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CONCLUSIONS PAPER

RAN C&N meeting – Extremists’ use of video gaming – Strategies and narratives

15 and 17 September 2020

Digital meeting

Extremists’ Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives

Introduction

Although the use and abuse of not only video games but also gaming adjacent communications platforms and gaming imagery by violent extremists receives high-profile press attention, the nature and extent of this problem remains poorly understood by many frontline practitioners. The aim of the RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (C&N) meeting held on 15 and 17 September 2020 was to explore this topic with practitioners, industry and experts. During the meeting, currently used strategies and narratives from violent Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist groups were presented and discussed. It became clear that a large variety of extremist propaganda and recruitment strategies can be identified, depending on the medium used (i.e. through games themselves, through gaming cultural references or through gamification). Used narratives include memes, symbols or other linguistic references to online gaming culture, the spreading of conspiracy narratives and the use of gaming jargon on platforms like 8chan. Additionally, challenges faced by first-line practitioners and policymakers were determined, after which some potential solutions to these challenges were identified. Rather than applying singular approaches (such as merely working on media literacy), it was suggested to apply multipronged approaches to tackle the issue from various angles at once. Attention was also given to ways in which the gaming community could be empowered to deal with the challenges, such as better access to reporting and notifying extremist content. This paper summarises the general challenges and the strategies and narratives used and recommends some practical next steps.

What are general challenges in tackling extremist use of video gaming platforms?

Extremists using video games is not a new tactic; groups such as Hezbollah were creating video games as far back as 2003 for recruitment purposes. There are various challenges in tackling extremist narratives and strategies surfacing in these video games and video gaming (adjacent) platforms, including, amongst other things, the following:

- **Understanding the problem:** There is a risk in conflating gamification with video games or extremist video games with safeguarding in-game chat features. The table that follows breaks down the array of video game-related extremist activities facing practitioners. Although they all relate in some way to games, gamification or gaming culture, they are completely different phenomena and require highly specialised responses. Conflating them is therefore unhelpful and counterproductive.
- **Avoiding stigmatisation:** There is a long history of blaming video games for mass violence, stereotyping gamers as loners and assuming that the gaming community as a whole is “at-risk”. Participants consider this to be inaccurate, unproven and counterproductive and suggest working together with the gaming community on this issue.
- **Extremist behaviour:** Extremists show agile behaviour on gaming-related platforms, often moving between different platforms to avoid detection, and are adept at speaking in codified ways. They are often able to use essential, integral features of these gaming environments (like in-game chat) to advance their narratives into sometimes mainstream communication.
- **Limits of moderation:** The elements that make gaming environments attractive to their audience make it difficult to monitor extremist behaviour. There is often a high degree of anonymity in in-game chats and on gaming-related communications platforms. The small platforms can therefore encounter difficulty in doing heavy content moderation.

Types of video game strategies related to extremist activity

The full range of specific strategies extremists use to recruit is still subject to more research. Overall, one can already distinguish seven video game-related extremist recruitment and propaganda efforts:

	Games			Gaming adjacent communications platforms	Gaming cultural references	Gamification
	<i>Production of bespoke games</i>	<i>Modding mainstream games</i>	<i>In-game chat: Grooming</i>			
Example	<p>There are a number of high-profile examples of extremists producing their own video games.</p> <p>Hezbollah, for example, produced its own video game in the early 2000sⁱ, and more recently violent right-wing groups have produced games such as <i>Ethnic Cleansing</i>ⁱⁱ and <i>Heimat Defender: Rebellion</i>.ⁱⁱⁱ</p>	<p>Many games allow users to create their own modifications, or mods. This positive creative outlet can be abused by extremists.</p> <p>Examples include versions of <i>Grand Theft Auto</i>^{iv} and <i>Call of Duty</i> modded by Daesh supporters.^v This tactic places powerful game engines at the disposal of extremists.</p>	<p>In-game chat functions, both text and chat, provide a possible avenue for extremists to “groom” vulnerable users. Recruiters can target people on open platforms, and they start building relationships before inviting these people to more closed-off environments.</p> <p>The nature and functionality of these chat functions vary wildly depending on the platform involved.</p>	<p>As extremists are being pushed off social networks such as Twitter, some of them have migrated to gaming adjacent communications platforms such as Discord.</p> <p>These platforms, initially established to service the gaming community, have rapidly become popular social media platforms.</p>	<p>Extremists’ use of popular cultural references has long been common, and gaming is no exception. Daesh is known to appropriate marketing images from <i>Call of Duty</i> in its own propaganda efforts.^{vi}</p> <p>The perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre ironically asked his followers to “subscribe to PewDiePie”, a high-profile streamer.^{vii}</p>	<p>Gamification is a powerful motivational tool, and extremism is no exception. It is the use of design elements of existing games in a non-gaming context, aimed at behavioural change. Gamification can consist of “top-down” efforts to rank extremist users (by “radicalisation meters”, providing incentives to reach a level by completing tasks and gaining access to secret groups) or “bottom-up” efforts by supporters praising attackers with “high scores”.^{viii}</p> <p>In recent years, attackers themselves have taken this a step further by live streaming attacks on platforms such as Twitch and Facebook Live in a way reminiscent of first-person shooter (FPS) games.^{ix}</p>
Known impact	<p>Although these games capture headlines, it is unclear how large an impact they have as they are usually removed rapidly from digital distribution services such as Steam and represent a high investment of time for the group to create.</p>	<p>Extremist mods garner press attention and give the illusion of credibility and technical competence to those unfamiliar with the ease with which mods can be created. It is unclear if modded games have ever had an impact on recruitment beyond propaganda.</p>	<p>Examples of extremists’ first contact taking place via in-game chat are rare but not unknown to practitioners.</p>	<p>The challenge posed by extremist spaces on platforms such as Discord mimics the challenge previously posed by Facebook groups. These social spaces can provide extremists with a space to radicalise and recruit others.</p>	<p>Efforts to use gaming cultural references are distinct from the creation of games or mods (see the paragraph on narratives).</p> <p>Propaganda that speaks the language of those it is attempting to recruit is likely to be more effective.</p>	<p>Gamification has the potential to bring about increased engagement and identification with extremist content.</p> <p>Attacks such as the Christchurch massacre were viewed by thousands as they were ongoing, and the footage was subsequently viewed by millions.^x</p>

What concrete narratives do extremists use?

As detailed above, video game-related extremist activity is a varied and complex phenomenon. There have been examples of video game-related extremist activity by violent Islamist extremists, violent right-wing extremists and ethnonationalist groups. As such, the search for any one narrative being used by such a varied group in such a varied array of circumstances would be an exercise in futility. There was a high concentration of violent right-wing experts among the attendees and speakers at this event; as such, a number of violent right-wing memes and conspiracy narratives were identified. However, this should not be considered exhaustive, or representative.

Memes, language and symbols linked to (RWE) online culture

Violent right-wing extremists often disseminate accelerationist or apocalyptic narratives. These can draw upon visual material of popular culture like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* and are often sarcastic or ironic in nature, portraying extreme caricatures. Examples include the Pepe the Frog meme, Black Sun and Death's Head images, which are often popular among Siege Culture adherents, and variations of the "Happy Merchant" meme. Fashwave music and art (an alt-right take on "synthwave", an electronic music genre that is heavily influenced by soundtracks and computer games from the 1980s) are popular and value-based swearwords centred around exclusion and thinking in parallels and opposites (such as black/white, weak/strong, dyke, faggot etc) are common.



Figure 1: Extremists disseminate varieties of, for example, the Happy Merchant (left) and Pepe the Frog (right) memes on video gaming platforms.

Symbolism used can include artefacts from meme culture, the gun or war culture, popular symbols used on channels like 4chan, and sometimes even occult or religious symbols. Many extremist-made games contain imagery and symbols that require specialist knowledge to understand. It is often assumed that those being communicated with are acquainted with their symbols and understand them.

Conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy narratives have always been present but have recently gained additional traction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These narratives often have anti-government sentiment and are adhered to by vulnerable individuals who want to make sense of the world, who feel they have a critical perspective to share that contrasts the in-their-opinion ignorant mainstream. Well-known examples are:

- "White genocide", "the Great Replacement" and "Islamisation", which all focus on the assumed decline of the white race.
- The QAnon conspiracy narrative, which has surfaced globally amongst a larger group of people this year. This narrative claims there is a group of high-ranking, Satan-worshipping paedophiles running a global child sex-trafficking ring, which is a popular narrative amongst the alt-right.

Gamification jargon and symbolism

Gaming jargon and symbols have amongst other things been merged into a commonly known gamified language. Examples of this are **hero-protector narratives**. Within games in general, as with much popular culture, a common narrative is that one should protect the world from evil. War and fighting are seen as legitimate ways to address these grievances. Gamified expressions include **"Game over for this person"** and **"Beat that score"** (e.g. used on 8chan to reflect the high body count the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack "achieved" and to urge other people to beat his score).

The gaming subculture can also be used as a frame to convey extremist ideas. For instance, the Halle shooter included an "achievement" list in one of his released documents. While one can focus on the gamification aspect here, it might be more useful to conceive of video games as having become such an intrinsic component of the zeitgeist that references to gaming will become more and more commonplace. The language of video games offers linguistic frames that are easily understood by a large chunk of the audience.

Challenges and recommendations

Participants indicated that practitioners encounter the following challenges in tackling this issue, and elaborated on the needs that practitioners as well as the gaming community may have.

What challenges do practitioners encounter linked to gaming and P/CVE?

- **Lack of gaming knowledge:** Practitioners have a limited level of knowledge on how gaming actually works, eminent trends, where extremists are active, how people engage on these platforms, and the differences between games, gamification and gaming adjacent communications platforms. They highlighted a lack of time and skills to operate on these platforms.
- **Lack of symbolism knowledge:** Practitioners have difficulty recognising, understanding and countering the language and symbolism used in an effective manner. This is also due to the fact that the language and symbolism are changing quickly, so even the industry is struggling with understanding what is happening on their platforms.
- **Inability to reach out:** Practitioners highlighted an inability to identify vulnerable individuals on gaming-related platforms, due to anonymity provided by the gaming environment and the closed-off nature of some gaming groups. Some expressed doubts on how open the gaming community would be to welcoming interventions for individual users on these platforms. In addition, practitioners often target too big an audience, which makes it difficult to reach the specific audience they have in mind.
- **Narrow focus:** Practitioners often apply singular approaches (only focused on media literacy) and not multipronged approaches to tackle this issue. These should tackle the issue from various angles and consist of, amongst other things, counter- and alternative narratives, media and digital literacy training, understanding of diversity and inclusion.
- **Budget and skills gap:** Practitioners have a lack of budget and technical skills to develop attractive, effective games or gamified applications for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

What do practitioners need in order to increase their own skills, knowledge and understanding of this issue?

As this is a new topic, there needs to be **more collaborations** between gaming platform providers, the gaming community, research institutes, policymakers and practitioners on **how to tackle the recruitment narratives**, how **these platforms work**, what **psychological mechanisms** are in place in recruiting and what **kinds of strategies extremists use** on these platforms. The EU Internet Forum (EUIF) is already a good environment to meet, and it is recommended to enlarge the scope of this forum to gaming platforms as well. Practitioners additionally need better access to research on these processes. Further recommendations are:

- **Practitioners need to familiarise themselves with gaming environments** by playing games, talking to the gaming community and being present on the platforms to understand the language and symbolism used. Knowing the environment and their target audience is crucial to create effective counter- and alternative narratives and avoid doing harm.^{xi}
- **There needs to be an increase in open exchanges and cooperation amongst the police and other first-line practitioners** to ensure a trustworthy relationship, in which potential stereotypes or feelings of “snitching” when collaborating with the police are also tackled.
- **Practitioners need an overview of innovative products that use gaming mechanisms in prevention work.** Dynamic training modules on theoretical and practical guidelines of gaming or a handbook could help in this. This overview should address, amongst other things, the following topics:
 - knowledge of the gaming environment, platforms and related trends,
 - violent extremism within the gaming environment,
 - online dynamics and technicalities,
 - research on psychological drivers and impact.

- **Practitioners need to critically reflect on the assumptions related to the correlation between gaming and radicalisation.** A majority of people in many countries are gamers^{xii}, but we know very little about actual numbers of gamers that are supposedly radicalised via this medium. Much can be learned from the debate on video games and violence (and on media effects more generally), which after a large amount of studies is inconclusive as to both effects and affects.

What does the gaming community need?

Assuming that the gaming community really needs to be supported is not necessarily correct. There is bottom-up action against extremists on these platforms. The advertisements for *Heimat Defender: Rebellion*, a game of the Identitarian movement, has for example already drawn pushback from the gaming community (e.g. coordinated efforts to report the game to Steam and on Reddit). A first recommendation is therefore **to not underestimate or even undermine the resilience of this community**. The gaming community can help P/CVE practitioners by teaming up with them to not only understand but use games/gamification effectively in their work.

- **Gamers need more tools and better access to mechanisms for reporting and notifying extremist content.** This is not just about the takedown of content or blocking of users, but also about helping gamers to challenge some of the things extremists may have said or shared on the platforms. Policymakers can support the creation of software that can automatically identify and remove extremist content from gaming platforms.
- **Gamers can be supported by increasing their knowledge and awareness** of the narratives and tactics extremists use to radicalise and recruit.
- **Education is needed to promote an inclusive, tolerant culture on gaming platforms.** Media literacy and critical thinking skills are key elements of this education. The focus in this education can be on combining these online efforts with offline actions.
- **More responsiveness of the platforms in the content moderation and to the spread of extremist narratives is needed.** This can be done by sharing experiences between platforms taking part in the EUIF and Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) to improve their proactive detection measures, for example by including provisions against terrorist and extremist content in their terms and conditions, and for capacity building.

Follow-up

Video game-related extremist activity is highly complex and manifests itself in vastly different ways across platforms and extremism types. Many of the issues raised during this meeting, for example the issue of live streaming massacres, are better dealt with through forums such as the EUIF and the GIFCT. The use of educational video games in P/CVE may present an interesting topic for the RAN Youth and Education Working Group (RAN Y&E). Nevertheless, a number of opportunities to follow up on this topic for RAN practitioners through meetings or actions emerged from this meeting, including:

- a meeting to explore the possible positive role e-sports could play in PVE and CVE efforts, mirroring the role offline sports plays;
- a follow-on meeting to further explore the nature of a "digital frontline practitioner";
- a meeting bringing together digital grooming experts with P/CVE practitioners, following on the 2019 H&SC meeting that discussed the psychological profile of groomers and general grooming tactics.

ⁱ ['Hezbollah game celebrates war vs. Israel'](#)

ⁱⁱ ['Games Elevate Hate to Next Level'](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ ['A German Far-Right Group Is Trying to Recruit Kids with a Free Video Game'](#)

^{iv} ['Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0'](#)

^v ['ISIS'S CALL OF DUTY'](#)

^{vi} [The Idols of ISIS: From Assyria to the Internet](#) (p. 37).

^{vii} ['I didn't want hate to win': PewDiePie ends 'subscribe' meme after Christchurch shooter's shout-out'](#)

^{viii} ['Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes'](#)

^{ix} ['2,200 Viewed Germany Shooting Before Twitch Removed Post'](#)

^x ['Facebook to reexamine how livestream videos are flagged after Christchurch shooting'](#)

^{xi} ['Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model'](#)

^{xii} In the United States, for example, 65 % of adults are gamers: ['2019 ESSENTIAL FACTS About the Computer and Video Game Industry'](#)