HATE THE PLAYER, NOT THE GAME

Exploring extremist and terrorist use of games, gaming platforms and gamification strategies for propaganda purposes.

This article examines how video games, gaming culture, and gamification strategies are exploited by extremist and terrorist organisations to spread propaganda, recruit, and radicalise individuals. It reviews the link between video games and violence, highlighting the importance of addressing extremist content within the gaming community. It will trace the development of online extremism from the 1980s to the present, investigating how extremist groups modify games and use in-game communication for recruitment purposes. It also explores the role of gaming platforms such as Steam, Twitch, and Discord in this context. Additionally, it discusses how extremists incorporate gaming culture references, both visually and linguistically, into their communication strategies. The article concludes that various extremist ideologies exploit video games and gaming platforms to disseminate their messages, build communities, and radicalise individuals. This exploitation is not limited to far-right or jihadist ideologies but encompasses a broad spectrum of extremist movements.

Key words:

Gaming;
Social Media;
Online;
Terrorism;
Extremism;
Radicalisation.

Olivier CAUBERGHS *is a researcher at Textgain, a spin-off from the University of Antwerp specialized in developing AI to detect and analyze disinformation, extremism, and terrorism. Olivier's expertise lies in the use of technology by extremists and terrorists, such as generative AI, social media, gaming, etc. In 2024, he obtained a Master's in Terrorism & Political Violence from the University of St Andrews (UK).*

1. Introduction

"It would be strange if today's terrorist did not use the Internet, just as it would be strange if past terrorists did not use the postal service or the telephone".

Benson[1]

Over the past few years, the digital landscape has increasingly become a fertile ground for extremist ideologies, recruitment, and propaganda dissemination. Although there has been substantial research conducted on social media platforms, the impact and significance of gaming spaces have remained underexplored. Video games and gaming platforms constitute a vibrant ecosystem with a large community of active users worldwide. Gamers immerse themselves in virtual worlds, form social groups, and interact via in-game chats, online forums, and streaming

1 Benson, David C. 2014. "Why the Internet Is Not Increasing Terrorism", *Security Studies* 23 (2), 14.

platforms. These spaces offer a unique opportunity for extremist and terrorist information to infiltrate large innocent audiences. Gaming spaces operate pseudonymously, allowing extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations without immediate consequences. Additionally, gaming platforms reach diverse demographics, including young and vulnerable individuals to radicalisation.

Gamification techniques, mostly defined as the "use of game design elements in non-game contexts", further blur the line between entertainment and indoctrination, with players, often unwittingly, participating in sharing extremist narratives. Extremists and terrorists gamified strategies, such as achievements, rewards, and rankings for recruitment and radicalisation.

The objective of this article is to explore how extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations employ games, gaming (adjacent) platforms, and gamification techniques to infiltrate these spaces with their propaganda and to assist the reader with developing a better understanding of this phenomenon.

2. Online extremism: from digital pioneers to modern challenges

The landscape of online extremism and terrorism has undergone significant transformations across the distinct stages of the internet era. From its inception in the mid-1980s, characterised by the pioneering efforts of white supremacist organisations, to the contemporary digital space, each phase has brought about distinct challenges and characteristics. This chapter provides a brief overview of the evolution of online extremism throughout three generations, analysing the technological and social shifts that have shaped the strategies and impact of extremist ideologies in conjunction with the expanding capabilities of the Internet[2] [3] [4].

2.1 First Generation (1984 to Mid-2000s)

"Imagine, if you can, a single computer to which all leaders and strategists of the patriotic movement are connected. Imagine further that any patriot in the country is able to tap into this computer at will".

Beam (1984)[5]

Under the guidance of Louis Beam, a prominent member of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist movement transitioned into the digital era and established *Aryan Nations Liberty Net*, the first online bulletin board system for white supremacists[6]. The use of online platforms for disseminating KKK propaganda enabled Beam and the organisation to bypass the legal and cultural restrictions imposed by the American government, which aimed to restrict the reach of their propaganda. These platforms, preceded by static websites and characterised by one-way

2 Jacob Ware. "The third generation of online radicalisation" Program on Extremisms at George Washington University (June 2023) https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/2023-06/third-generation-final.pdf

3 Kwame Antwi-Boasiako "Terrorism and Right-Wing Extremism: History and Comparative Definitions", In *Political Preferences*, July 2020

4 Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, Logan Macnair. "Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends" In International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep1962Trends", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2023 http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19623

5 Chip Berlet "When Hate went Online", Northeast Sociological Association, Spring Conference, Fairfield, CT: Sacred
Heart University, April 28 2001, 3

6 Berlet, When Hate went Online, 3

communication, were considered for their educational and propaganda value, rather than the ability to facilitate social connections that would define the future generations of online platforms[7]. Although there is a lack of evidence to suggest that these basic online networks have ever directly motivated acts of terrorism, they undeniably established the foundation for future platforms.

2.2 Second Generation (Mid-2000s to Late-2010´s)

The second generation of Internet users was born within the confines of the dorm room where Mark Zuckerberg conceived the social media platform known as (The) Facebook in 2004[8]. Social media sites, with a user base of hundreds of millions of profiles and expecting to reach a staggering 5.85 billions of social media users in 2027[9] have played a pivotal role in shaping the internet landscape by facilitating user-generated content. Differing from earlier websites and forums which required a demonstrated interest in the subject matter and a specific level of knowledge for access, Facebook profiles enabled individuals to generate and share content within their social circles. This encompassed friends and family members, representing a shift from the primarily isolated one-to-many model to an open many-to-many model[10][11]. (Figure 1 - 2) As a result, (violent) extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations were suddenly able to reach larger audiences with much less effort.

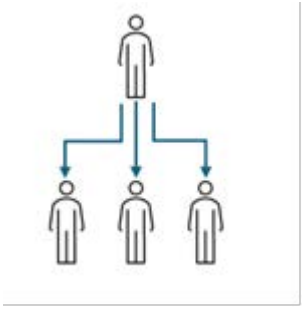

Figure 1
Isolated one-to-many model
Based on Van Raemdonck & Pierson [12]

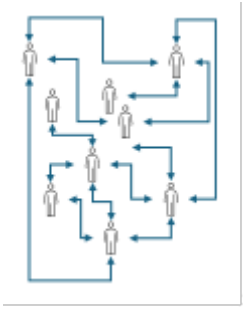

Figure 2
Open many-to-many model
Based on Van Raemdonck & Pierson[13]

2.3 Third Generation (Late-2010´s to today)

The current generation exhibits a notable amplification and departure from its predecessor. In the preceding era, the significance of organisations within the online extremist and terrorist ecosystem reduced, including their extremist ideology[14]. The focal point of concern lies in the lone actor, and the content they generate on online platforms. They are frequently their own propaganda arm, disseminating manifestos and livestreams leading to the idolisation of perpetrators, creating a *Saint status*[15][16].

7 Berlet, "When Hate went Online", 7
8 Ware, "The third generation of online radicalisation", 10
9 Allison Zeller. "*The Future of Social Media (2024-2027)*" In *Exploding Topics,* 2024 https://explodingtopics.com/blog/future-of-social-media
10 Ware "The third generation of online radicalisation", 10
11 Nathalie Van Raemdonck & Jo Pierson. "Taxonomy of Social Network Platform Affordances for Group Interactions", Vrij Universiteit Brussel, 2022, https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=9663773
12 Van Raemdoncl & Pierson. "Taxonomy of Social Network Platform Affordances", 3
13 Van Raemdoncl & Pierson. "Taxonomy of Social Network Platform Affordances", 3
14 Ware, "The third generation of online radicalisation", 17
15 Stephane Baele, Lewys Brace and Travis Coan. "Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans' Far-Right "/pol" Boards" In Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 15, No. 1, February 2021, pp. 65-80, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26984798
16 Ari Ben Am & Gabriel Weimann, "Fabricated Martyrs: The Warrior-Saint Icons of Far-Right Terrorism", In Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 14, No. 5, October 2020, 130-147 https://www.jstor.org/stable/26940043

Moreover, the Covid-19 epidemic has accelerated certain trends. With closed schools, businesses and workplaces, millions of people were forced to stay at home for extended lengths of time. A staggering 72% of people said that their children spend more time online compared to before the pandemic[17]. Hootsuite quantified this to be approximately 7 hours per day[18].

According to the Radicalisation Awareness Network (European Commission, 2021), the pandemic served as a catalyst for the proliferation of online phenomena such as conspiracy theories. Extremist organisations and individuals capitalised on the opportunity by offering extremely simple solutions and answers to highly complex issues with the aim to advance their agendas and recruit followers. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) observed a significant increase in the number of terrorist attacks driven by conspiracy theories (in combination with extremism), from 6 incidents in 2019 to 116 incidents in 2020[19]. Fortunately, almost all the incidents were non-fatal, with a surprising 96% targeting telecommunication infrastructure but it also highlighted how online originated narratives become intertwined with offline violence[20]. Whittaker described this hyperconnected reality as "Onlife"[21].

Onlife radicalisation and gaming

The fusion of the offline and online (gaming) world became very painfully clear in March 2019 when Brenton Tarrant walked into the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch (New Zealand) and began shooting indiscriminately, leading to the deaths of more than 50 people[22]. This would be the start of a series of terrorist attacks carried out in 2019 (3/2019 Christchurch, 8/2019 El Paso, 10/2019 Halle) with gamified characteristics before, during or in propaganda after the attack[23].

Groen[24] point out that most of these attackers were radicalised in an online toxic and right-wing ecosystem of user-moderated boards such as 4chan and 8chan (currently 8kun) or social media platforms such as Gab. Furthermore, academics observed additional specific gaming related elements in the execution of the terrorist attacks such as counting of victims as "high scores", setting gaming like achievements, and livestreaming of the attacks creating a first person shooting (FPS) perspective similar to computer games[25] [26] (see chapter 3.3. Gaming Culture References). These elements further highlight the intertwining of the online gaming world with the offline terrorist attack.

17 Coleen McClain, Emily Vogels, Andrew Perrin, Stella Sechopoulos, Lee Rainie. "The Internet and the pandemic", Pew Research Center, 2021 https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/09/PI_2021.09.01_COVID-19-and-Tech_FINAL.pdf

18 Hootsuite "Digital 2021 Global Overview Report", 2021, https://www.meltwater.com/en/resources?category=guide&tag=reporting

19 START, "Information on more than 200,000 Terrorist Attacks," *Global Terrorism Database.* www.start.umd.edu/gtd/#:~:text=Information%20on%20more%20than%20200,000%20Terrorist

20 Liam Farrel, "UMD Report: Conspiracy Theories Fueled More Terror Attacks", https://today.umd.edu/umd-report-conspiracy-theories-fueled-more-terror-attacks-in-2020#:~:text=UMD%20Report:%20Conspiracy%20Theories%20Fueled%20More

21 Joe Whittaker, "The Online Behaviors of Islamic State Terrorists in the United States", 2021, 30, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348206663_The_online_behaviors_of_Islamic_state_terrorists_in_the_United_States

22 Luke Munn, "Algorithmic Hate: Brenton Tarrant and the Dark Social Web", University of Queensland, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344794316_Algorithmic_Hate_Brenton_Tarrant_and_the_Dark_Social_Web

23 Maike Groen, Nina Kiel, Angela Tillmann. "Games and ethics; Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to ethical questions in digital gaming cultures", Springer, 2020, 20

24 Groen et all, "Games and ethics", 20

25 Eliza Mackintosh & Gianluca Mezzofiore. "How the Extreme Right Gamified Terror", 2020, CNN. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/10/europe/germany-synagogue-attack-extremism-gamified-grm-intl/index.html

26 Miron Lakhomi. "Let's Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment", In *Studies in Conflict& Terrorism,* vol. 42, no. 4, 2019, 383 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903?needAccess=true

3. Video game strategies related to (violent) extremist & terrorist activity

While additional research remains crucial to comprehensively grasp the full spectrum of specialised tactics employed by extremists, four distinct occurrences of extremist and terrorist recruiting and propaganda operations are linked to video games and the gaming community. In this chapter I will discuss this different modus operandi which include: video games, online gaming and gaming adjacent platforms, gaming culture references, gamification of violent extremism and terrorism.

3.1 Video games

3.1.1 Designing and producing video games that promote violent extremist narratives

Several notable instances exist where extremist and terrorist organisations have developed their own video games. Jihadist organisations, such as Hezbollah, a designated terrorist organisation in the European Union (only military wing), created video games already in the early 2000s[27]. With a portfolio including titles like Quds Kid (2000), Special Force (2003), Special Force 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge (2007), or Holy Defence (2018), Hezbollah could be considered experts in propaganda through video games[28] [29]. The Special Force series aims to portray Hezbollah's armed conflict with the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in 2000 and 2006 in a favourable light, depicting its fighters as heroic and morally justified in their actions[30].

Figure 3
Special Force (2023)

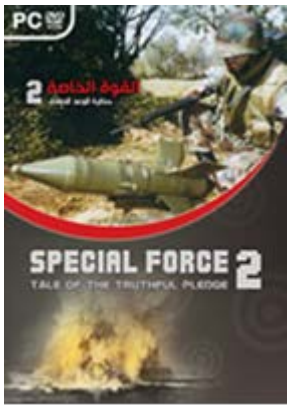

Figure 4
Special Force 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge (2007)

Figure 5
Holy Defence (2018)

The production of bespoke games is not limited to jihadist organisations, various ideologies have designed and developed video games to disseminate extremist or terrorist narratives. Right-wing extremist organisations developed and released games like "Shoot the Blacks," "Concentration Camp Rat Hunt," and "Ethnic Cleansing - The Game" throughout the early 2000s[31].

27 European Union "Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/147 of 3 February 2022 implementing Article 2(3) of Regulation (EC) No 2580/2001 on specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities with a view to combating terrorism, and repealing Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/1188", 2022, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2022.025.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A025%3ATOC

28 Sunniva Rose. " 'Holy Defence': Hezbollah issues call of duty to video gamers" In *Middle East Eye,* 2018, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/holydefence-hezbollah-issues-call-duty-video-gamers

29 Ruth, Sherlock. "Hezbollah Designed A Video Game To Appeal To The U.S." In NPR, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/07/16/629588453/hezbollah-designed-a-video-game-to-appeal-to-the- -u-s

30 Rose. "Holy Defence."

31 Anti Defamation League. "Hate and harassment in Online Games", 2012, 2 https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/Racist-groups-use-computer-gaming.pdf

More recently, Kvltgames and Ein Prozent released the games Heimat Defender: Rebellion (2020) (Figure 7) and The Great Rebellion (2023). Both games are classic Jump 'n Run games designed in a retro 1980s style. Heimat Defender stands out from others due to its main characters being prominent people engaged in far-right political activism. These include Martin Sellner, an influential leader of the Identitarian movement in Austria. A user on the gaming distribution platform Steam described Heimat Defender as being "from Nazis for Nazis".

Figure 6

Heimat Defender: Rebellion

Figure 7

Heimat Defender: Rebellion

Lakomy identifies four reasons why extremists and terrorist organisations have shifted from bespoke games towards modifying existing games[32]. First and foremost, the development of video games necessitates specific skills, and qualitative video games demand a substantial budget. Secondly, modifying pre-existing video games not only addresses these issues but also requires less time. Thirdly, extremist and terrorist organisations seek to produce "digestible" content in order to reach broader audiences. Titles such as "Ethnic Cleansing" or game narratives involving the effective oversight of a Nazi concentration camp can pose hurdles for players. Finally, modified games provide a more "digestible" blend of entertainment and propaganda, making them able to reach the widest audience achievable.

3.1.2 Modifying existing video games to twist the narrative into violent extremist message or aspiration

Video game modification, also known as "modding", involves users creating changes to various aspects of an already existing video game. For extremists and terrorist organisations, these changes are implemented to visually symbolise the branding of an extreme or terrorist ideology or organisation. In 2006, the Global Islamic Media Front, a propaganda outlet associated with Al Qaeda, modified the first-person shooter game Quest for Saddam (2003) and developed a new game titled Quest for Bush (also known as Night of Bush Capturing)[33]. The primary objective of the original game was to eliminate Iraqi soldiers and capture Saddam Hussein, however Al-Qaeda reversed the roles of the players to capture (former) President Bush. Both games seem to significantly draw inspiration from the renowned 1993 game Doom (Figure 8).

32 Lakhomi. "Let's Play a Video Game."Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment", Studies in Conflict& Terrorism, 2019. VOL. 42, NO. 4, 395 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903?needAccess=true

33 Linda Schlegel. "Preventing and Countering Extremism in Gaming Spaces," chapter in *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalisation of Digital Playgrounds* edited by Linda Schlegel & Rachel Kowert, 2024, 4

Figure 8

Doom (1993)

Figure 9

Quest For Saddam (2003)

Figure 10

Quest For Bush (2006)

Game modification has gotten more affordable and accessible for extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations. Terrorist organisations have predominantly modified first-person shooter (FPS) video games to simulate the actual armed battles they are involved in, such as the Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty series[34]. Both games have continuously been among the top 10 best-selling games for nearly 20 years, making them highly effective at reaching a large audience.

More recently, gaming platforms like Steam have facilitated the dissemination of game modifications, making them more easily available and accessible to a large audience.

3.1.3 In-Game Communication

Video game communication mechanisms occur inside a dynamic ecosystem, including voice and text chat on both in-game chats and gaming adjacent platforms outside of the gaming environment. The selection of communication methods will primarily depend on the specific game being played and the individuals participating[35]. To determine this type of games, Schlegel & Amarsingam[36] questioned 622 gamers. 85% of the participants said they witnessed or personally encountered problematic behaviour while playing games like misogyny, racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, and transphobia[37]. Schlegel & Amarsingam analysed the responses and created an inventory of features that indicate an increased likelihood of encountering hateful language which include: online multiplayer games, games where players are teamed up with strangers, highly competitive games, games with fighting and violent themes, interaction via in-game chat, etc[38].

3.2 Online gaming and gaming adjacent platforms

Online gaming and gaming adjacent platforms have gained significant attention after the livestreamed attack in Christchurch (NZ) in 2019[39]. A few months later, Europol cautioned in their annual EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report that these types of platforms are being increasingly exploited to spread extremist and terror-

34 Lakomy, "Let's play a video game", 391

35 Suraj, Lakhani. "Press F to Pay Respects: An Empirical Exploration of the Mechanics of Gamification in Relation to the Christchurch Attack Terrorism and Political Violence", Volume 35, Issue 7, 2021, 11, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2064746

36 Linda Schlegel & Amarnath Amarasingam. " Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism," *United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism,* 2022, 13, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/221005_research_launch_on_gaming_ve.pdf

37 Schlegel & Amarasingam. " Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism," 14

38 Schlegel & Amarasingam. " Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism," 16

39 Linda, Schlegel. "Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary preventionmeasures", Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021, 4 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ec83092-d946-45d8-a3d76e790d5dbf4e_en?filename=ran_extremists_use_gaming_platforms_082021_en.pdf

ist propaganda, particularly by right-wing individuals and organisations[40]. Although there are indications that extremists from different ideologies have found their way to gaming (adjacent) platforms, the existing academic research on the intersection of gaming (adjacent) platforms with violent extremism and terrorism is limited to the use of right-wing extremists on platforms Steam, Discord, and Twitch.

The current research indicates that the use of gaming and gaming adjacent platforms by far-right extremists is not a new phenomenon as some groups on Steam date back to 2016. Furthermore, the platform is not used exclusively to connect like-minded individuals but also (re)unite outside the platform on Discord Servers, Telegram channels or Twitch livestreams to participate in organised online harassment campaigns. Discord, a popular platform initially created to build communities within the gaming scene, developed to a platform to share image, video and sound around a wide range of topics from language courses all the way to groups dedicated to the development of extremist memes.

Livestream platform Twitch has been regularly targeted by these online harassment campaigns, or so-called *hate raids,* where trolls gather in Twitch livestream chats to post a massive amount of racist, sexist, transphobic and abusive messages. As a result, the largest Twitch streamers organised a #ADayOffTwitch, a protest to refrain from creating content for 24 hours to force the platform to take actions against this phenomenon[41].

Although the majority of extremists using these platforms are far-right inspired, almost all ideologies are present in these online spaces. To achieve a complete view on the current situation of the use of propaganda of different ideologies, I performed a small-scale analysis of the main platforms mentioned above. Below, you can find examples of single issue, anarchist and jihadist extremists using gaming (adjacent) platforms.

Figure 11:
Steam - Single Issue Extremism

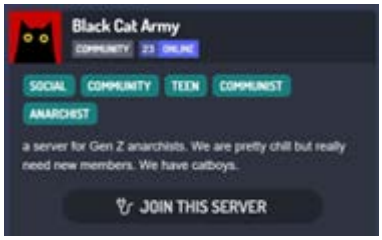

Figure 12:
Discord - Anarchism

Figure 13:
Twitch - Jihadism

40 Europol. "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT)", 2020 https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020#:~:text=1%20004%20individuals%20were%20arrested%20on

41 Ash Parrisch. "After weeks of hate raids, Twitch streamers are taking a day off in protest," In *The Verge,* 2021, https://www.theverge.com/2021/8/31/22650578/twitchstreamers-walkout-protest-hate-raids

3.3 Gaming Culture References

The use of gaming culture references has become a common and readily identifiable component in extremist and terrorist propaganda[42]. These references, used on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook or X, can function as a connection between the gaming community and extremist ideologies. Lamphere-Englund[43] claims there are two reasons why (violent) extremist and terrorist organisations use gaming culture references in propaganda.

First, he identifies a distinct demographic appeal since 60% of United States and 58% of European gamers are 12 to 35 years old[44]. This age range corresponds with the primary recruitment demographics for militaries, armed groups, and violent extremist organisations globally. Furthermore, the intrinsic and present-day widespread appeal of gaming provides a compelling means to connect with both audiences and wrongdoers[45]. For instance, the gaming term "high score" is a coded expression that specifically denotes the count of individuals who have been killed during a terrorist assault (Figure 14). The expression is widely recognised and employed by users of platforms like 4chan where many gamified attacks are celebrated and others encouraged to do so too[46].

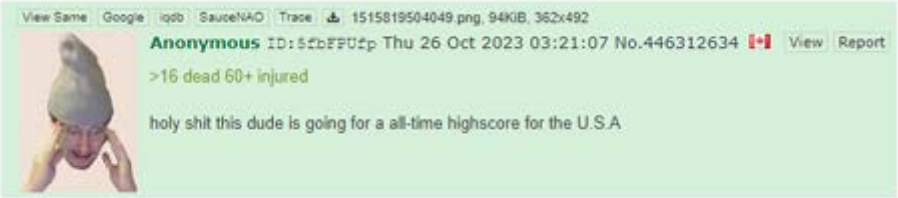

Figure 14
Use of the term "high score" to refer to victims of a terrorist attack

Extremist and terrorist individuals and groups can effectively reach a wider audience by leveraging the familiarity and engagement of gaming culture using gaming culture references[47]. This can be achieved by employing visual or linguistic references to the gaming culture.

3.3.1 Visual References

Extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations employ game-based memes as an instrument of "memetic warfare"[48] to exploit video game visual references for effective propaganda aimed at their target demographic[49]. Popular games like Grand Theft Auto V have been frequently used for that matter. With over 195 million copies sold, gamers are likely to recognise and relate to the references in the game, such as the font and layout[50].

42 Ashton Kingdon, "Beauty is power, The Use of Gaming References and Gaming Aesthetics in Extremist Propaganda." Chapter in *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalisation of Digital Playgrounds* edited by Linda Schlegel & Rachel Kowert, 2024, 131
43 Galen Lamphere-Englund. "Theories of Digital Games and Radicalisation" Chapter in *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalisation of Digital Playgrounds* edited by Linda Schlegel & Rachel, Kowert, 2024, 46
44 Lamphere-Englund. "Theories of Digital Games and Radicalisation", 46
45 *Ibid*
46 Lakhani, S. "Press F to Pay Respects", 1595
47 Merle Vergedaal & Lieke Wouterse. "Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives", conclusion paper RAN C&N Meeting, 2020, 3 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f20e3a9f-b4f6-4a31-89e1 b7f140d9a132_en?filename=ran_cn_conclusion_paper_videogames_15-17092020_en.pdf
48 Memetic Warfare is a term describing the use of memes on social media in the online information warfare.
49 Ashton Kingdon. "God of Race War: The Utilisation of Viking-Themed Video Games in Far-Right Propaganda", In *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2023 https://gnet-research.org/2023/02/06/god-of-race-warthe-utilisation-of-viking-themed-video-games-in far-right-propaganda/
50 Guiseppe Nelva. "Grand Theft Auto V Has Sold Over 195 Million Units, Red Dead Redemption 2 at 61 Million Units" *TechRaptor*, 2024. https://techraptor.net/gaming/news/grand-theft-auto-v-has-sold-over-195-milli-

Figure 15
GTA Original Game

Figure 16
GTA Active Club Dietsland

Figure 17
GTA Berlin City

With the arrival of generative artificial intelligence, the process of generating memes has significantly sped up. AI generative tools such as DALL-E or Midjourney can generate a unique and high-quality image in just a matter of seconds[51] (Figure 18 -20). Although the gaming theme is used in this genre of memes, it's certainly not dominant.

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

However, this phenomenon is not limited to the use by the far-right. In November 2023, Tech against Terrorism[52] issued a warning on the use of generative AI by sympathisers of Islamist terrorist groups including Daesh (Figures 21-22), Al-Qaeda, and Hamas.

Figure 21

Figure 22

3.3.2 Linguistic References

Other pieces of propaganda have employed explicit linguistic references to popular videogames or incorporated terminology commonly used by gamers. Lamphere-Englund points out that Daesh is particularly infamous for incorporating gaming references in their propaganda messages[53]. An ISIS recruiter made a clear

on-units-red-dead-redemption-2-at-61-million
51 Rose. "Holy Defence: Hezbollah issues call of duty to video gamers."
52 Tech Against Terrorism, "Early Terrorist Adoption of Generative AI", 2023, 5-8
53 Lamphere-Englund, "Theories of Digital Games and Radicalisation", 36

reference to the widely known FPS game Call of Duty and posted on Twitter (currently X): "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"[54]. Other ISIS propaganda included the tag line "This is our Call of Duty and we respawn[55] in jannah[56] "[57].

Figure 23

Simply employing gaming culture references will not alone initiate a process of radicalisation in vulnerable individuals. Nevertheless, Schlegel highlights that increasing involvement, and identification could draw in individuals and further engage them with extremist propaganda and communities[58].

3.4 Gamification of Violent Extremism and Terrorism

3.4.1 The conceptualisation of gamification

The term "gamification" originated in the early 2000s and has drawn significant academic interest since the start of the 2010s[59]. The core concept is to employ the fundamental elements of games and apply them to real-life situations, primarily with the objective of encouraging particular human behaviours, such as user engagement. A generally accepted definition of gamification describes it as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts"[60]. However, there is still no universally accepted definition for this concept. In recent years, violent extremists have come to understand the potential of gamification and have incorporated this technique into their activities. Some implemented it deliberately and others organically due to their own involvement in gaming and alignment with the gaming subculture. Whether in the digital space, actions in the physical world, or an amalgamation of both, gamification has played an important role in various strategies or acts implemented by violent extremist or terrorist organisations or individuals[61]. (Violent) Extremist and terrorist organisations have recently incorporated gamification into their strategies, while video games have historically been a part of their weaponry.

54 Schlegel. "Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures."
55 Respawn is a computer game term to describe a situation where a character in a video game comes back to life after dying or being killed.
56 Jannah is the Islamic concept of heaven or paradise
57 Cori Dauber, Mark Robinson, Jovan Baslious, & Austin Blair. "Call of Duty: Jihad – How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos." In *Perspectives on Terrorism,* 13(3), 2019, 18, https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-3/02--dauber-et-al..pdf
58 Schlegel, "Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms", 18
59 Andrej Marczewski. "User Types. In Even Ninja Monkeys Like to Play: Gamification, Game Thinking and Motivational Design", 2013, 3
60 Sebastien Deterding. "Gamification: Using Game Design Elements in Non-Gaming Contexts", 2011, 1
61 Suraj Lakhani. "A is for Apple, B is for Bullet: The gamification of violent extremism" Chapter in *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalisation of Digital Playgrounds* edited by Linda Schlegel & Rachel Kowert", 2024, 125

However, the focus on gamified aspects of radicalisation and recruitment activities has only emerged in the public attention following the Christchurch attack in 2019. Generally, gamification techniques are categorised into two main groups that can potentially facilitate extremist and terrorist organisations in recruiting individuals, as well as influencing the process of radicalisation.

3.4.2 Typologies of gamification techniques

Top-down gamification

The origins of top-down gamification can be identified in the forums hosted on extremist websites as early as the 2000s[62]. Extremist organisations often employed gamified elements to facilitate and encourage user engagement with their content. These features include visible indicators of commitment, such as ranks or levels that users can achieve by posting comments, and virtual badges that are awarded for reaching specific milestones of engagement, such as a certain number of comments or years as an active member. Additionally, members are rewarded for their dedication by gaining the privilege to customise their avatar, or by receiving exclusive invitations to 'secret' chatgroups which were only accessible to a chosen elite group who displayed exceptional commitment to the forum or organisation[63]. One online platform even incorporated a 'radicalisation metre' as a graphical representation of an individual's advancement towards extremism[64]. Although the significance of forums may have reduced due to the migration to social media networks, violent extremists continued embracing gamification. For example, Daesh incorporated gamification in their propaganda movies, including helmet cameras to simulate first-person shooter (FPS) perspectives[65]. Additionally, they have developed a mobile phone application, which teaches youngsters the alphabet using militaristic terminology instead of the conventional A for apple and B for bee[66]. The mobile application provides a systematic guide to learning the Arabic alphabet, complete with a nasheed[67] to assist children in memorising the alphabet. However, the developers opted not to follow the conventional pattern of associating letters with fruits or animals. Instead, they use a militaristic approach, using س (sin) to represent سيف (sayf or sword), to normalise propaganda and violence used by terrorist organisations from a young age (Figure 24-25)[68].

62 Linda Schlegel, "Connecting, Competing, and Trolling: "User Types" in Digital Gamified Radicalization Processes", In *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15(4), 2021, 5 https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2021/issue4/schlegel.pdf

63 VRT. "Wat moet je doen om "strijder" of "veteraan" van Schild & Vrienden te worden en wat is het einddoel?" 2018, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/08/31/schild-vrienden-achtergrond/

64 Linda Schlegel. "Points, Rankings & Raiding the Sorcerer's Dungeon: Top-down and Bottom-up Gamification of Radicalisation and Extremist Violence", 2020 GNET, https://gnet-research.org/2020/02/17/points-rankings-raiding-the-sorcerers-dungeon-top-down-and-bottom-up-gamification-of-radicalization-and-extremist-violence/#:~:text=Top-down%20gamification.%20Some%20elements%20of%20gamification

65 Magdalena El Ghamari, "Pro-Daesh Jihadist Propaganda A Study of Social Media and Video Games". In *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 14(1), 2017, 75 https://securityanddefence.pl/pdf-103197-36129?filename=Pro_Daesh%20jihadist.pdf

66 Lakhani. "A is for Apple, B is for Bullet", 153

67 a vocal Islamic melody without instrumental accompaniment

68 Lakhani. "A is for Apple, B is for Bullet", 153

Figure 24

Figure 25

Bottom-up gamification

Bottom-up gamification refers to an organic method that focuses on individuals or small groups. It can be categorised into three main groups: (1) gamification driven by perpetrators or attacks, (2) gamification strategies within online communities, and (3) gamification techniques in the process of radicalisation of individuals or groups[69].

Gamification driven by perpetrators or attacks

The most widely known aspect of bottom-up gamification is the implementation of game-like elements by attackers. According to Schlegel , the Norwegian right wing terrorist Anders Breivik was the first terrorist to supposedly gamify his attack in 2011[70]. During the court proceedings, Breivik explains how he "trained" for his attack by engaging in the computer game Call of Duty. One year after Breivik's attack, Mohammed Merah, who pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda, recorded his killings and confrontations with police authorities using a GoPro camera attached to his chest and later uploaded the footage online[71]. His footage replicated the visual style of First Person Shooter (FPS) games, and mimicked the Let's Play (LP) format to provide spectators with a front row perspective. Subsequently, several other terrorist perpetrators transitioned from uploading footage to livestreaming the recordings of their acts of terrorism and incorporating gamification techniques (see chart). Livestreams transformed the attacker's and spectators' experience of the event into a game-like activity[72].

69 Linda Schlegel. "Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes", Journal for Deradicalization, summer 2023, 5
70 Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism?", 6
71 Virginie Andre. "Merah and Breivik: A Reflection of the European Identity Crisis", In *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. 26(2):183-204, 2015, 186, DOI:10.1080/09596410.2015.1015246
72 Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism?", 15

Perpetrator	Location	Date	Manifesto posted on	Attack lives-treamed on
Brenton Tarrant	Christchurch (New Zealand)	15th of March 2019	8chan (later 8kun)[73] /pol/	Facebook[74]
John Timothy Earnest	Poway (USA)	27th of April 2019	8chan (later 8kun) / pol/	Facebook (failed)
Patrick Wood Crusius	El Paso (USA)	3rd of August 2019	8chan (later 8kun) / pol/	/
Philip Manshaus	Bærum (Norway)	10th of August 2019	Endchan[75]	Facebook (failed)
Stephan Balliet	Halle (Germany)	9th of October 2019	Meguca[76]	Twitch[77]
Tobbias Rahtjen	Hanau (Germany)	19th of February 2020	Youtube[78]	/
Payton S. Gendron	Buffalo (USA)	14th of May 2022	Discord[79] Gdoc[80]	Twitch
Juraj Krajčík	Bratislava (Slovakia)	12th of October 2022	Twitter[81] (Currently X)	/

Chart 1: Terrorist attacks with gamified elements since 2019.
Based on Thorleifsson & Duker (2021) for RAN with additions from Lakhani et al (2021, p. 11) and Lamphere-Englund & White (2023, p. 18)

Gamification within online communities

The perpetrators, who streamed their actions live on the internet, were primarily associated with online subcultures where bottom-up gamification has become increasingly prominent[82]. Moreover, these very toxic online communities, such as 4chan or 8kun, exhibit strong endorsement of extremist violence. This worship extends to the point of establishing a Saint Culture based on the high score of victims caused by the perpetrators[83]. This virtual high score is frequently cited as an incentive for other users to engage in mass shootings.

The use of gamified language may appear less significant compared to gamified actions; yet it sets the stage for perceiving reality from a gaming perspective and may encourage gamified terrorist copy-cat attacks[84].

Gamification in radicalisation process of individuals or small groups

The final category includes instances of gamification within private conversations and small groups. The available evidence for this is extremely scarce as it is difficult to accurately determine the extent to which gamification is present in private communication channels[85]. This information typically only becomes known only when there is police intervention or a data leak. In 2018, the Flemish public broadcaster (VRT) aired a documentary delving into the activities of a Flemish nationalist group called Schild & Vrienden[86]. The documentary revealed a structured hierarchy within

73 Board on 8kun for "politically incorrect" topic discussions
74 Free social networking website
75 Anonymous imageboard where the Bærum attacker announced his actions
76 Anonymous imageboard with a thematic focus on anime, taken down after the upload of the Halle manifesto
77 Free interactive livestreaming service, popular for sharing gaming content
78 Free video sharing social media website
79 Free voice, video, and text social media website, popular for sharing gaming content
80 Online word processor website with possibility to share and collaborate
81 Free microblog social media website
82 Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism?", 6
83 Ben Am & Weimann, "Fabricated Martyrs", 131
84 Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism?", 6
85 Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism?", 7
86 VRT, "Bekijk hier de "Pano"-reportage: Wie is Schild & Vrienden echt?" https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/09/05/pano-wie-is-schild-vrienden-echt/

the group, with a game-based system of military-inspired rankings and badges prominently displayed on its Discord channel. At the top of the organisation stands the "eindbaas" (final boss in Dutch), akin to Dr. Eggman in Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog game. Members earn ranks based on their contributions, with involvement in more activities elevating their significance. Sympathisers are labelled as normies, while participation in protests make members climb the ranks to warriors or veterans[87]. In addition to its hierarchical consequences, it has also an impact on online interactions as it unlocks access to Discord channels with high ranked members where strategic organisational decisions are made.

	Top -down gamification	Bottom-up gamification
Who	*Extremist and terrorist organisations*	*Individuals and online communities*
What	*Use of game concepts; rankings, badges, points, etc.*	*Livestreaming, gamified language, virtual scoreboards, personal "quests"*
Why	*Facilitate engagement with content and peers, visibility of commitment, motivate users to participate, appeal to young audience, etc.*	*Appeal to online community/ subcultural milieu, look cool, make sense of reality through gaming*
Examples	*Rankings, badges etc in forums or apps such as Patriot Peer*	*errorist attacks with gaming elements such as Christchurch (NZ) and Halle (GER), small group Whatsapp radicalisation; discussions on social e.g. to beat the high-score referring to victims.*

Chart 2: Overview Top-down versus Bottom-up gamification

Conclusion

This article has presented an assessment of the intersection between video games, gaming culture, and the gamification of extremism and terrorism. It has documented the evolution of online extremism, highlighting the shift from digital pioneers to modern challenges. This evolution eventually challenged the simplistic view of radicalisation as a binary phenomenon. Subsequently, I argued that we should move to a framework 'onlife radicalisation', which makes the need to differentiate between offline and online radicalisation redundant. Moreover, an analysis of various strategies related to extremist and terrorist activity within video games and gaming platforms has been conducted. I highlighted the potential for video games to be created with the explicit intention of disseminating a clear extremist or terrorist message. Nonetheless, it requires financial investment, considerable time investment, and, above all, specialised game development abilities.

Consequently, (violent) extremist and terrorist individuals and organisations resorted to modifying existing video games to propagate violent extremist narratives or aspirations, as well as to recruit and radicalise other players through in-game communication. In addition, a review of the role of gaming-related and gaming (adjacent) platforms, including Steam, Twitch, Discord, has been conducted. While I contend that the aforementioned platforms are the most frequently utilised, the list does not end with these three. Additionally, smaller platforms and platforms cater-

87 VRT. "Wat moet je doen om "strijder" of "veteraan" van Schild & Vrienden te worden" VRT "Wat moet je doen om "strijder" of "veteraan" van Schild & Vrienden te worden"

ing to a distinct demographic are utilised and demand greater scholarly scrutiny. Gaming culture references and the use of gamification in propaganda and the execution of terrorist attacks has further enriched our understanding of how extremism and terrorism can be gamified. I argued that propaganda can be effectively employed through both visual and linguistic gaming references, as they appeal to the culture and demographics of gamers, but also align with the primary recruitment demographics of militaries, armed groups, and violent extremist organisations worldwide.

In summary, (violent) extremist and terrorist organisations and individuals have effectively implemented the strategy of recruiting and radicalising individuals using games, gaming (adjacent) platforms, and gamification strategies. Despite the predominant academic focus on far-right and Jihadist ideologies, single-issue extremism, anarchism, and other similar ideologies are also prevalent on gaming platforms. However, as technologies evolve constantly and at an ever-increasing pace, so will need academic research to constantly evolve and adapt to better understand how (violent) extremist and terrorist groups exploit video games, video gaming platforms, and gamification strategies for propaganda dissemination.

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