in opportunities for extremist actors to make contact with young people through gaming (adjacent) platforms.[3] It is believed that extremist actors seek to "capitalise on the massive, youthful audience and the gaming world's deep integration within pop culture." [4]

A recent RAN conclusion paper presented a typology of six ways gaming-related content can be used by extremist actors to further their goals. These included: production of video games, the modification of existing games, the use of in-game chat functions, the use of gaming (adjacent) platforms, gaming cultural references, and gamification.[5] The following paper is focused on the gaming (adjacent) platforms. However, it should be noted from the outset that the content posted on such platforms is often built on gaming cultural references and therefore both types overlap to some degree in the discussion that follows.

The first part of the paper discusses how traditional gaming (adjacent) platforms have contributed to extremist activities. Non-gaming platforms must be considered in addition to classic platforms focused on gaming. The paper will also explore how extremist individuals and organisations make strategic and organic use of the platforms. The second part focuses on opportunities for primary and secondary prevention on gaming (adjacent) platforms. As there is little experience of P/CVE measures on these platforms, the paper provides considerations and recommendations that should be taken into account when designing and implementing prevention efforts in these environments.

Extremist activity on gaming (adjacent) platforms

There is no clear definition of what constitutes a gaming platform, a gaming-adjacent platform, and platforms where gaming-related content appears. In the following, the major traditional gaming (adjacent) platforms, which were created either for gaming or for the gaming community and have been linked to extremist activities, are discussed. The focus will also be on the other selected platforms linked to gaming (adjacent) platforms and content, e.g. through cross-posting, and should be considered as the broader ecosystem of gaming-related content.

Traditional gaming (adjacent) platforms

Discord

Discord was created as an effective means of communication for gamers playing video games together. Users can create public or private servers with forums, chat functions, audio and video communication, to connect with like-minded gamers. Many of the private servers are self-moderated. Worldwide, Discord has almost 7 million servers, over 300 million registered accounts, and over 140 million monthly active users,

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(¹) EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 9066/20 Online gaming in the context of the fight against terrorism
(²) RAN, The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation
(³) Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report
(⁴) Tielemans, A Survey of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Activities Across the Gaming Environment
(⁵) RAN, Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives

who not only communicate about games, but have created servers to talk about every topic imaginable, from sports to politics and music.[6] While originally tailored to gamers specifically, it quickly developed into a social media platform used also by many individuals who are not avid gamers but simply want to chat to others about topics they are interested in. Discord is part of the digital far-right [7] ecosystem in various countries and hosts hundreds of private servers, in which neo-Nazi ideology, far-right narratives, and hateful memes are shared. Also, avid users of the now shut 8chan allegedly took their dark humour with them after migrating to Discord.[8] Most notably, some of the Charlottesville 'Unite the Right' rioters had connected and organised via Discord servers, but the platform has also been used by the Boogaloo Boys, QAnon supporters as well as other far-right groups and individuals.[9] The platform is also linked to inceldom as incels connect to each other via private servers to communicate but also share potentially harmful content.[10]

Despite various rounds of deplatforming, including against servers supporting QAnon, Boogaloo Boys, Atomwaffen Division, and other far-right groups, both far-right supporters and incels remain on the platform.[11] Users creating servers can add tags describing the main theme of the server, so that others can identify more easily which servers they might be interested in. There are currently 3 634 servers with the tag 'toxic', 272 servers tagged as 'right-wing', 182 tagged with 'hate', 222 tagged as 'Nazi', 177 tagged as 'homophobic' and 194 tagged with 'incel' on Discord despite the deplatforming efforts.[12] As these are only the publicly displayed tags, the number of servers with hateful content is likely to be much larger than these numbers indicate. Server descriptions sometimes specify who is allowed to join, e.g. "no minorities, no women, no black people" or indicate that a specific server is used for vetting purposes, such as "Fascist Friends Verification". The latter suggests that certain Discord servers are used as middlemen before adding new members to either more hidden private Discord servers or to groups on other platforms.

Steam

Steam is the largest digital distribution platform for PC games and had 120 million monthly active users in 2020.[13] In addition to games, Steam hosts recorded Let's Play videos, a forum for discussions, artwork, screenshots, guides, and a 'workshop' to present user modifications of popular games. Steam was implicated in the 2016 attack in Munich as the shooter engaged in Steam forums glorifying mass shootings and propagating anti-Muslim narratives.[14]

In 2019, an individual was arrested for posting threats against 'high value' Jewish targets and boasted "Wanna see a mass shooting with a body count of over 30 subhumans?" on Steam.[15] As research by the ADL shows, Steam seems to harbor a significant amount of right-wing extremists and white supremacists, who express their views in profile pictures, names, bio descriptions, and on discussion forums. Some, including a user with the numerical code 1488 (14 as a reference to "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children" and 88 as a reference to "Heil Hitler"), earned 'community ambassador' badges on Steam, signifying their high level of engagement with the Steam community. Users also celebrated the Oslo and Christchurch attackers, addressing the latter with praise such as "I saw you dominate in kebab removing simulator and I wanted to say well done". [16] Like Discord, Steam also partially operates like a social media site, with discussion forums and a high degree of user engagement. This allows discussions to move seamlessly between games and political ideology.

([6]) Statistics retrieved from : https://www.businessofapps.com/data/discord-statistics/
([7]) Far-right is used here as an umbrella term encompassing both the radical right and right-wing extremism.
([8]) Patterson, 8chan users are moving to Discord, where your kids are playing video games
Guhl et al, The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right
([9]) Farokhmanesh, White supremacists who used Discord to plan Charlottesville rally may soon lose their anonymity
Brewster, Revealed: FBI Raided Discord Chats Of 'Unite The Right' Leade
([10]) Morgensen & Helding Rand, Angry Young Men
([11]) Allyn, Group-Chat App Discord Says It Banned More Than 2,000 Extremist Communities
Alexander, Discord is purging alt-right, white nationalist and hateful servers
Clayton, Discord deleted thousands of 'violent extremist' servers last year
([12]) Numbers retrieved from disboard.org on May 22, 2021
([13]) Statistics retrieved from : https://www.statista.com/statistics/308330/number-stream-users/#:~:text=Steam%20had%20approximately%20120%20million,monthly%20active%20users%20in%202019.
([14]) Der Spiegel, The Growing Threat of Online-Bred Right-Wing Extremism
([15]) ADL, This is Not a Game: How Steam Harbors Extremists
([16]) Ibid.

Twitch

Twitch is a livestreaming platform, boasting 9.5 million active streamers. An average of 2 billion hours of streams is watched every month by users, of whom over 70 % are between the ages of 16 and 34.[17] While originally developed to host gaming streams, there are now streams on a wide range of issues, including outdoor activities, (e-)sports, cooking, arts and craft, music, animals, political talkshows, podcasts, and 'just chatting' streams.

Livestreaming is notoriously difficult to police, not only because it is happening live but because spoken work is less easily picked up by detection measures than, for instance, text, in which one can search for key words. What's more, streams may simply disappear after they end, making it almost impossible to analyse them unless watched in real-time. When the Halle perpetrator livestreamed his attack on Twitch in 2019, the video was taken down within 35 minutes resulting in 'only' around 2 200 people watching it.[18] However, the stream was downloaded and then spread on other platforms, including Twitter and in far-right Telegram groups, where it accumulated over 72 000 views in the first five days after the attack.[19] This shows the popularity of such streams even if they are quickly taken down from the original website.

In addition to the livestreamed attack, Twitch has been implicated in unwillingly financing right-wing extremist actors, who make money by streaming videogames while disseminating their political messages and spreading misinformation. This includes misinformation on COVID-19, masks, the 2020 US presidential election, and QAnon ideas but also Proud Boys influencer and far-right narratives. Far-right influencers also benefit from their Twitch popularity as viewers donate considerable amounts of money to them, in one case USD 84 000 for the influencer's birthday.[20]

DLive

DLive, which was created as an alternative to streaming on YouTube and Twitch, counted more than 125 000 active streamers, and reported 5 million monthly active users in April 2019.[21] Similar to Twitch, DLive does not only host gaming streams, but streams on a variety of topics as well as digital events and a 'community hub' to post other types of content. The platform is partially gamified as viewers are rewarded for continuous engagement with streamers with the chance to win Lemon, an in-platform currency, from a 'treasure chest'. Although some right-wing extremist and white supremacist streamers have been deplatformed,[22] DLive is still considered an 'extremist haven' and a 'cozy new home' for right-wing propaganda efforts. This is mainly due to the lenient content moderation, effectively allowing hate speech, antisemitism, glorification of Nazism, and calls for violence.[23] There is growing concern that young audiences could become radicalised after gaming streams caught their attention and well-versed far-right and right-wing extremist streamers then slowly take them down an extremist rabbit hole.[24]

Identitarian Martin Sellner, for instance, has almost 12 000 followers on DLive and streams regularly. He also uses DLive to advertise his other channels on Trovo, Telegram, Gab and others as well as asking for donations from his followers. The Southern Poverty Law Center found that several lead figures of the far-right from the US and Europe are making considerable amounts of money with their streams on DLive, some allegedly making hundreds of thousands of euro.[25] The platform has been linked to various cases of misinformation, extremism, and violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the run up to the US elections in 2020, far-right streamers spread conspiracy narratives about the virus and political events via DLive.[26] QAnon was and continues to be another popular streaming topic.[27] Consequently, DLive also played a lead

(17) Statistics retrieved from : https://www.businessofapps.com/data/twitch-statistics/
(18) BBC, Germany shooting: 2,200 people watched on Twitch
(19) Counter Extremism Project, Extremist Content Online: Twitch Streamed German Synagogue Shooting Proliferating on Telegram
(20) Browning, Extremists find a financial lifeline on Twitch
Grayson, Twitch Isn't Overwhelmed With Far-Right Extremists, But It Does Have A Big Misinformation Problem
Gonzalez, QAnon believers and anti-maskers build new audiences at Twitch, report says
(21) DLive, DLive Daily Active Users Grow Six-Fold in New Report
(22) Cohen, White nationalists are moving from YouTube to DLive
(23) D'Anastico, A Game Livestreaming Site Has Become an Extremist Haven
Andrews & Pym, The Websites Sustaining Britain's Far-Right Influencers
(24) Keierleber, How white supremacists recruit teen culture warriors in gaming communities
(25) Gais & Haiden, Extremists Are Cashing in on a Youth-Targeted Gaming Website
(26) Bergengruen, How Far-Right Personalities and Conspiracy Theorists Are Cashing in on the Pandemic Online
(27) Kaplan, DLive may have cracked down on some extremists following the Capitol attack, but QAnon supporters remain on the platform.

role before and during the 6 January 2021 storming of the US Capitol building. Some perpetrators streamed the event live and engaged the audience watching their stream, who sent in donations and voiced their suggestios to "smash the window" or "hang all the Congressmen". This resulted in congressional scrutiny of DLive.[28]

PlayStation & other consoles

Over 100 million users connect, communicate, and play with each other through Sony's PlayStation Network (PSN).[29] Users can form group chats or talk to others in real time through voice devices. It was suspected that the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attack may have used PSN to organise their coordinated action while avoiding detection.[30] The PlayStation voice communication is believed by some to be even more difficult to monitor than private chats on WhatsApp as audio communication leaves less evidence that can be traced by the security agencies. Similar issues may occur on other consoles such as Xbox Live.[31] Consoles can also be used to store extremist content as exemplified by the court case against a 14-year-old Austrian, who allegedly downloaded bomb-making plans and stored them on his PlayStation.[32]

Other platforms to consider

Gaming forums

Next to the gaming adjacent platforms discussed, there are a multitude of more or less specialised gaming forums.[33] For instance, on Reddit, there are over 30 million members discussing gaming related content in r/gaming and on the MMORPG forum, there are 1.3 million comments in the general 'Pub' discussion forum alone and hundreds of thousands in other parts of the forum. The Minecraft forum has over 5 million members and hundreds of thousands of users chat daily about their favorite Ubisoft games in the company's own forum. The list of gaming forums available online is long but the basic take away is the following. Every day millions of users discuss thousands of games in an ever-growing number of gaming and gaming-related forums. While none of these forums in particular have been linked to extremist activities, it is almost certain that there is some overlap between the users of such forums and radicalised individuals. The prevalence of extremist content on these platforms, however, is difficult to estimate. It's also not easy to determine whether they have been used for the dissemination of propaganda or recruitment efforts. Nevertheless, in theory these forums are an efficient avenue to reach potentially millions of people interested in gaming.

YouTube

In addition to the more specialised streaming sites such as Twitch and DLive, there is also the possibility to stream and upload gaming-related content on YouTube, which is the largest video platform in the world averaging one billion hours of content watched per day.[34] This includes livestreams with the opportunity for viewers to comment in real-time as well as pre-recorded content or recordings of livestreams.

There are multiple opportunities for extremist streamers. Firstly, livestreams, even on a major platform such as YouTube, are difficult to moderate in real time. This is especially true if the video content is disguised as a cooking or gaming channel and only the spoken word reveals a certain political ideology. Considering that channels such as *Baklava Küche* (Baklava Kitchen), pretending to be a cooking channel but in reality communicating neo-Nazi ideology [35], are still available on YouTube, gaming content could be used similarly to hide extremist messages behind a different activity. Secondly, posting content on a mainstream platform

(28) D'Anastico, A Game Livestreaming Site Has Become an Extremist Haven
Kelly, DLive is under congressional scrutiny over Capitol attack
(29) Statistics retrieved from : https://www.statista.com/statistics/272639/number-of-registered-accounts-of-playstation-network/
(30) Day, Why terrorists love PlayStation 4
(31) Tassi, How ISIS Terrorists May Have Used PlayStation 4 To Discuss And Plan Attacks [Updated]
(32) Reuters, Teenager in Austrian 'Playstation' terrorism case gets two years
(33) See https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/forums/ and https://blog.feedspot.com/gaming_forums/ for popular gaming forums
(34) Statistics retrieved from : https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/about/press/#:~:text=One%20billionhours%20watched%20daily,day%2C%20generating%20billions%20of%20views.
(35) Forchtner & Tomic, Kalashnikov and Cooking-spoon: Neo-Nazism, Veganism and a Lifestyle Cooking Show on YouTube.

such as YouTube, even if subsequently removed, could increase the streamers' reach and potentially encourage some viewers to follow the streamer to a less regulated platform such as DLive. One can also imagine cross-posting of recorded Twitch or DLive livestreams on YouTube to increase popularity, similar to streams being posted on Telegram.[36] Thirdly, gaming content directly related to extremist organisations is available on the platform. For instance, for both for Hezbollah's video game series *Special Forces* and *Heimatdefender: Rebellion*, a game associated with the German-speaking branch of the Identitarian movement[37], one can find Let's Play videos freely available on YouTube. This is especially disturbing considering that *Heimatdefender* was placed on Germany's index of dangerous material. Overall, the link between gaming-adjacent platforms and YouTube is twofold. Firstly, gaming content such as Let's Play videos of extremist games can be posted directly to the platform. Secondly, content made on gaming-adjacent platforms, most notably streams, can be cross-posted to YouTube to increase reach. Most importantly, this link could also develop with other video-based platforms and is not necessarily unique to YouTube.

Chanboards and image-boards

Chanboards and image-based forums such as 4chan, 8kun (previously 8chan), Endchan and others have also been linked to both gaming-related content and extremism and should, therefore, be included in the wider eco-system of relevant gaming (adjacent) platforms. While precise user statistics are hard to find, data suggests the typical user is a young male between the ages of 16 and 34, who is interested in video games, technology and animes.[38] At one point, the now banned 8chan accumulated over 5 000 posts per hour, making it a lively and popular platform before it was banned [39], and 4chan attracted around 27 700 000 unique visitors per month in 2020.[40] Chanboards were the main medium of expression for misogynistic attacks such as #gamergate from actors in the 'manosphere', some of them closely linked to far-right actors.[41] Chanboards have also been implicated in the spread of racist, antisemitic, and extremist narratives,[42] often expressed through 'humorous' memes[43] but also through virtual leaderboards of right-wing extremist perpetrators and users expressing the desire to 'beat' an attacker's 'score'.[44] Multiple perpetrators, including the ones in Christchurch, El Paso, Bærum, and Halle, posted comments or manifestos on chanboards before their attacks.[45] The Halle attackers manifesto also contained several references to chan-culture and gaming, including 'achievements' such as "Crusty Kebab: Burn down a Mosque".[46] This exemplifies the close link between chan-culture, gaming cultural references, and gamification and the relationship between gaming-related content and the glorification of violent actions such platforms.

Gaming-related content on non-gaming platforms

Theoretically, any platform could be turned into a gaming-adjacent platform if enough users post and consume gaming content there, although the classical gaming-adjacent platforms have been designed specifically for the gaming community. There is considerable overlap between content posted on the classical gaming-adjacent platforms and other social media networks. In addition gaming-adjacent platforms are increasingly turning into social media sites, where users discuss topics unrelated to gaming. This further blurs the distinction between gaming-adjacent platforms and other social media sites. As discussed, fringe and extremist actors, for instance, stream on Twitch and then post the recordings on Telegram, increasing their reach and archiving the streams should they be removed from the streaming platform.[47] Once downloaded, streams could reappear anywhere, on any platform, and reach users who do not frequently visit Twitch or DLive. Instagram also allows livestreaming, which is difficult to police in real time, as well as longer

(36) Counter Extremism Project, Extremist Content Online: Twitch Streamed German Synagogue Shooting Proliferating on Telegram
(37) Schlegel, No Child's Play: The Identitarian Movement's 'Patriotic' Video Game
(38) Gonzalez, 8chan, 8kun, 4chan, Endchan: What you need to know
(39) Keen, After 8chan
(40) Keen et al, Memetic Irony And The Promotion Of Violence Within Chan Cultures, p.8
(41) Nagle, *Kill All Normies*
Crawford, Chan Culture and Violent Extremism
(42) Brace, The Role of the Chans in the Far-Right Online Ecosystem
(43) RAN, It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour
(44) Schlegel, Jumanji Extremism?, p.15
(45) Keen et al, Memetic Irony And The Promotion Of Violence Within Chan Cultures, p.8
(46) Ibid.
(47) Counter Extremism Project, Extremist Content Online: Twitch Streamed German Synagogue Shooting Proliferating on Telegram

videos posted via IGTV. This presents yet another opportunity to cross-post content in order to increase reach. It is also becoming more likely that smaller platforms could suddenly become go-to platforms for the posting or cross-posting of gaming-related content and other propaganda material when larger platforms engage in efforts to deplatform such actors, posing significant moderation challenges.

For instance, VidMe only had six employees, none of whom spoke Arabic, when Daesh took over the platform in 2014-15.[48] While Daesh videos could be identified as propaganda relatively easy, the same may not be true for gaming-related content and if smaller platforms lack the necessary subcultural knowledge to identify such content as related to extremism, removal and moderation could take much longer than it did in the VidMe case.

Overall, it is easy to discern a clear link with two other categories in the RAN typology: gaming cultural references and gamification.[49] Like gaming streams, both could appear on any platform. Discussions about games, the use of gaming language and references, the appropriation of images from *Call of Duty* and other games in propaganda videos, dark humored gaming memes, and gamified propaganda do not have to stay on gaming-adjacent platforms and chanboards but can spread to the wider ecosystem. For instance, while gamification has often been observed on Discord servers, it could also appear on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook [50] and there is no barrier to discussing gaming cultural references on other platforms, exemplified by the famous tweet of a Daesh recruiter: "You can sit at home and play Call of Duty or you can come and respond to the real call of duty… the choice is yours".[51] Gaming-related content can easily spread to other platforms, effectively turning sections of such platforms into gaming-adjacent digital environments. Therefore, it is not only traditional gaming (adjacent) platforms that should be considered in the discussion of extremist gaming-related content but the broader ecosystem of platforms on whichsuch content is posted must be taken into account and be constantly updated as gaming-related content emerges on various (new) platforms.

Key Lessons

1. There is extremist content on almost all gaming (adjacent) platforms, from streams to dark humored memes and calls to violence. A substantial amount of this content is gaming-related.

2. These platforms are not inherently dangerous. They are used by extremists like any other digital platform. Also, the vast majority of content on gaming (adjacent) platforms is not related to extremism.

3. Gaming (adjacent) platforms often operate partially like social media sites. They encourage discussion among users and on livestreams on various topics, including political ideology. Fringe and extremist actors use these platforms to communicate with one another and potential new recruits, often expressing their views through their profiles and posts.

4. Content moderation, especially of livestreams, is difficult to achieve in real-time, especially when livestreams are conducted in languages other than English.

5. To gain a holistic view, the entire ecosystem of gaming-related content across all platforms must be considered rather than only traditional gaming (adjacent) platforms. Content originating on gaming (adjacent) platforms is often cross-posted or re-appears on other platforms, increasing its reach and the difficulty to delete such pieces of content.

(48) Singer & Brooking, *LikeWar*, p.247
(49) RAN, Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives, p.3
(50) RAN, The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE, p.9
(51) Schlegel, Can You Hear Your Call of Duty? The Gamification of Radicalization and Extremist Violence

Strategic and organic use of gaming (adjacent) platforms

The logical questions that follow from the presence of extremist actors and propaganda content on gaming (adjacent) platforms is how this presence is directed and whether content is disseminated top-down. If this is not the case, it could be that it occurs naturally and content appears on the platforms in a bottom-up manner. As in so many other contexts, both instances can be observed. However, it must be determined whether, in such a fragmented digital environment and within a trend towards less formal organisation of extremist activity, one can actually speak of top-down and bottom-up use of platforms. It may be more accurate to speak of strategic and organic use of gaming (adjacent) platforms.

Strategic use

The presence of far-right and right-wing extremist influencers on platforms such as DLive, the placement of extremists' own games such as *Heimatdefender* on big platforms like Steam, and the existence of Discord servers dedicated to groups like Atomwaffen Division (now deplatformed), suggests there is a strategic element to extremist presence on gaming (adjacent) platforms. Firstly, it increases reach and attention. Advertising for *Heimatdefender* on Steam generated a lot of attention for the game even before it was released. This is likely to have increased downloads of the game despite Steam ultimately refusing to host it. Its mere presence can also support the reach and attention paid to extremist influencers on such platforms, who can be found, contacted, and spread their message to potentially large audiences on these platforms. As discussed, there are often millions of users on each platform and it is strategically useful for extremist actors to disseminate their messages through such popular channels.

Secondly, extremist actors often use multiple platforms simultaneously for different purposes and as a back-up plan should they be deplatformed. The goal is to direct as many users as possible to as many channels as possible to ensure that being deplatformed from one site does not lead to a substantial drop in audience numbers. Therefore, influencers such as Identitarian Martin Sellner, use their DLive accounts in part to advertise their presence on other platforms. Therefore, some of the gaming (adjacent) platforms may be used simply because such actors have not been deplatformed from these sites (yet). With increasing pressure on the companies operating (social) media sites to deplatform extremist actors, gaming (adjacent) spaces have become a logical refuge.

Thirdly, Discord in particular also holds the benefit of private servers. Extremists can use these to communicate and organise without much outside interference since many servers are self-moderated. Here, internal communication as well as potential recruitment can take place and extremist content or dark humoured memes can be freely shared without drawing backlash. However, as we have seen, there have been substantial efforts by Discord to delete servers with obvious connections to extremist organisations. If Discord is still used extensively for in-group communication, it is done more secretly than previously. However, some servers remain overtly tagged with 'Nazi' and similar terms.

Apart from a mere strategic presence, the content disseminated on gaming (adjacent) platforms can also be strategic. As a recent RAN paper on the strategic use of humour by far-right actors argues, extremists and their movements need to be "entertaining and participatory"[52] to be successful in the digital sphere. Part of the strategic appeal of gaming (adjacent) platforms is that they are both. Users meet on these platforms to play and speak about entertaining leisure activities. Anyone interested can participate in the discussion on a livestream, post a funny meme, or comment on gaming artwork shared by other users. It is therefore the ideal environment for an entry point into extremist ideology expressed through dark, 'funny' memes, gaming references, and 'politically-incorrect' messages.

As parts of the gaming culture suffer from misogyny, exclusion of minorities and women, expressions of violence and hate, it is easy to blend in to avoid detection. It is even also easier to build on the problematic content already existing in some of the gaming spaces to 'meet them where they are'. This means building on existing grievances and modes of communication of potential new recruits to facilitate radicalisation processes. In addition, gaming-related content has a large popcultural appeal as it is familiar to so many, especially young men.[53] Therefore, like other popcultural references, using gaming-related content can

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(52) RAN, It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour, p.4
(53) Schlegel, Jumanji Extremism ?

increase the appeal of extremist propaganda both within gaming spaces and beyond, making it strategically useful to employ such references.

There is also concern over grooming tactics used by extremist actors on gaming (adjacent) platforms and chats. A recent RAN paper on the issue warned that groomers could play with other users, talk to them during gameplay, and then try to steer the conversation towards feelings of anger or other grievences, which they could then seek to exploit in further conversations, potentially facilitating radicalisation processes. Extremist actors may also appeal to a gamer's feelings of loneliness, insecurities and other potential risk factors they uncover while playing video games with them.[54] Such grooming activities could take place via in-game chats, but also on Discord servers, through voice communication during video game play, or on livestreaming platforms such as Twitch. Importantly, it is believed that far-right actors are more likely to use humorous content and target big groups when seeking to engage in grooming, whereas Islamists may take a more individualised approach to grooming.[55] This belief, however, needs to be supported empirically by future research efforts.

Organic use

Gaming (adjacent) platforms are also used in a bottom-up or organic manner by individuals associated with extremist beliefs.

Firstly, there is an overlap between gamers and radicalised individuals. With an estimated 2.5 billion gamers worldwide, it would be very surprising if there were no radicalised individuals who play video games and enjoy communicating with others through gaming (adjacent) platforms. However, there is no evidence to suggest there is a causal link between enjoying video games and the risk of becoming radicalised. Nevertheless, because radicalised individuals are present on these platforms and may express their ideological beliefs while communicating with others, the overlap leads to an organic use of gaming (adjacent) platforms by such actors.

Secondly, as suggested above, parts of the gaming community are grappling with issues such as misogyny, male supremacism, hateful and antisemitic memes, a counter-movement to 'political correctness', and both references to and calls for violence.[56] A recent ADL report, for instance, found that while the majority of gamers emphasise positive aspects of gaming, a majority has also witnessed or been the victim of harassment, doxxing, racism, and hate against LGBTQ+ communities. Nearly a quarter of players reported exposure to far-right and white supremacist ideology.[57] Allowing such content due to a lack of moderation on gaming (-related) platforms, may facilitate the participation of radicalised indivdiuals in such spaces.[58]

Radicalised individuals may take to gaming spaces where such modes of communication occur not for strategic reasons but simply because they feel that their views are supported in such spaces. This may not only make them more confident in their views but could potentially facilitate radicalisation processes as a social collective and perceived in-group applauding calls to violence, for instance, may be believed to also support real life action. Because violent perpetrators are often praised in such communities, some individuals may feel emboldened to take action.

Thirdly, in some recent attacks, one could observe such an interplay between parts of digital communities and extremist perpetrators, who are emboldened by what they perceive as a supportive in-group and who then 'deliver' to them, e.g. in the form of livestreaming their attacks or the posting of manifestos. Even lone actors are usually not alone. They have or perceive themselves to be part of a supportive (digital) community.[59] The livestreams of the Christchurch and Halle attacks stem, in part, from the perpetrators' embeddedness in gaming (adjacent) communities, familiar with the visual style of both first person shooter games and 'Let's Play' videos, which were mimicked in the streams.[60]

([54]) RAN, Digital Grooming Tactics on Video Gaming & Video Gaming Adjacent Platforms: Threats and Opportunities
([55]) Ibid., p.4
([56]) Nagle, *Kill all Normies*
Won & Lewis, Male Supremacism, Borderline Content, and Gaps in Existing Moderation Efforts
DeCook, The Issue Isn't Incels. It's Racist Misogyny
([57]) ADL, Free to Play? Hate, Harassment and Positive Social Expériences in Online Games
([58]) RAN, Digital Terrorist and 'Lone Actors'
([59]) Ibid.
([60]) Schlegel, Jumanji Extremism ?

It is unlikely that anyone ordered them to stream their attacks or that they did so for purely strategic reasons. Rather, they used the tools they were familiar with from the gaming space and appealed to their in-group on chanboards and other platforms, who often praised right-wing perpetrators before, by giving them the ultimate immersive experience in the attack through a livestream. The Halle attacker's manifesto also specifically uses chan-cultural references as well as gamification elements such as 'achievements', underlining that he saw himself as part of this community and 'spoke' to his peers through the manifesto.

As discussed, multiple attackers posted their manifestos on chanboards, giving their perceived in-group a 'heads-up' as to what was about to happen.[61] The Christchurch perpetrator infamously leaked his plans to the community by posting "Well lads, it's time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post" shortly before he began his attack [62]. Therefore, many lone actor attackers seem to perceive themselves as part of such online communities and then deliver content back to these communities through manifestos, livestreams and comments.

Key Lessons

1. Gaming (adjacent) platforms and related sites are used both strategically and organically by extremist actors.

2. Little regulation, a potentially large reach, and the possibility to tap into existing modes of communication make gaming (adjacent) spaces attractive for extremists.

3. Lone actors in particular can feel at home in such communities and seek to appeal to them by 'rewarding' them with the posting of manifestos and livestreaming of attacks.

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(61) Keen et al, Memetic Irony And The Promotion Of Violence Within Chan Cultures, p.8
(62) Crawford, Chan Culture and Violent Extremism

Primary and secondary prevention on gaming (adjacent) platforms

Currently, few primary or secondary prevention interventions take place on gaming (adjacent) platforms. In the following, potential approaches and important considerations for the development and implementation of future programmes within gaming spaces are discussed. Considering the limited evidence of the effectiveness of P/CVE interventions in the gaming space, these should be read as suggestions rather than firm recommendations.

Subcultural knowledge

The language on gaming (adjacent) platforms pertaining to dark humoured memes, subcultural codes, and gaming references as well as the specific tone of each platform are usually not easy to understand intuitively. Similar to implementing P/CVE measures in other contexts, preventative efforts on gaming (adjacent) platforms will require comprehensive subcultural knowledge. Without such knowledge, one runs the risk of being immediately identified as part of the out-group and that content posted will simply not be appealing to the gaming audience. In this context, it must be noted that there is not *the* gaming culture and gamers do not present a homogenous target audience. While general subcultural knowledge of gaming references is the basis, each platform and, depending on the context, each discussion on a particular game may have its own conventions, codes, and tone. Part of the challenge is that content may not be easily identified as making reference to extremist narratives, as discussed in a recent RAN paper on the use of humor in far-right memes and related content.[63] On the other hand, there may also be overtly violent references pertaining to particular games without any connection to offline hate or extremist narratives. Distinguishing violent gaming culture references from other violent and hateful comments will only be possible for those with sufficient knowledge of both. Ultimately, only deep knowledge of such humorous codes as well as gaming references and conventions will ensure that prevention measures have a chance to be successful in gaming communities.

As a starting point, P/CVE organisations may consult with those who have intimate knowledge of a particular platform or game because they are part of the gaming community. Considering that there are 2.5 billion gamers in the world, it is almost certain that there will already be P/CVE professionals with such insider knowledge working in the field, i.e. it is very likely that organisations already have access to subcultural knowledge, although they may not be aware of it. Encouraging these individuals to support P/CVE measures on gaming (adjacent) platforms will be paramount for the success of any prevention efforts in the gaming space. There are also other organisations and individuals to consult with before developing and implementing prevention measures on gaming (adjacent) platforms. Academics who research either gaming in general or the use of gaming-related content by extremist actors or related associations, such as the Digital Games Research Association,[64] may help with the development of robust theories for prevention programmes in gaming spaces. Other organisations that could potentially support P/CVE organisations in gaining relevant subcultural knowledge are the International eSports Federation,[65] the Fair Play Alliance,[66] Games for Change,[67] the Game Changer project from TechSoup,[68] and Keinen Pixel den Faschisten (No pixel for the fascists).[69] Consulting with and making use of knowledge acquired by other organisations connected to the gaming space can support primary and secondary prevention providers in gaining the necessary subcultural knowledge to run successful campaigns on gaming (adjacent) platforms.

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(63) RAN, It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour
(64) http://www.digra.org/
(65) https://iesf.org/
(66) https://fairplayalliance.org/
(67) https://www.gamesforchange.org/
(68) https://gamechangereu.org/
(69) https://keinenpixeldenfaschisten.de/

Identifying at-risk gamers

It would be ideal if at-risk individuals could be identified on gaming (adjacent) platforms, approached, and then directed to appropriate support systems. A recent RAN conclusion paper advises that the use of risk assessment tools and self-harm assessment tools should be explored in digital environments to help identify users who could be ready to take offline action. In addition, warning signs such as expressing an urgent need to act and an existential threat to the in-group or searching for manuals to build weapons, should always be kept in mind when engaging on digital platforms.[70] However, identifying at-risk gamers is very difficult on gaming (adjacent) platforms. Firstly, livestreams are often deleted after the stream ends, making it difficult to trace users posting disturbing content in the chats. On Discord, many servers are not open to the public and it is unfeasible for P/CVE actors to join every single one of the almost 7 million servers on the platform. Therefore, it will be difficult to gain access to the necessary material to judge whether individual users are at-risk. Secondly, references to violence are abundant in environments where violent games are discussed. It can be challenging to identify when a comment is referring to violence in a gaming context or uses the violent gaming content to comment on offline events. Thirdly, gaming communities grapple with problems such as shitposting, trolling, dark humour and misogyny.

In some communities the tone may be generally disturbing but not indicative of any offline risk. In these settings, comments of those who are at risk may blend in with the large amount of disturbing content, making identification at the individual level extremely hard. None of this should deter practitioners from seeking to identify at-risk gamers but they should be aware of the specific challenges these environments pose. One potential avenue to take could be raising awareness for existing family support measures or programmes advising worried family and friends of potentially at-risk individuals and specifically including references to gaming environments or highlighting possible ways of facilitating a healthy engagement with gaming and gaming spaces.[71] This, however, is only advisable when organisations possess enough subcultural knowledge of these spaces to adequately support families or when there is a cooperation with actors who already provide support for gamers and their family members.

Supporting bottom-up counter-speech

While there have been very few professional measures against extremism, there have been some incidences where parts of the gaming community have pushed back against extremists on their platforms. For instance, when the Identitarian game *Heimatdefender: Rebellion* was advertised on Steam, parts of the German-speaking community resisted. The game was flagged by hundreds of users before it was even released and, in the end, Steam decided not to host the game on its platform at all. Such bottom-up counter-speech efforts can be supported by P/CVE actors similar to the support of other grassroot counter-speech movements offline and online, e.g. the YouthCAN project run by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue empowering young people to engage in counter-speech.[72] Similarly, positive influencers on gaming (adjacent) platforms could be supported by P/CVE organisations in their efforts to promote inclusion, tolerance, and democracy on their platforms. Influencers could receive training or be made aware of the possibility to reach out to counter-extremism experts when they notice potentially harmful content or potentially extreme users on their platforms. In addition, it may be fruitful to work with gaming (adjacent) platforms directly and find productive ways to alert users to harmful content as well as encourage them to flag extremist content or hateful comments they come across while spending time on the platform.

Becoming part of the gaming (adjacent) spaces

In addition to supporting bottom-up counter-speech, P/CVE organisations could also seek to become part of gaming (adjacent) platforms. Just being actively present, for instance by establishing accounts posting about Exit work or spreading positive, alternative messages as a counterweight to extremist or conspiratorial messages may help to increase awareness of extremists on the platforms and shift the tone on gaming

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(70) RAN, Digital Terrorist and 'Lone Actors'
(71) https://www.healthygamer.gg/
https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-gaming/
(72) https://www.isdglobal.org/youth-civil-activism-network-youthcan/

(adjacent) platforms. Such presence may also motivate other users to reach out to P/CVE accounts and alert them to users they perceive to be radicalised or at risk. In addition to creating own accounts, there are also other ways to become part of gaming spaces without necessarily engaging in active prevention work. There could, for instance, be targeted advertising employed with a variation of the Redirect Method,[73] to address users who are members of Discord servers tagged with 'Nazi' or similar tags. Another possibility would be the participation on existing channels, e.g. appearing in talkshows on Twitch to establish a visible but relatively low profile presence in these spaces and test how users react.

Using gaming (adjacent) platforms as communication channels

Many gaming (adjacent) platforms are not only used for gaming but similar to social media networks and for discussions on all kinds of issues. Therefore, approaches that have been tried in other digital communication environments are likely to be a fruitful starting point to think about the use of gaming (adjacent) platforms as communication channels. For instance, streamers could be asked for permission for P/CVE actors to be present in the chats during livestreams and to participate in the conversations. While this requires presence in real-time, it could help to establish communication between the account used by the prevention provider and other users on the platform. Importantly, conversations do not have to and probably should not start with disclosing that one is there to counter extremism on the streaming platform but rather to participate in the flow of the conversation. This could also be used to gain more knowledge about the atmosphere and language used on the platform before implementing any projects on the platform in question.

According to a recent report published by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), there is an increase in engagement from P/CVE actors with online audiences but largely in an ad hoc and rather uncoordinated manner. However, the importance of digital youth work generally and digital outreach for P/CVE is likely to increase further in the coming years.[74] Initial projects exist, such as the German streetwork@online,[75] but more training in digital youth work is needed in the P/CVE field. Knowledge on such digital outreach could also support prevention measures on gaming (adjacent) platforms. While games may be part of the conversation or could help to initiate conversations, digital engagement could be multi-faceted and pertaining to a variety of topics audiences discuss on these platforms. The German Amadeu Antonio Foundation has begun with a pilot project using digital outreach on Steam and Twitch but it is too early to draw conclusions or evaluate the effectiveness.[76] Nevertheless, it seems promising to consider such digital outreach on gaming (adjacent) platforms for future prevention projects.

Using gaming to open conversations

Similar to extremists using gaming and discussions about gaming to open the conversation with individuals, they could potentially draw towards a process of radicalisation, primary and secondary prevention could employ gaming to engage in positive conversations with audiences interested in gaming. The Dutch police, for instance, has implemented a pilot project "Gamen met de Politie" (Gaming with the police), in which gamers have the chance to play various games – from *Fifa* to *Fortnite*, *Call of Duty* and *Mario Kart* - with police officers.[77] Rather than declaring the project as aimed at preventing or countering extremism and pushing conversations on this issue, the police officers are first and foremost speaking to the gamers about the game and everyday situations that come up in the discussion naturally. As such, gaming serves as an easy and positive way to start a conversation. From this positive interaction, it then becomes easier to follow up on potentially more controversial topics.

In addition, as suggested by a recent RAN Spotlight, eSports could be an avenue for opening conversations with gaming communities.[78] Offline sport has long been recognised as a way to support prevention efforts as it provides positive interactions, increases resilience, promotes social inclusion, and empowers participants.[79] There are similar mechanisms at play in online competitions. Also, eSports can provide

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(73) https://moonshotteam.com/redirect-method/
(74) Lewis & Marsden: Countering Violent Extremism Interventions: Contemporary Research, p.31
(75) https://www.streetwork.online/ [in German]
(76) https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/projekte/good-gaming-well-played-democracy/ [in German]
(77) https://gamenmetdepolitie.nl/ [in Dutch]; https://www.instagram.com/gamenmetdepolitie/?hl=de [in Dutch]
(78) RAN Spotlight, Online Gaming Platforms, p.11f
(79) UNODC, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sport

positive interaction, a feeling of unity through collaboration, and the experience that a common interest can transcend cultural barriers. The Spotlight calls on practitioners to use the knowledge accumulated in offline sport projects and design eSports programmes to mirror what has worked in the offline sphere. These programmes may then provide a positive entry point into interactions with communities similar to the project organised by the Dutch police.

There are also other ways to start a conversation via gaming. For instance, it could easily be imagined that a Twitch channel or 'Let's Play' videos discussing and playing positive games with a political or social message, such as *Through the Darkest of Times*,[80] could be part of a primary prevention project seeking to establish a line of communication to streaming audiences. Any P/CVE measures acknowledging gaming as a positive force and games' contribution to fun and wellbeing are likely to be more effective than approaches suggesting that gaming in itself or gaming (adjacent) platforms are dangerous and audiences should be 'protected' from such influences.

Using serious games

Not all games are aimed at pure entertainment. There are 'serious games' developed to be educational and transmit important lessons to players. Such games are used in a variety of fields, including healthcare and military training, and have also been suggested as a tool to teach knowledge on terrorism and counter-terrorism.[81] The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) at The Hague, for instance, released a serious game exploring the aftermath of the 2011 attack in Norway.[82] The Game Changer project from TechSoup has also developed serious games on various topics[83] and there is an increasing amount of apps and games aimed at curtailing misinformation.[84] Serious games promoting ideas against extremism could be advertised on gaming (adjacent) platforms. These could be streamed on channels established by P/CVE actors, or could be promoted with the help of established streamers discussing and playing such games on their own channels, potentially with contributions from P/CVE actors in the stream.

Gaming references & 'nerd culture'

It is unsurprising that gamers find not only gaming (adjacent) platforms but also gaming cultural references appealing. Using such references, both on gaming (adjacent) platforms and beyond, may help to establish access to gaming communities as an audience for other P/CVE measures such as alternative or counter-narratives. Gamers as an audience are not confined to gaming (adjacent) platforms, they will also watch YouTube videos, scroll through Instagram, and chat on other platforms. But they may find gaming references and gaming aesthetics especially appealing if they are avid gamers. Therefore, using such references and appropriating the visual styles of popular games can help to make P/CVE content more appealing to audiences who enjoy gaming. For instance, video-based narrative campaigns could copy the visual style of popular videogames similar to Daesh using a first-person shooter perspective and actual footage from Call of Duty in some of its propaganda videos.[85] The appropriation of such aesthetics does not necesssarily need to involve violence. The Austrian narrative campaign Jamal al-Khatib,[86] for instance, appropriates certain stylistic elements featuring prominently in the Assassin's Creed video games, including a hooded protagonist, shots on rooftops, and over-the-shoulder-shots used in many video games to increase the player's feeling of presence in the events displayed on screen. Videos could also appropriate comic styles, such as found in the Super Mario Brothers games. Considering that nostalgic retro games are popular with many gamers and that extremist actors have also used such retro visual styles in their propaganda efforts, such as the Heimatdefender game,[87] it is not unreasonable to believe that such visual styles may be appealing to gamers. Narrative campaigns using such appropriation of visual styles found in gaming could be placed on gaming (adjacent) platforms but also on other popular sites such as YouTube or Instagram as it is likely that those familiar with gaming aesthetics will also frequent these platforms.

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(80) https://paintbucket.de/en/ttdot
(81) Xiang, Bridging the Gap Between Counterterrorism Research and Practice Through Game-Based Learning
(82) http://icct.nl/flashpoints-game/
(83) https://gamechangereu.org/play/
(84) Plaum, Fighting the infodemic, one game at a time
(85) Schlegel, Jumanji Extremism ?
(86) See https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/content/jamal-al-khatib-%E2%80%93-my-path_en
(87) Schlegel, No Child's Play: The Identitarian Movement's 'Patriotic' Video Game

In addition, gamers have many other identities and interests aside from being a gamer, exemplified by the variety of topics discussed on Discord servers. This includes, but is not limited to, 'nerd culture' topics, most notably anime (almost 140 000 servers), manga (15 000 servers), KPop (over 10 000 servers), memes (over 50 000 servers), roleplay (over 98 000 servers), and fantasy (over 10 000 servers).[88] As discussed, it may be difficult to use gaming-related content without the sufficient subcultural knowledge. However, if there is knowledge on other popular topics such as anime, starting conversations about 'nerd culture' topics could help establish a channel of communication even when the knowledge of gaming is less pronounced in the P/CVE project team. In addition, it may also be possible to appropriate aesthetics usually found in animes or KPop videos for alternative and counter-narrative campaigns, which could then be disseminated on gaming (-adjacent) platforms and beyond. Given the large amount of servers dedicated to these topics, the chances that such content would be clicked on when placed in the appropriate spaces, can be regarded as relatively high. By acknowledging other prominent topics discussed on gaming (adjacent) platforms and utilising the full breadth of diversity on such platforms, P/CVE content without references to gaming could be used to make an impact in such spaces.

What not to do

As with any other primary or secondary prevention measure, there are caveats to be considered before implementing P/CVE measures on gaming (adjacent) platforms as well as assumptions and actions that should clearly be avoided.

1. **Viewing gaming as a problem to be solved**: Whether one chooses to work with gaming communities directly, seeks to implement prevention measures on gaming (adjacent) platforms, or wants to use gaming-related content for other types of interventions, neither gaming, gaming (adjacent) platforms nor gamers should be treated as a threat or a problem to be solved. Even when not explicitly stated, gaming communities are likely to be able to detect when the underlying assumption for engaging with them is one of threat and risk management. Since the 1990s, many public discussions about gaming have been linked to violence such as school shootings, despite unclear evidence of the link between violence and gaming.[89] This makes gamers particularly alert to new perceptions of risk and accusations of violence directed to their communities. Therefore, any suggestions that gaming or gamers are a threat should be avoided.

2. **Treating gamers as more susceptible to radicalisation**: There is no evidence to suggest that gamers are more susceptible to radicalisation or propaganda and should be considered as an 'at risk' community. It is hardly surprising there is some overlap between gamers and radicalised individuals, given that over 2.5 billion people are gamers but this correlation does not mean that there is a causal link between gaming and radicalisation.[90] Perceiving gamers as 'at risk' will not only cause problems when seeking to engage gamers in P/CVE efforts, it will also lead to misdirected policy and practice initiatives.

3. **Disregarding religious extremism**: Much of the discussion on extremist content on gaming (adjacent) platforms focuses on right-wing extremism. This is logical since most real-world incidents linked to gaming spaces have been perpetrated by right-wing individuals and much of the publicly available extremist content on these platforms derives from the right-wing spectrum. However, this does not mean that religious extremism should be disregarded. The fact that there are, for instance, only a handfull of Discord servers tagged with 'jihad' does not necessarily mean there are no jihadists on the platform, it only means they are less vocal than far-right actors who boldly and overtly display their ideological beliefs in user names, profiles and server names.

4. **Trying to do everything at once**: It will be unfruitful to attempt to include every single suggestion discussed above within a P/CVE project on gaming (adjacent) platforms or be present on all gaming (adjacent) platforms at once. All of the avenues discussed may be worthwhile but a single intervention project will hardly be able to do digital youth work, identify at-risk gamers, play games with the community, and organise an eSports tournament. In addition, because there have been only so few P/CVE efforts in these spaces so far, it is advisable to engage in a bit of trial and error to determine which of the

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(88) Numbers retrieved from disboard.org on June 27, 2021
(89) American Psychological Association, APA Resolution on Violent Video Games
(90) RAN Spotlight, Online Gaming Platforms, p.11

possibilities gaming (adjacent) platforms are most promising for which specific type of primary or secondary prevention initiatives.

5. **Copycat P/CVE**: Trying to copy the dark humoured memes and gaming language or using gaming simply because extremist actors are believed to use them successfully, is unwise. While inspiration can and should be taken from what 'works' for these actors, it is neither necessary nor advisable to employ a type of copycat P/CVE in the gaming space. The chances that gamers will see right through that and perceive it as gimmicky at best, are relatively high.

6. **Meeting them where they are vs**. **invading spaces**: There is an inherent tension, especially in digital prevention, between the necessity to meet audiences where they are and being perceived as invading their spaces in such a way that it causes backlash. A certain degree of caution is necessary when beginning to implement prevention measures on gaming (adjacent) platforms. There is little use in joining Discord servers and, more or less randomly and certainly uninvitedly, starting P/CVE work. In addition, it may not always be possible to join servers where secondary prevention measures would be appropriate due to vetting processes on extremist servers. Also, going in undercover to attempt CVE work is likely to be perceived as an invasion and therefore fruitless. There should be a sense of proportion of what audiences will deem appropriate, which spaces lend themselves to prevention work and which spaces are better left untouched.

Key Lessons

1. The development of subcultural knowledge is the basis for all primary and secondary prevention efforts in gaming spaces.

2. Involvement in gaming spaces can range from supporting bottom-up counter-spreech to establishing a presence on the platforms, the use of (serious) games, and gaming or 'nerd culture' references in narrative campaigns.

3. Viewing gaming (adjacent) spaces or gamers as a potential threat and 'at risk' group is discouraged.

Key recommendations for P/CVE on gaming (adjacent) platforms

Gaming (adjacent) platforms have developed into important spaces, not only to speak about games and watch gaming streams, but to connect with likeminded individuals to chat on all sorts of topics. Since these platforms are frequented by millions of individuals, it renders them interesting for digital prevention efforts in both the primary and secondary prevention space, regardless of the presence of extremist actors on these platforms. More research is needed to better understand the impact of extremists' presence in these spaces and to judge potential counter-measures. Therefore, at this point in time, only generic recommendations can be derived from the information available.

Recommendations

1. **Consult insiders**: There are a variety of individuals and organisations with theoretical and practical knowledge of gaming spaces and gaming-related content, who can improve our understanding of gaming spaces, and develop suitable interventions and subcultural knowledge.

2. **Speak to the platforms**: While not all gaming (adjacent) platforms are willing to support P/CVE measures, a number of platforms are, for instance, members of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT).[91] Liaising with the platforms will support the development of prevention projects that match the style and atmosphere of the platform in question.

3. **Start somewhere**: There are currently very few P/CVE projects that include gaming (adjacent) platforms. Given their general popularity and implication in the spread of extremist narratives, it is advisable that gaming (adjacent) platforms are better included in digital prevention efforts and that P/CVE organisations consider which parts of their expertise could be useful for programmes in such spaces.

4. **Use all aspects of gaming-related content** : Gaming (adjacent) platforms are not only spaces to play but also talk about games, joke about gaming, chat on everyday topics, exchange artwork on games etc. When thinking about primary and secondary prevention measures in gaming spaces, think broadly about the appeal of gaming-related content rather than focusing merely on playing the games.

5. **Think beyond gaming-related content:** These gaming (adjacent) platforms have turned into social media sites and users discuss everything from their favorite music to anime and politics. As such, there is no need to limit yourself to gaming-related content on these platforms as these other topics could also open avenues of conversation with the communities on the platforms.

6. **Know where you're going:** Gaming (adjacent) platforms differ considerably not only in their primary functions but the user communities and tone. For instance, P/CVE measures on Twitch will look very different from those on Steam or Discord. Consider the specificities of the platform you are targeting.

7. **Know who you're speaking to:** There is not just one gaming community, but many different, sometimes overlapping communities on various platforms. Those who enjoy watching Call of Duty streams on Twitch may or may not be the same people who post Mario Brothers memes in Discord. Targeting 'the gamers' will do very little to support prevention projects on gaming (adjacent) platforms.

8. **Don't reinvent the wheel:** Ask yourself whether the gaming space you are considering for your prevention project is really *fundamentally* different from other (digital) spaces you have experience in. In many cases, it will be possible to draw on lessons and approaches from offline, as well as other online projects, that were carried out previously. The label 'gaming' should not deter you from using these lessons when developing prevention measures in gaming spaces.

9. **Conduct research**: The use of gaming (adjacent) platforms by extremist actors and related issues of the use of videogames, gamification, and gaming-references are currently notoriously under-researched. At the moment, there are no research gaps, but rather a large research hole on this issue.

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(91) https://gifct.org/membership/

Empirical research on gaming (adjacent) platforms and how gaming content could influence digitally-mediated radicalisation processes is severely lacking. It is important to conduct more research in order to better understand and address the issue. Essential research questions may include the following.

- How prevalent are the presence of extremist actors and extremist content in gaming spaces?

- Are gaming (adjacent) platforms used by these actors like any other digital communications platform or is there something inherently appealing for them in gaming spaces?

- How influential are gaming spaces and gaming-related content for digitally-mediated radicalisation processes relative to other factors facilitating radicalisation?

- How are gaming spaces used differently (or similarly) by extremists of various ideological backgrounds?

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