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Towards a Sociology of Gaming and Radicalisation

A report on the state of the art

Maja HALILOVIC-PASTUOVIC, Gillian WYLIE, and Neven VUKIC



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Towards a Sociology of Gaming and Radicalisation: A report on the state of the art

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Executive Summary

This literature review explores the intricate relationship between gaming, gaming-adjacent technologies, and extremism, highlighting the evolving dynamics and challenges in understanding this multifaceted phenomenon. While early research focused on the debunked link between violent video games and real-world aggression, a more nuanced perspective has emerged, recognizing the potential for both harmful and beneficial influences within the gaming ecosystem. The long-term purpose of the report is to establish foundational elements of a sociology of gaming and radicalisation as a separate field of research.

The review examines how extremist groups, particularly those affiliated with far-right ideologies, exploit gaming spaces for recruitment, propaganda dissemination, and ideological indoctrination. This exploitation includes developing bespoke games, modifying existing games to incorporate extremist themes, utilizing in-game chat for communication and coordination, and leveraging gaming-adjacent platforms like Discord and Twitch to reach wider audiences.

The concept of "gamification," the application of game design elements in non-gaming contexts, has emerged as a central theme. Extremist groups are utilizing gamified techniques to enhance engagement, motivate action, and normalize their ideologies, particularly among younger demographics.

However, recent research has challenged some established assumptions, highlighting the need for greater clarity and nuance in understanding this complex relationship – extremism and gaming. The overemphasis on aesthetic similarities between extremist content and first-person shooter games, as well as the direct link between gamification and the gaming ecosystem, have been questioned.

Furthermore, the literature suffers from terminological inconsistencies, particularly in defining "gaming" and "gaming-adjacent" spaces, hindering meaningful comparisons across studies. The over-reliance on broad terms and generalizations also risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes about gamers and obscuring the diverse and often positive aspects of gaming culture.

Policy and Security Implications

A key challenge is to mitigate the risks posed by extremism within the gaming ecosystem without stifling innovation or encroaching on free speech. A balanced and collaborative approach is crucial, requiring close cooperation between policymakers, security agencies, and the gaming industry.

It is important to:

- **Promote digital literacy and critical thinking.**
- **Empower gaming communities.**
- **Provide accessible moderation tools and resources.**
- **Invest in research.**

By fostering collaboration, transparency, and a nuanced understanding of the gaming ecosystem, policymakers and industry leaders can effectively address the challenges of extremism while ensuring a thriving and innovative gaming industry within the EU.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Gaming & Radicalisation: A Literature Review	2
2.1. Introduction: Concepts and Clarifications	2
2.2. Radicalisation	3
2.3. Gaming and Radicalisation.....	5
2.3.1. The First Wave.....	6
2.3.2. Gamergate: Gaming and Gamer Misogyny under Scrutiny	8
2.3.3. Second Wave: Gaming and Extremism after Christchurch	12
3. Recent Developments in the Field: An Emergent Critical Discourse	15
3.1. “Gamification of Extremism” and “Gaming Aesthetics”	15
3.2. The need for a unified terminology	17
3.3. Sample Sizes and Conflicting Results	19
4. Conclusion.....	22
Bibliography	24
Appendix 01 – GEMS Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts	35

1. Introduction

This literature review explores the evolving dynamics between gaming, gaming-adjacent technologies, i.e., the gaming ecosystem, and extremism, synthesizing a wide range of academic contributions. It provides an updated perspective on how gaming interacts with extremist tendencies. The long-term purpose of the report is to establish foundational elements of a sociology of gaming and radicalisation as a separate field of research.

The review utilized meta-analyses not only as background for the topic but also to collect bibliographical data, assess the extent of previous work, identify potential points of engagement, and avoid duplication of efforts.³ This thorough examination of meta-analyses and systematic reviews was crucial for outlining the academic landscape and determining where our review could contribute novel insights. Studies published after the meta-analyses' cut-off dates were incorporated to ensure coverage of the latest developments in the field. A snowballing technique was then employed to further enrich the source pool, ensuring a comprehensive coverage of relevant literature.

The materials gathered were analyzed and thematically sorted. A selection of these materials (n=66) was carefully chosen for inclusion in this report, aimed at continuing the analytical rigor typical of previous meta-analyses and surveys while focusing specifically on the intersections relevant to our topic of gaming and radicalisation. This structured approach has facilitated a detailed and critical examination of the current state of research at the intersection of gaming and extremism.

To ensure clarity and accessibility for all readers, including those unfamiliar with the specific topics discussed, the literature review will include a basic glossary (Appendix 01). This glossary, utilized by project partners, will define key terms and concepts, establishing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis.

³ For example: Garrison Wells, et al. "Right-Wing Extremism in Mainstream Games: A Review of the Literature." *Games and Culture* 19:4 (2023), 469-492; Rachel Kowert and Elizabeth Kilmer, *Extremism in Games: A Primer* (N.A.: Take This, 2023); Galen Lamphere-Englund, and Luxinaree Bunmathong, *State of Play: Reviewing the Literature on Gaming & Extremism*, (N.A., Extremism and Gaming Research Network-EGRN, 2021).



2. Gaming & Radicalisation: A Literature Review

2.1. Introduction: Concepts and Clarifications

In this report, our primary focus is on the processes of radicalization and recruitment toward right-wing extremism within the gaming ecosystem.⁴ Historically, research on extremism in gaming predominantly, and prominently addressed Islam-themed extremism. This area of study has been extensively covered and incorporated into the meta studies that inform our current analysis. To avoid redundancy and to stay abreast of emerging trends, we have chosen to concentrate more extensively on far-right extremism. Recent research within the GEMS project confirms this shift, indicating both a decline in the presence of jihadi materials in gaming and a corresponding decrease in academic attention to this specific overlap. Instead, there is a growing focus on far-right and ideologically fluid forms of extremism.⁵ A more detailed exploration of these newer developments will follow later in the report.

In keeping with Europol's definition of it, right-wing terrorism is defined here as a political ideology rooted in exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and related forms of intolerance, which advocates an authoritarian system that fundamentally opposes democratic values, the rule of law, and basic human rights.⁶ When “extremism” is used in the text below, it will refer to far-right extremism, unless specified otherwise.

⁴ Clark McCauley, and Sophia Moskalenko. “Mechanisms of Political Radicalisation: Pathways Toward Terrorism.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:3 (2008): 415-433; Gilbert McLaughlin. *Radicalisation: A Conceptual Inquiry*. (London: Routledge, 2024); Moorthy S. Muthuswamy. “Radicalisation ecosystem as a confounder of violent extremism’s drivers.” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (2024). Mitja Sardoč. *Making Sense of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: Interviews and Conversations*. London: Routledge, 2022.

⁵ Moonshot. *Extremism across the online gaming ecosystem* (2024), 8-12. Report available at, Moonshot Team. “Extremism across the online gaming ecosystem.” *Moonshot Team* (03 June 2024), last accessed 04 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/3fymjp4z>. The report is based on an analysis of over 64 million posts from gaming platforms and other forums frequented by gamers. Initially, the preparatory phase revealed only negligible amounts of Islam-inspired materials across these platforms.

⁶ EUROPOL. *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2023 (TE-SAT)*. (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023), 43.

Our analysis considers both non-violent and violent manifestations of far-right extremism, with "violent far-right extremism" used synonymously with "far-right terrorism." Throughout, we are mindful of the nuances in these terms and strive to address them appropriately in our discussion. We use the term "gaming ecosystem" to describe gaming and gaming-adjacent spaces taken together.

"The gaming ecosystem," as defined here, serves as an umbrella term for a wide range of interconnected activities (both online and offline) broadly associated with what is commonly referred to as "gaming culture." This ecosystem encompasses games (whether computer, mobile, console, or hybrid), in-game communication platforms, streaming services (e.g., Twitch, Discord), social media, gaming-related news outlets, and cultural events (such as conventions and tournaments). While these are sometimes classified as gaming or gaming-adjacent spaces, there are issues with this terminology, which are discussed further in the report.

2.2. Radicalisation

The study of radicalisation is currently experiencing a significant transition, prompting a reassessment of foundational concepts and their connections to related fields such as extremism and terrorism studies. Recent developments in the field of radicalisation studies have seen an expansion from its initial, almost exclusive focus on post-9/11 religious extremism to include a broader array of extremist ideologies, notably those associated with the far-right. Despite this shift, the emphasis remains predominantly on Islam-affiliated radicalisation.

An initial Scopus analysis of publications in the social sciences (N=714) using the keyword "radicalisation" reveals a significant disparity: 35.29% of these publications explicitly pair "radicalisation" with Islam-related keywords, compared to just 4.62% that associate it with far-right ideologies. This demonstrates still persistent imbalance in scholarly attention, with too much focus on "Islam-themed" extremism.

In comparison, gender as a topic of consideration appears as an outlier, with a relatively smaller number of publications on this issue – at least when compared to the amount of research done on their male counterparts.⁷ However, the role of gender as a consideration in radicalisation and extremism is highlighted in several well-researched publications, including those stemming from the EU's Horizon Programme.⁸ The role of the internet, and emerging technologies, in the process of radicalisation was investigated as well, and with somewhat surprising results. For example, in a study which analysed the offence histories of 235

⁷ Shahla Shahreen, Shafi Mostofa, "Female radicalisation in Bangladesh: an investigation of its scope, extent and key motivations behind," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 17:2 (2024), 153-175; Shafi Mostofa, "Redefining gender roles: women in South Asia's Jihadist Movements," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2024.2312112>.

⁸ Katherine Johnson and Kim Ebert, "'A Future for White Children': Examining Family Ideologies of White Extremist Groups at the Intersection of Race and Gender" *Social Currents* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965241275141>; Muhammad Najib Azca, and Rani Dwi Putri, "The Women 'Behind' the Mujahidin Eastern Indonesia: Negotiating Agency and Gender Dynamics," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024), 1-15; Mehr Latif et al. "Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46:4 (2023), 415-432; Sead Turcalo et al., *Pave Working Paper 1: Cumulative Extremisms in the Balkans* (Pave Project Publications, 2022), 17-18; Ramadan Ilazi et al., *Working Paper 5: Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the Balkans* (Pave Project Publications, 2022), 38-41.

individuals convicted of extremist offences in England and Wales the internet was at best a complementary vector of radicalisation, with those exclusively radicalised online being less likely to contact real-world groups, and less likely to take part in violent offences, or violence in general.⁹

Overall, it can be said that the very concept of radicalisation has become contentious and controversial. Initially viewed with optimism for its potential to illuminate aspects of terrorism studies, it has since been subject to major criticism. There is a realization of an apparent fragmentation of the field, as well as concerns about its core concepts, which in turn seem to have questioned the identity of the discipline.

Rik Coolsaet, a Belgian academic, and a veteran of numerous EU terrorism related initiatives, for example, criticized the introduction of the concept, as well as the field at large, for fostering confusion through uncritical use and an over-reliance on micro-level research. Coolsaet further highlights that, despite numerous proposed models of radicalisation, contemporary understanding mirrors conclusions from the 1980s—radicalisation involves a complex interplay of personal characteristics, group dynamics, belief systems, and contextual factors.¹⁰

On the topic of the proposed models of radicalisation themselves, recent research additionally testifies to their limited usability. That is, earlier models often focused on youth as the primary targets of radicalizing agents. However, recent research has challenged this youth-centric view, demonstrating that radicalisation and violent extremism can be just as prevalent among older demographics.¹¹ Furthermore, the established notion that grievances are the fundamental drivers of radicalisation has been contested. Recent scholarly work proposes a shift towards considering envy as a more pivotal factor. This perspective suggests that envy, unlike grievances, endows individuals with agency—actions driven by envy are seen as proactive rather than merely reactive responses to perceived injustices.¹²

Gilbert McLaughlin, an expert in criminology from Liverpool University, offers another critical perspective, arguing that radicalisation is a social construct, which brings with it significant implications for how we comprehend the pathways towards terrorism and violent extremism. He emphasizes the need to scrutinize not just the process by which individuals engage in terrorism but also how radicalisation is conceptualized and utilized within academic and policy frameworks.¹³

In another recent major volume on radicalisation, Ford and Jackson deliver perhaps the most rigorous criticism of the radicalisation discourse to date, identifying ten key problems that should, according to the analysis, cause serious concern among scholars engaged in this area. The crux of the critique is that the concept of radicalisation is fundamentally "state-centric." It serves, perhaps unintentionally, to obscure discussions about state violence and, by extension, to legitimize the authoritarian tendencies apparent in contemporary governments.

⁹ Jonathan Kenyon, Jens B. Finder, and Christopher Baker-Beall. "Online radicalisation: Profile and risk analysis of individuals convicted of extremist offences," *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 28:1 (2022), 74-90.

¹⁰ Rik Coolsaet, "'Radicalisation' and 'Countering Radicalisation' The Emergence and expansion of a contentious concept," *The Routledge Handbook on Radicalisation and Countering Radicalisation*, Ed. Joel Busher, Leena Malkki, and Sarah Marsden (London: Routledge, 2024), 47-48.

¹¹ Maja Halilovic-Pastuovic, Gillian Wylie. "Challenging the youth assumptions behind P/CVE: acknowledging older extremists," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2024), DOI:10.1080/17539153.2024.2380547

¹² Michelle Moncrieff, Pierre Lienard. "From Envy to Radicalisation," *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 10:1 (2024), 70-86.

¹³ Gilbert McLaughlin, *Radicalisation: A Conceptual Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2024).

Furthermore, the authors contend that the radicalisation discourse is irredeemable for both analytical and policy-related purposes. This assertion is based on the concept's deep entanglement with ideologies and extremes, as well as its perpetuation of an Orientalist discourse about 'the Other,' making its redemption unfeasible. A major issue highlighted involves the problematic distinctions made between types of violence—what is deemed legitimate versus illegitimate. Such distinctions, the authors argue, not only justify certain forms of violence but also provoke violence. Ultimately, the concept of radicalisation, fraught with these and other issues, obstructs a genuine consideration of political alternatives that have been suppressed—often through brutal means.¹⁴

This is not to say that the interest in radicalisation, understood as the process of adoption of extremist ideologies, is waning. It is not. However, what is emerging is a realization of a need for critical reassessment of both the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of radicalisation, including a more holistic reconceptualization of the term – radicalisation.^{15 16} In addition to these, a more recent development includes video games as potentially relevant factors within the debate on radicalisation.

2.3. Gaming and Radicalisation

Gaming has successfully transitioned from being a parental "public enemy number one" and a source as well as a target of several waves of moral panic: to a legitimate (and very profitable) activity.¹⁷ Today, top gamers are not only recognized for their considerable skills and talents but also attract major endorsements. Nearly every major brand has engaged with the esports and gaming phenomenon, leading to an exponential increase in investments and profits each year. Beyond the expected sponsors like energy drink companies and electronics manufacturers, even the United States Air Force has also entered the arena by sponsoring jerseys for the esports team Cloud9, prominently featuring the Air Force logo.¹⁸

This is not to suggest, however, that gaming reached a point where it is no longer seen as problematic, and there are still stigmas associated with both gaming and gamers. Unlike other targets of past moral panics, gaming continues to be viewed with scepticism.¹⁹ This

¹⁴ Kieran Ford, Richard Jackson. "Problematising Radicalisation," *Radicalisation: A Global and Comparative Perspective*, ed. Akil N. Awan, James R. Lewis (London: Hurst & Company, 2024), 11-32.

¹⁵ Gilbert McLaughlin, *Radicalisation: A Conceptual Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2024); Maja Halilovic-Pastuovic, Gillian Wylie. "Challenging the youth assumptions behind P/CVE: acknowledging older extremists," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2024); Michelle Moncrieff, Pierre Lienard. "From Envy to Radicalisation," *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 10:1 (2024), 70-86; Kieran Ford, Richard Jackson. "Problematising Radicalisation," *Radicalisation: A Global and Comparative Perspective*, ed. Akil N. Awan, James R. Lewis (London: Hurst & Company, 2024), 11-32.

¹⁶ Tahir Abbas. "Radicalisation studies: An emerging interdisciplinary field," *The British Journal of Sociology* 75:2 (2024), 232-238; Rik Peels, "Towards a fruitful concept of radicalisation: a synthesis," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32:3 (2024), 610-624.

¹⁷ Allen Copenhaver. "Violent Video Games as Scapegoat After School Shootings in the United States." *Handbook of Research on Mass Shootings and Multiple Victim Violence*, ed. Gordon A. Crews (Hershey: IGI Global, 2020), 243-267; Nicholas D. Bowman. "The rise (and refinement) of moral panic." *The video game debate : unravelling the physical, social, and psychological effects of digital games*, ed. Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt (New York, London: Routledge, 2016), 22-38; Carly A. Kocurek. "The Agony and the Ecstasy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of Death Race." *Game Studies* 12:1 (2012), <https://tinyurl.com/mv7yc9c6>.

¹⁸ Adam Fitch. "U.S. Air Force sponsors Cloud9's CS:GO roster." *Esports Insider* (19 July 2018), last accessed 03 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/f96n8dh5>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/2awud8pp>.

¹⁹ Devan Cole. "Trump, McCarthy cite video games as a driver behind mass shootings." Cable News Network (05 August 2019), last accessed 03 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/bdez2bbk>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/58m4k3c4>.

persistence is somewhat remarkable, especially considering the outcomes of major studies that have debunked various myths about gaming, gamers, and gaming communities - particularly the alleged link between in-game and real-world violence.²⁰ This topic, also formed the basis for the initial cycle of research into the relationship between gaming and extremism. Within this report we broadly categorise these cycles of research as the “first,” and “second” wave of research, demarcated by the 2019 Christchurch massacre.

2.3.1. The First Wave

The initial wave of research into the societal impacts of video games was predominantly US-based and oriented, emerging amid the most recent moral panics about the medium. This research sought to broaden the discussion beyond the contentious and increasingly scrutinized claims linking video game violence directly to real-world aggression. It aimed to shift the focus towards more substantiated concerns that promised richer empirical insights.

In this context, David J. Leonard’s 2006 article not only critiqued the then-dominant focus on violence in video game discourse but also illuminated how this limited perspective diverted attention from critical issues such as the perpetuation of racist ideologies through gaming. Leonard argued that video games were contributing to the spread of white supremacist ideology. Leonard further argued for a more critical and intersectional approach in game studies, which would better understand and address the impact of these media on broader social and political issues. He emphasized that video games are not just entertainment, “kid stuff,” but a significant cultural force shaping public perceptions and policies around race and gender.²¹

On the topic of race, Tenner Higgin analysed the “disappearance of blackness” in fantasy games, using cultural race theory. Higgin argued that fantasy games often designed characters and narratives which promoted a Eurocentric and racially exclusive fantasy world, where Black characters were either absent or depicted through stereotypical and reductive tropes.²²

In 2010, Andrew Selepak, analysed 28 racist video games, with a focus on the “enemies” within the games. Selepak found that people of non-white ethnicities, mostly Black, and Jews (sic.) were most often portrayed as the “enemy,” with the “hero” often being white, though mostly ambiguous. Selepak concluded that the games were developed as “a form of entertainment to reinforce and educate players of racial hierarchy,” with the core message being that violence is “the only way to deal with blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Muslim, and homosexuals [sic].”²³

²⁰ David Dupee, Varun Thvar, and Nina Vasan. “Stanford researchers scoured every reputable study for the link between video games and gun violence that politicians point to. Here’s what the review found.” *Fortune* (02 May 2023), last accessed 01 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/bdf8b4jr>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/4ak3mhav>; Rachel Kowert, and Thorsten Quandt. “Revisiting old debates.” *The Video Game Debate 2: Revisiting the Physical, Social, and Psychological Effects of Video Games*, ed. Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt (New York, London: Routledge, 2021), 2-3.

²¹ David J. Leonard. “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies.” *Games and Culture* 1:1 (2006), 83-88. Leonard wrote extensively on similar issues before this article, however, not in relation to white supremacy, i.e., far-right extremism.

²² Tanner Higgin. “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.” *Games and Culture* 4:1 (2008), 3-26.

²³ Andrew Selepak. “Skinhead super Mario brothers: An examination of racist and violent games onWhite supremacist websites.” *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 17:1 (2010), 34.

A major milestone in first-wave gaming research is the 2014 volume by C. Richard King, and David J. Leonard, in which the authors discuss the nuances of relationships between white nationalism and video games, within the broader context of the role and presence of white nationalism in pop culture.²⁴ This volume stands out as a seminal work which provided invaluable insight on the establishment of the virtual communities, and discursive networks activated through the online engagements of far-right extremists with various popular cultural texts, including movies, music, television, video games, etc. The authors outline the ways in which far-right activists interpret popular cultural forms and probe the contemporary spaces of far-right popular culture. The chapter on gaming examines the complex and seemingly contradictory relationship white nationalists have with video games, revealing how they perceive mainstream gaming culture as both a threat and a tool for advancing their ideology. Overall, the authors argue that games could be used by far-right extremists (FRE) as, 1) recruitment tools, drawing in population already immersed in gaming culture; 2) training simulators; 3) propaganda platforms, via the creation of bespoke games. As will be shown, this contribution has largely and independently anticipated the debates and discussion within the post-Christchurch academic discussions by more than a decade.

The discipline achieved a more global academic engagement in response to the several developments, i.e., the varied propaganda techniques employed by jihadi terror groups, including their exploitation of the gaming ecosystem.²⁵ However, global interest in the connection between the far-right and the gaming ecosystem, arguably grew as a consequence of a broader interdisciplinary shift toward studying the far-right. This shift was largely a response to several key events: the 2011 Norway Massacre, events leading up to the 2016 United States presidential election, and the subsequent Trump presidency.²⁶ These factors also form the broader backdrop for the 2019 Christchurch attack. The 2019 Christchurch massacre is considered by some, as the flashpoint of a short-lived series of right-wing terrorist attacks where the assailant would attach a recording or streaming device to themselves and broadcast the attack live online.²⁷ This event also demarcates the field of research into the relationship between extremism and gaming. Before we proceed however, we shall provide some information concerning Gamergate, an event separate from, yet closely related to, the development we just discussed.

²⁴ C. Richard King, David J. Leonard. "Chapter 6: Hating the Playa: White Nationalism and Sport in the Contemporary USA." *Beyond Hate: White Power and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014), 111-134.

²⁵ Marcus Schulzke. "Simulating terrorism and insurgency: video games in the war of ideas." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27:4 (2014), 627-643; Ahmed Al-Rawi. "Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30:4 (2016), 740-760; Miron Lakomy. "Let's Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42:4 (2019), 383-406.

²⁶ Bart Schuurman. "Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32:5 (2020), 1011-1026; Cf. Yasmine Ahmed, Orla Lynch. "Terrorism Studies and the Far Right – The State of Play" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47:2 (2024), 199-219. While 'Gamergate' significantly impacted the gaming ecosystem, it is considered secondary to these events and arguably a consequence of them.

²⁷ Despite several attacks attempting to emulate the Christchurch attacks, the overall percentage of such incidents has remained small. More recent attacks have generally avoided adopting similar tactics.

2.3.2. Gamergate: Gaming and Gamer Misogyny under Scrutiny

Gender issues within gaming quickly emerged as a research topic with high relevance and output volume. Much of that output is tied into the debates concerning misogyny within gaming spaces. The events of gamergate which took place between 2014 and 2015, resulted in the production of what amounts to 81.2% of all material on gender and gaming.

For those unaware of the event, Gamergate was a series of harassment campaigns which took place period between August 2014 and 2015. The “gate” suffix in "Gamergate" derives from the infamous Watergate scandal, which ended Nixon's presidency. According to its "moderate" supporters, Gamergate concerned a legitimate issue troubling the gaming community: ethics in gaming journalism, specifically the opaque relationships between gaming studios and the journalists and reviewers tasked with objectively reporting on and reviewing their products. However, the campaign quickly degenerated into anti-feminism and an online harassment campaign targeting several female game developers and a feminist media critic.



This campaign was marked by extreme misogyny and anti-feminist discourse. Threats of rape, other forms of violence, and death either directly or via the use of trolling, and offensive memes, were the tactics of the pro-gamergate party. Twitter became a battlefield of sorts, with millions of users getting involved. Although the initial attacks focused on specific developers, the harassment did not have just one target or specific gaming community behind it. Later analyses revealed that more than a quarter of the usernames engaged in these harassment campaigns using social media and in particular Twitter, were created during the period or were inactive before it.²⁸ Subsequently, it also came to light that although

²⁸ Andy Baio, “72 Hours of #Gamergate” *Waxy* (27 October 2014), last accessed 24 June 2024, <https://waxy.org/2014/10/72-hours-of-gamergate/>.

Gamergate lacked a formal leadership structure, it had a central hub of sorts, on the now-defunct 8chan image board.²⁹

FBI documents show that one of the suspects who was identified and who in fact confessed, was responsible for over 50 phone calls, with the purpose of harassing and annoying the victim. Another suspect was identified, and pending an investigation the case against him? was dismissed. The individual issued the threats “as a joke.” Lastly, one of the victims was warned by the FBI to limit her media interactions concerning the investigation, because it could negatively impact their work. Eventually, no Gamergate related charges were filed.³⁰ Recent research into online harassment of this type has in fact identified elements of gamification inherent in such behaviour – online harassment campaigns function as alternate reality games, where the collective goal is to disrupt, and potentially ruin, peoples’ lives.³¹ This approach, arguably helps in contextualizing the phenomenon of hyper-, or super-posters - individuals who post extremist content at a disproportionate rate, often “dominating and shaping discourse within extremist forums.”³²

There appears to be a potential correlation with another notorious online community, the incels. Around the same time that the Gamergate harassment was escalating, the incel movement was gaining traction, particularly following the May 2014 Isla Vista killings.

The 2014 Isla Vista killings constituted a sequence of lethal incidents near the University of California, Santa Barbara, where Elliot Rodger fatally attacked six individuals and injured fourteen others before committing suicide. These acts of violence, executed via stabbing, shooting, and vehicular assault, were preceded by the publication of a manifesto in which Rodger articulated his motives, deeply entrenched in personal and societal grievances. Notably, he expressed profound distress and resultant aggression stemming from his perceived sexual rejection and involuntary celibacy.

This incident, marked by the publication of the perpetrator’s manifesto, is arguably the genesis of the contemporary incel movement. Likewise, research has found that the discourse within the reddit community discussing the topic of gamergate exhibited a significant overlap with right-wing extremist (RWE) discourse, and in particular commonplace instances of RWE bigotry (both hate speech, and RWE specific jargon), anti-left rhetoric, and normalization of hate speech within the limits of free speech.³³

²⁹ Sarah A. Aghazadeh, Alison Burns, Jun Chu, Hazel Feigenblatt, Elizabeth Larabee, Lucy Maynard, Amy L. M. Meyers, Jessica L. O’Brien, and Leah Rufus, “GamerGate: A Case Study in Online Harassment,” *Online Harassment* ed. Jennifer Golbeck (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 179-207; Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedburg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)

³⁰ FBI files available at: N.A. “Gamergate,” *FBI Records: The Vault* (n.d.), last accessed 12 September 2024, <https://vault.fbi.gov/gamergate>.

³¹ Kevin Veale, *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³² Lewys Brace, and Stephane Beale. “Extremist Influencers: Hyper- and Super-Posters in Extremist Forums.” *GNET* (03 October 2022), last accessed, 14 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/z2x9hfck>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/hnx6sbn>.

³³ Ashley Peckford, “Right Wing Extremism in a Video Game Community? A Qualitative Content Analysis Exploring the Discourse of the Reddit GamerGate Community r/KotakuInAction,” *A Closer Look in Unusual Times: Criminological Perspectives from Crim 862* (Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 2020), 65-79; also see: Marcus Maloney, Steven Roberts, and Timothy Graham, *Gender, masculinity and video gaming: Analysing reddit’s r/gaming community* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

The Gamergate controversy was, according to this line of research, a moment with implications for, but also far beyond, the gaming ecosystem. Condis, for example, argued that Gamergate became the defining moment of the contemporary understanding of a “gamer” within a part of the population. Moreover, Condis, suggests that the “gamer,” as post-Gamergate construct, follows a line from “gaming masculinity” as a reactionary response to the perceived loss of ownership of the geek culture. While mainly focusing on, what she perceives as, toxicity of masculinity in gaming spaces in general, she also draws a connection between gaming behaviours, such as online trolling (widely used during Gamergate) and the rise of the populist right in the US, and especially the “alt-right,” various anti-feminist movements, and the electoral success of Donald Trump, presented in the chapter as the “ultimate troll.”³⁴

Although Gamergate happened a decade ago, issues of misogyny and sexism besetting gaming eco-systems continue to be documented. The industry itself faces persistent allegations of sexism and harassment – as encapsulated in the lawsuit taken in 2021 by female employees against Activision Blizzard (makers of Call of Duty, Overwatch etc.) which ended in a settlement of \$18 million to compensate employees for enduring a ‘toxic culture’^{35 36}

Academic literature analysing gender and gaming notes that the masculine hegemony and sexism embedded in the industry’s structures are often replicated in the structure of game play, story lines and character development, with marketing directed to ‘young, cisgendered, straight’ males whose masculinity combines both ideals of competitiveness and technical prowess with a more marginalised sense of being ‘adolescent and lacking’.³⁷ One example of the construction of ‘toxic masculinity’ through storyline and character development is Conway’s analysis of *God of War* and its protagonist Kratos, whom Conway dubs ‘a masculine power fantasy’. Early iterations of the character are purely driven by rage and revenge, requiring players to perform ‘autonomously and aggressively’. Later versions, where Kratos becomes a father and grieving widower, involve a masculinity trying to control rage but still

³⁴ Megan Condis, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

³⁵ Mitchell Clark, “Activision Blizzard faces lawsuit and employee backlash over sexual harassment,” *The Verge* (16 December 2023), last accessed 24 September 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/47rdtnk9>.

³⁶ The DFEH accused Activision Blizzard of violating California’s Equal Pay Act and the Fair Employment and Housing Act. Following a two-year investigation, the lawsuit was settled in 2023 with Activision Blizzard agreeing to pay \$54 million to resolve the allegations. In addition, Activision Blizzard settled a related lawsuit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for \$18 million, addressing claims of sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and retaliation within the company. These settlements required Activision Blizzard to implement substantial changes to improve workplace conditions and prevent future incidents of harassment and discrimination. The company also set aside \$47 million to handle accusations related to gender discrimination in pay and promotions. Other major gaming companies have faced similar allegations. In 2018, Riot Games was hit with a class-action lawsuit alleging gender discrimination and a toxic work environment, which resulted in a \$100 million settlement in 2021. Similarly, Sony faced a class-action lawsuit in 2021, filed by former IT analyst Emma Majo, alleging that the company’s toxic work culture towards women led to her termination and included accounts from several employees reporting gender discrimination and sexual harassment. However, these financial penalties, while seemingly large, are but a drop in the bucket for these major players in the gaming industry. For example, Activision Blizzard was fined \$90 million, but this represents less than 1% of its annual revenue of \$8.71 billion in 2023. Similarly, Riot Games’ settlement of \$100 million is a minor expense compared to the gaming revenues of its parent company, Tencent, which amounted to approximately \$27.4 billion in 2022. In Sony’s case, although the revenue figures for its PlayStation division were not specified, the financial repercussions of any legal actions would constitute only a small fraction of Sony Corporation’s total earnings, which were \$88.34 billion in 2022. For the aftermath of these events see: Suzanne de Castell et al., “Gaming Equity: Women, Videogame Companies, and Public Discourse,” *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research 7:1* (Reading: Academic Conferences International Limited, 2024), 107-115.

³⁷ Amanda C. Cote, *Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 5-6, 23.

'privileging the masculine over the feminine' in a world of gender binaries.³⁸ The representation of female characters equally reflects binary gender orders in which women are subordinated and objectified.

One study of 6.2 million words of dialogue in video game scripts showed not only that male characters are more present and more verbal (70%) but that female characters have less dialogue, lesser roles and the type of words they speak are of gratitude, apology, indecision or flirtatiousness.³⁹ The representation of the female body in games as hypersexualised and/or seductive is ubiquitous.⁴⁰ However, what the research of Cross et. al. with gamers concludes is that there is a lack of causative effect between short term exposure to sexualised and passive female characters in games and the endorsement of negative gender attitudes.⁴¹ This insight reminds that as with wider debates about gaming and violence, it is far from simple to draw uncomplicated lines between online/gaming spaces and 'real world' attitudes or even violence.

Indeed, many writers on gender and gaming present a more nuanced picture. With about 50% of the world's gamers being women, and the growing space of 'casual games' in the industry (easy to learn games for broad audiences), the gaming world is caught in a paradox between simultaneous exclusionary (gamergate etc.) and inclusionary trends.^{42 43} More fundamentally, because video games ultimately 'operate as expressions of the dream life of a culture'⁴⁴ multiple ways of imagining, representing and interpreting gender through games are possible, as Ruberg argues in *Video Games Have Always been Queer*.⁴⁵ In this complex space there are studies which suggest that 'gaming communities in which misogyny, hate of minorities, expressions of violence, toxicity and 'politically incorrect' humour are prevalent offer extremists a place to blend in and meet audiences, but even the same report acknowledges

³⁸ Stephen Conway, "Poisonous Pantheons: God of War and Toxic Masculinity," *Games and Culture* 15:8 (2019), 943–961.

³⁹ Stephanie Rennick et al., "Gender bias in video game dialogue," *R Soc Open Sci* 24:10 (2023), doi: 10.1098/rsos.221095.

⁴⁰ Liam Cross et al., "Gendered violence and sexualized representations in video games: (Lack of) effect on gender-related attitudes," *New Media & Society* 26:3 (2024), 1648–1669.

⁴¹ Cross et al., "Gendered Violence," 1649.

⁴² Cote, *Gender and Identity*, 2.

⁴³ The percentage cited above, though not incorrect, reflects an adoption of the widest possible designation of a gamer, sans many of the cultural and milieu identity markers, and it simply refers to people who play video games in any type of capacity. However the terminology is more complex. A gamer is a category distinct from that of a player, see Appendix 1 for details. Moreover, concerning the demographics, industry findings emerged from a survey conducted by Activision Blizzard, titled "Gallery of the Gamer: Modern Gamer Personas." This report, which analysed over 21,000 gamers from the US, UK, France, and Germany, highlights a clear trend: higher engagement levels overwhelmingly correlate with a higher likelihood of the gamer being male. For instance, the most dedicated segment, "Next Levelers," who play 2.4 times more than the average gamer and spend \$1,600 annually (on their content only), are predominantly male (75%) and in their mid-30s. Another key segment, "Player Ones," representing 25% of all gamers, is similarly male-dominated (69%), also in their mid-30s, with slightly lower game-specific spending compared to next levellers. Interestingly, less than half of all gamers actually identify as such, and those who do are predominantly men. The only notable gender-based exception is found in the "Super Swipers" category—mobile game players focused on word games—where women aged 50 and above make up 64% of users. One of the largest game developers globally, Japan-based Capcom, recently held an online survey called 'Super Elections' in June 2024, where fans worldwide could vote for their favourite characters, game series, and express preferences for sequels or new titles. A total of 254,148 people from 220 countries participated. Out of all participants, 82% (208,650) identified as male, 14% (34,794) as female, and 4% (10,704) as other. 89% of the respondents were aged between 20 and 40, highlighting a dominant demographic within the gaming community. See: N.A., Gallery of the Gamer. Behind the Art: Modern Gamers Personas (Activision Blizzard Media, 2020). Available at, Activision Blizzard Media. "Modern Game Personas." *Activision Publishing, Inc* (01 October 2020), last accessed 22 July 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/s6bshmj4>; Capcom, *Capcom Super Elections* (2024), last accessed 25 September 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/42ca852b>.

⁴⁴ Murray, S. (2018) *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. London and New York: IB Tauris, p5.

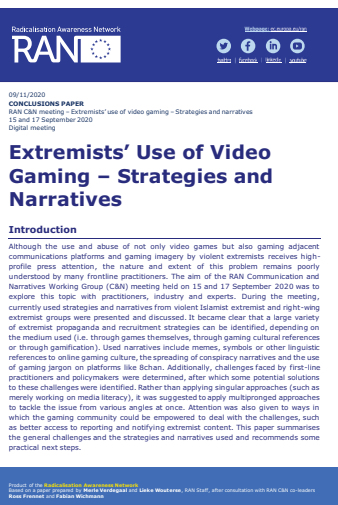
⁴⁵ Ruberg, B. (2019) *Video Games have Always been Queer*. New York: NYU Press

this is only a 'potential' and as yet, there is an absence of evidence that a gaming-violent extremism nexus exists.⁴⁶

2.3.3. Second Wave: Gaming and Extremism after Christchurch

As mentioned, the Christchurch attack resulted in a new approach to the study of extremism in radicalisation, insofar as the relationship with gaming is concerned. What arguably significantly distinguishes the second wave from its predecessor is not solely its theoretical innovations, i.e., gamification of violence as an indicator of a significant overlap with the gaming ecosystem, but also the way these advancements were achieved - through cross-sectoral collaboration. For instance, a central feature of the second wave, a typology of links between gaming and extremism, was initially developed by researchers, SME and industry representatives, and a research arm of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). Overall, the post-Christchurch paradigm, seemingly hinges its argument on the intersection of video gaming and violent extremism, via the concept of "gamification." In addition, according to this line of research "game aesthetics," observed in extremist content suggested a substantial link to gaming culture.⁴⁷

The proposed typology suggests that extremists use the gaming ecosystem in four primary exploitation strategies: 1) the creation of bespoke games, 2) modding existing games, 3) utilizing in-game chat features, and 4) leveraging gaming-adjacent platforms.⁴⁸



⁴⁶ Schlegel and Amarasingam (think this is ibid) p8-9.

⁴⁷ Suraj Lakhani, and Susann Wiedlitzka, "“Press F to Pay Respects”: An Empirical Exploration of the Mechanics of Gamification in Relation to the Christchurch Attack," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35:7 (2023), 1586-1603; Robert Evans. "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror." *Bellingcat* (4 August 2019), last accessed 04 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/253232ew>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/32tx2kjd>; Linda Schlegel. "Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalisation processes." *Journal for Deradicalization* 23 (2020), 1-43.

⁴⁸ Linda Schlegel, and Rachel Kowert. "Introduction: Extremism in Digital Gaming Spaces." *Gaming and Extremism: The radicalisation of digital playgrounds*, ed. Linda Schlegel, and Rachel Kowert, (New York, London: Routledge, 2024), 3-6; RAN report cited in the chapter: Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. "RAN C&N Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives," 3; Galen Lamphere-Englund, and Jessica White. "The Online Gaming Ecosystem: Assessing Socialisation, Digital Harms, and Extremism Mitigation Efforts." *Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)*, (May 2023), 15-21. This GNET report includes an additional method, absent in the preceding reports, namely "Financing and Money Laundering."

In addition to these direct abuses of the gaming ecosystem, there are two indirect methods: 5) employing gaming cultural references, and 6) gamifying the radicalisation process.⁴⁹ This typology was included in a pilot study, commissioned by United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), which aimed to: (i) explore the scope and nature of how violent extremists exploit gaming spaces; (ii) identify potential strategies to prevent or mitigate this exploitation; and (iii) gain insights into the potential of using gaming PCVE settings.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the RAN typology was quickly adopted by a number of academics, some of whom were involved to various degrees with its development. For example, the contributors in the 2024 volume edited by Linda Schlegel and Rachel Kowert offer a broad cross-section of the major arguments to date, concerning the presence of extremism in the gaming ecosystem, thoroughly covering the typology proposed by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). The volume itself encapsulates many key themes of the second wave of research on gaming and extremism, providing a comprehensive "snapshot" of the field in the aftermath of the Christchurch events.⁵¹ Overall, the authors tend to stress the importance of viewing gaming and its related platforms as a complex ecosystem where different actors and factors interact. The volume often highlights the need for more empirical research on this evolving issue to inform effective policy responses, including counter-messaging and platform moderation.

Real-world examples of radicalisation exclusively through gaming spaces are few and far between, with a consequent dearth of empirical academic research into the issue. The exception concerns an article which analysed the use of a combination of online gaming platforms in the recruitment and radicalisation of children into far-right extremism. The study in question employed a qualitative content analysis of police investigation files from 2016 to 2021, examining how two boys under 14 were radicalized through interactions on gaming platforms like Roblox, communication platforms such as Discord, and video platforms like Bitchute. It was established that the gaming platform served as an initial contact point, and was primarily used for leisure and socializing. However, actual ideological indoctrination and encouragement of offline extremist behaviour occurred primarily *outside* the gaming space, i.e., through Discord and Bitchute.⁵²

⁴⁹ When discussing the production of bespoke games, this involves extremist groups creating new games where the narrative or various elements are designed to further their ideologies. Similarly, the modding of existing games entails producing modifications with the same goal: promoting extremist ideologies. In-game chat features and the use of gaming-adjacent platforms are identified as potential vectors for radicalisation, providing direct communication channels between extremists and potential recruits. The use of gaming cultural references is seen as a method to enhance extremist recruitment efforts through more engaging propaganda. The concept of gamification, broadly understood as applying gaming mechanics to non-gaming contexts, is also exploited to make the radicalisation process more appealing and interactive. See: Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. "RAN C&N Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives," 3.

⁵⁰ Linda Schlegel and Amaranth Amarasingam. *Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism*. (United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, UN Counter-Terrorism Centre UNCCT, 2021). For a more detailed overview on all major activities of RAN in relation to the topic of extremism and gaming see: Petra Regeni et al. *Spotlight: Games, Gaming and Gamification* (RAN, June 2023); available at: N.A. "Spotlight on Games, Gaming and Gamification." *Migration and Home Affairs* (June 2023), last accessed at 04 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/awkw4h45>. Some of the insights from this survey were explored in greater detail in, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Daniel Kelley. "Hate and Extremism on Gaming platforms: Insights from Surveys with the Gaming Community." *Gaming and Extremism: The radicalisation of digital playgrounds*, ed. Linda Schlegel, and Rachel Kowert, (New York, London: Routledge, 2024), 110-129.

⁵¹ Linda Schlegel, Rachel Kowert ed., *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalisation of Digital Playgrounds* (London: Routledge, 2024).

⁵² Daniel Koehler, Verena Fiebig, and Irina Jugl, "From Gaming to Hating: Extreme-Right Ideological Indoctrination and Mobilization for Violence of Children on Online Gaming Platforms," *Political Psychology* 44:2 (2023), 419-434.

The issue of “extremist mods” has also been discussed in relation to using games for historical education. The article by Andrew J. Salvati discusses the phenomenon of players creating or using game modifications (mods) for historical strategy games that incorporate extremist ideologies, including racist and neo-fascist themes. These mods often reconfigure game mechanics to allow players to engage in scenarios like religious wars or ethnic cleansings under the guise of exploring historical 'what-ifs'. Salvati’s balanced interpretation acknowledges the dual nature of these mods: while they can enhance gameplay and provide new historical insights (e.g., playing as native Americans in a game focused on colonization), they can also become platforms for ideological extremism, normalising discussions and content that promote ethnic violence and other harmful practices.⁵³

The topic of moderation inevitably raises questions about the limits of free speech and censorship. Recent studies have dealt with this issue, specifically within the context of the digital age. For example, David Bromell delves into the complex dynamics in play within large tech companies, critiquing business models that foster an “attention economy” and the role of algorithms in amplifying damaging content. He argues against the heavy reliance on artificial intelligence for content moderation, advocating instead enhanced transparency and accountability from these platforms.⁵⁴ Others have also pointed out that extremists and conspiracy theorists manipulate online content, algorithms, and platform features to “game” content moderation systems and circumvent regulations. Understanding these manipulation tactics is then crucial for developing more effective policies and moderation practices in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Content moderation emerges as a sociotechnical problem, consequently, with significant limitations of purely technological solutions (AI moderation) which disregard the importance of human factors⁵⁵

⁵³ Andrew J. Salvati. “Fantasies of Control: Modding for Ethnic Violence and Nazi Fetishism in Historical Strategy Games.” *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian* ed. Alexander von Lunen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (London: Routledge, 2020), 155-169.

⁵⁴ David Bromell, *Regulating Free Speech in a Digital Age: Hate, Harm and the Limits of Censorship* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

⁵⁵ Ashley A. Mattheis, and Ashton Kingdon. “Moderating manipulation: Demystifying extremist tactics for gaming the (regulatory) system,” *Policy & Internet* 15:4 (2023), 478-497.



3. Recent Developments in the Field: An Emergent Critical Discourse

3.1. “Gamification of Extremism” and “Gaming Aesthetics”

Scholarly scepticism is growing about the emphasis on aesthetic similarities between first-person shooter (FPS) games and extremist content.

A recent article, which, among other sources, uses interviews with Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre, provides little evidence that attackers deliberately design their video streams to mimic FPS games or "Let's Play" videos. Instead, the specific "aesthetic" observed in these videos is more likely a result of practical considerations, such as the placement of the camera mount on the terrorist's equipment, rather than any intentional stylistic choice to replicate gaming visuals.⁵⁶

Concerning gamification, the notion that the gamification of violence, along with the propensity for dark humour and usage of "gaming references," is somehow affiliated with the gaming ecosystem and gamers as a community is likewise challenged. This is due to a lack of supporting evidence and the introduction of alternative, seemingly more nuanced theories. It is suggested that the inspiration is drawn from imageboards and the associated "Chan/Kun" culture, or that the gamification as argued in the first wave is even present in the post-9/11 terror attacks. As is well known, these platforms foster a form of cultural scripting where behaviours and references that mimic gaming tropes can be used for various purposes, including satire, social commentary, or as part of the board's internal language and humour.⁵⁷ The use of gaming references and the gamification observed in extremist propaganda could

⁵⁶ Sam Andrews. "The 'First Person Shooter' Perspective: A Different View on First Person Shooters, Gamification, and First Person Terrorist Propaganda." *Games and Culture* 19:1 (2023), 67-69.

⁵⁷ Andrews. "The First Person Shooter' Perspective." 69-71.

thus be interpreted as a product of these imageboard cultures, rather than a reflection of mainstream gaming communities.

Another recent article offers a contrasting perspective to the proposed understanding of the role of gamification in the radicalisation process.⁵⁸ Hickman argues that terrorism operates as a form of communication, where terrorists frame themselves as heroes or anti-heroes engaged in a battle between good and evil. The author highlights that terrorists internalize these narratives, seeing themselves as central figures responsible for fulfilling a "righteous" mission. Hickman proposes that if gamification is to be applied to extremism, it should be understood from an actor-centric perspective, where violent extremists internalize their roles within a narrative structure. In this view, their real-life violent actions become part of a personal "game" or mission, with the extremists cast as the main characters. Hickman concludes by addressing the implications for counter-terrorism, recommending strategies such as promoting counter-narratives, challenging terrorists' self-perception as heroes, and using ludic interventions to disrupt extremist narratives.⁵⁹

Recent findings in fact lend credence to Hickman's ludic interventions approach. The Decount project⁶⁰ sought to design and disseminate an online campaign including deradicalisation and prevention online resources; videos produced by vulnerable youth; and a video game structured by binary decisions leading to radicalisation or maintaining resilience. According to a pair of articles resulting from the project, the game effectively challenged and countered extremist viewpoints. Participants who played the game within a workshop setting also exhibited a significant decrease in authoritarian attitudes relative to the measurements taken before playing the game, indicating a broader positive influence on political attitudes and critical thinking. Moreover, participants in both conditions generally rated their learning experience positively, with those in the workshop condition reporting even stronger effects. Lastly, participants felt the game provided them with valuable knowledge for understanding and potentially intervening in radicalisation processes among their peers and family members.⁶¹

Likewise, Nick Robinson and Joe Whittaker, have argued for a refocusing of the field on interactivity in video games, since interactivity is the key differentiator of games v. other media like film, text, or music. They also questioned the longstanding perception of extremist games as propaganda tools aimed at exclusively proselytizing outside the extremist groups. Instead, they suggest that bespoke games are perhaps used to strengthen the views of those already in the group, or at least sympathetic to the group's ideology. For example, within the extremist games the "extremist worldview" is the "correct" view, with no justification provided to the player; such games contain "information and symbols that require a degree of specialist

⁵⁸ Morgan Hickman. "Protagonists of terror: the role of ludology and narrative in conceptualising extremist violence." *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 16:3 (2024), 428-444.

⁵⁹ The use of the term "ludic" here refers to what is commonly known as gamification. However, in line with recent shifts in the field and to avoid the negative connotations often associated with video gaming, we prefer to use "ludic."

⁶⁰ N.A., "DECOUNT" University of Innsbruck (n.d.), last accessed 25 September 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/2p4rvka3>.

⁶¹ Felix Lippe, Rebecca Walter, and Veronika Hofinger, "Evaluating an online-game intervention to prevent violent Extremism," *Journal for Deradicalisation* 32 (2022), 1-34; Daniela PISOIU, and Felix Lippe, "The name of the game: Promoting resilience against extremism through an online gaming campaign," *First Monday* 27:5 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i5.12600>.

knowledge to identify; for the player to already be part of the in-group;” and most of these games are distributed via extremist outlets.⁶²

While a considerable amount of theoretical work has been developed, the field still requires substantial experimental data to support these theories. Analyses within the gaming ecosystem often adopt an ideologically neutral approach, yet research predominantly concentrates on specific types of extremism, primarily jihadi and far-right variants, leaving other forms underexplored.⁶³ Furthermore, the RAN typology of extremist abuse tends to emphasize 'supply side extremism,' that is, how extremist groups use games to attract new members. But even work within RAN is very wary of making strong claims about the connection between violent extremism and video games, given the current lack of evidence. This is clear, for example, from the multiple conditional words used in the following from a RAN 2023 report; 'within gaming communities toxic narratives can inadvertently serve as a gateway, potentially laying the foundations for susceptibility to violent extremism and extremists can target toxic gaming communities for possible recruitment'⁶⁴

Lastly, to enhance the existing body of research, there is a pressing need for more actor-oriented investigations that delve into how extremists specifically utilize gaming environments—exploring the motivations, methods, and profiles of individuals who seek out and join micro-hubs (small platforms or community spaces within larger gaming ecosystems) within these spaces. Essentially, this would entail a shift towards examining the 'demand side' of extremism, focusing on the reasons and mechanisms through which players are drawn into such networks. For example, the cases discussed in the Koehler et al. article indicate the need for this shift, since in both cases the teenagers went into the online gaming spaces with a prior interest in right wing extremism.⁶⁵

3.2. The need for a unified terminology

The field also suffers from a lack of clarity in its terminology, with some ambiguity stemming from supporting disciplines such as radicalisation studies, terrorism studies, and far-right studies, while other inconsistencies appear self-inflicted. This inconsistency complicates discourse and hinders the development of a cohesive understanding across studies.⁶⁶ Notable discrepancies exist between reports on “extremism” within gaming spaces from both academic and industry circles.

⁶² Nick Robinson, and Joe Whittaker. “Playing for Hate? Extremism, Terrorism, and Videogames.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021), 10-11.

⁶³ Amaranth Amarasingam, Daniel Kelley, “Hate and Extremism on Gaming Platforms: Insights from Surveys with the Gaming Community,” *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds*, ed. Linda Schlegel and Rachel Kowert (New York: Routledge, 2024), 110-129; Garison Wells et al., “Right-Wing Extremism in Mainstream Games: A Review of the Literature,” *Games and Culture* 19:4 (2023), 469-492.

⁶⁴ Wallner, C., White, J. and Regeni, P. (2023) Building Resilience to Extremism in Gaming: Identifying and Addressing Toxicity in Gaming Culture. RAN Policy Support Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁶⁵ Daniel Koehler, Verena Fiebig, and Irina Jugl, “From Gaming to Hating: Extreme-Right Ideological Indoctrination and Mobilization for Violence of Children on Online Gaming Platforms,” *Political Psychology* 44:2 (2023), 419-434.

⁶⁶ These and other reports all use distinctive terminologies to denote the same types of behaviours. ADL. *Hate is no Game: Hate and Harassment in Online Games 2022*. (ADL Center for Technology & Society, 2023); Linda Schlegel. *Extremists’ use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures* (RAN, 2021); eSafety Commissioner. *Leveling up to Stay Safe Young people’s experiences navigating the joys and risks of online gaming* (The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, 2024).

Again, a recent academic publication reported high levels of “extremist sentiment” in gaming spaces.⁶⁷ However, it failed to differentiate clearly between general toxicity and specific extremist behaviour, which is distinctly categorized in the industry-led study, the “2023 Toxicity in Multiplayer Games Report.”⁶⁸ This industry report quantified various *toxic* behaviours such as cheating, harassment, and intended disruption, based on user experiences. Extremist content was considered as well, but as an *aspect of toxic* behaviour, whereas the academic study seems to *equate* toxic behaviour with extremism.

It is crucial for researchers and industry experts to collaborate on establishing clear definitions and scalable methodologies that can be universally applied to study toxicity and extremism in gaming. Such efforts would not only enhance the comparability of studies but also improve the overall quality of research and its applicability to real-world settings, ultimately fostering a safer and more inclusive gaming environment. This could involve interdisciplinary collaboration, utilizing feedback from the gaming community, and developing shared frameworks and glossaries that both display scientific rigor and resonate with the gaming community's real-world experiences. This is not to argue that toxicity, or harassment are not serious issues that do not need to be considered; nevertheless, toxicity is not extremism, and griefing is not criminal (yet).⁶⁹

When discussing the relationship between gaming and extremism, researchers often employ the terminology of “gaming, and gaming-adjacent spaces” to describe the different platforms where extremists might be active. And yet, the distinction(s) between these, if there are any, are rarely explained. For example, in the aforementioned RAN report on extremism in gaming, it is claimed that “There is no clear definition of what constitutes a gaming platform, a gaming-adjacent platform, and platforms where gaming-related content appears.”⁷⁰ The UN report discussed earlier does not offer any clarification or definitions of either the gaming, or gaming-adjacent platforms. The ISD reports, while focusing on platforms similar to those considered by the RAN and UN reports, do not distinguish them as gaming, or gaming-adjacent; instead, they use the phrase “platforms associated with gaming communities.”^{71 72}

This lack of terminological clarity spills over into general debate and public discourse, complicating our understanding of where and how extremist activities in gaming contexts occur. If we cannot define satisfactorily what a “gaming space” is (and consequently what it is not), the term risks becoming useless. We are not taking issue with the choice of platforms per se; but in how they are implicitly presented as gamer-centric, which, apart from designated gaming platforms, is often not the case. For example, Discord is often described in these and other reports as a gaming-adjacent platform. While it was initially developed in

⁶⁷ Rachel Kowert, Elizabeth Kilmer, and Alex Newhouse, “Taking it to the extreme: prevalence and nature of extremist sentiment in games,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (2024), 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1410620.

⁶⁸ N.A. 2023 *Toxicity in Multiplayer Games Report* (Unity Technologies, 2023).

⁶⁹ Similar need for clarity, or at least an awareness of the intrinsic complexities, apply to other key terms in the field such as recruitment, grooming, radicalisation, gamer v player distinction, and so forth.

Griefing is a term used to describe deliberate in-game disruptive activities like trolling, cheating, in-game theft, etc.

⁷⁰ Schlegel. *Extremists’ use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures*. 4.

⁷¹ Jacob Davey. “Gamers Who Hate: An Introduction to ISD’s Gaming and Extremism Series” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (12 August 2021), last accessed 05 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/bddt7nu2>, 5. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/bddt7nu2>.

⁷² Even the term “gaming” carries historical connotations linked to moral panics, especially in security-related discussions. However, this issue merits its own detailed and peer reviewed exploration in a separate discussion.

2015 as a platform for gamers, it has significantly evolved and is now better described as a "social platform," or, in its own words, "where the world talks, hangs out, and builds relationships." At time of writing, Discord is mainly an AI enthusiast space. The most popular server (space where members of a community socialize and share with one another through text posts, voice chats, and video streams) on Discord is the Midjourney server. It boasts 20 million members and focuses on AI-driven tools that convert text to images. It outnumbers the next 4 high traffic servers *combined*,⁷³ Therefore, simplifying Discord's identity to "gaming-adjacent" does not accurately reflect the platform's broad use cases and can lead to misleading assumptions about the nature of interactions it hosts.

3.3. Sample Sizes and Conflicting Results

Initial empirical analyses specifically aimed at identifying extremism in gaming spaces, understood in the narrow sense, suggest that its presence is relatively low, especially compared to the prevalence of extremism on other online platforms. Extremists are at most a small minority relative to the overall number of gamers, and their communities are both marginal and largely disregarded by the broader gaming community. For context, social media has had a significantly bigger issue with extremist content, with recent reports suggesting that users of Facebook and Twitter are exposed to extremist content 48.44% of the time they spend on the platform.⁷⁴

For example, in the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's (ISD) report on Steam, the authors identified 45 user groups sharing a pool of 8,720 users, with group sizes ranging from as few as 7 members to as many as 4,403. As of 2020-2021, when the reports were written, Steam had between 25 and 26 million users, meaning extremist-affiliated users accounted for about 0.032% of the total user base.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the identified extremist groups made up only about 0.128% of the 35,151 groups examined. Some of these groups have been shut down since 2021, while others show minimal user interaction, with the latest posts in some cases dating back several years. Given that these figures represent only a portion of the total number of groups on Steam - which are not publicly disclosed - the percentage of extremist groups could be even lower. In other reports in the series which focused on streaming platforms often used by gamers, but also other types of content creators, the researchers found similarly low but persistent extremist presence. In the case of Discord, the ISD reports on 24 English language discord servers associated with extreme right-wing activity. For context, Discord at the time of writing hosts anywhere between 13.5 to 19 million servers

⁷³ Gaming-related servers such as Blox Fruits (used by fans of Roblox), Genshin Impact Official (used by players of Genshin Impact), and Nova (used by players of Fortnite) also remain popular, with each having around 1.7 to 1.3 million members respectively. See: Influencer Marketing Hub. "The Latest Discord Statistics: Servers, Revenue, Data, and More." *Influencer Marketing Hub* (24 June 2024), last accessed 05 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/mpzahabu>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/42c4b3yc>.

⁷⁴ Thomas James Vaughan Williams, Calli Tzani and Maria Ioannou. "Discrepancies Between Social Media Policy and User Experience: A Preliminary Study of Extremist Content." *GNET* (18 August 2023), last accessed 05 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/y9wb5m4z>. Archived at: <https://tinyurl.com/3w8a7epu>.

⁷⁵ As of the most recent count, Steam has over 120 million active users.

weekly and was reported to have had 19 million active servers at the time of the ISD report.⁷⁶
77 78

The “2023 Toxicity in Multiplayer Games,” discussed earlier, also provided comparative data across the US, the UK, and South Korea on a sample size of 2522. The report states that “extremism,” is experienced by players 14% of the time over the past 12 months. This is significantly lower than the rates of extremism reported in a recent academic study, which reports that the participants in their study (n=361) experienced extremism at a much higher rate.⁷⁹ We should provide a reminder here of the issues related with terminology, namely, the industry report considers extremism as a type of toxic behaviour in gaming spaces, and as such it differentiates extremism from several other “toxic behaviours,” i.e., Cheating/tampering, Intended disruption, Hate, Inappropriate content, Aggravation & Abuse of play, Unintended disruption, Harassment, *Extremism*, Predatory Behaviour, and Other.

Moreover, a recent report on one of the world's most popular games, Fortnite, reportedly found “a flurry of neo-Nazi, antisemitic, and violent political content ... including a map based on the Jasenovac Concentration Camp, where almost 100,000 Jews, Serbs, Roma, and religious minorities were murdered by Nazis during World War II.”⁸⁰ The “flurry of content” was 24 maps out of over a 100 000 maps available at any given point; and the Jasenovac map had a peak player count of 7 players.⁸¹

In a report produced by Moonshot within the context of Project GEMS concerning extremism in gaming-adjacent spaces, an analysis of 64 million posts from Discord, 4chan, Gamer Uprising, and Incels.is revealed that the prevalence of extremist content is relatively low. Specifically, only a small percentage of posts contained extremist indicators, with less than 0.1% on Discord, 2.9% on 4chan, 6.5% on Gamer Uprising, and 9.5% on incels.is. Overall, of the 64 million posts analysed, 4.75% was tagged with extremist indicators, and that percentage drops to 3.17% if we were to exclude data from the incels.is platform.⁸²

Gaming communities have demonstrated the ability, and willingness to resolve issues internally, without external intervention or support from the gaming industry. This is somewhat remarkable when we consider that gamers, and by extension gaming communities

⁷⁶ Aoife Gallagher, Ciaran O'Connor, Pierre Vaux, Elise Thomas, and Jacob Davey, *Gaming and Extremism: The Extreme Right on Discord* (ISD, 2021).

⁷⁷ Influencer Marketing Hub, “The Latest Discord Statistics: Servers, Revenue, Data, and More,” *Influencer Marketing Hub* (24 June 2024), last accessed 13 September 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/mpzahabu>.

⁷⁸ Serif Pilipovic, “Discord statistics 2024 — how many people use Discord? Discord is immensely popular among gamers and other online communities.” *Levvel* (09 August 2023), last accessed 13 September 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/42annbhw>.

⁷⁹ Rachel Kowert, Elizabeth Kilmer, and Alex Newhouse, “Taking it to the extreme: prevalence and nature of extremist sentiment in games,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (2024), 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1410620.

⁸⁰ GPAHE. “Despite Previous Reporting, Fortnite Continues to Platform Violent Political and Antisemitic Content.” *Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE)* (18 July 2024), , last accessed, 14 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/mrxxb73s>. Archived version at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdfs6dsz>.

⁸¹ At the time of writing the available number of maps was 115 696. Fortnite is one of the most popular games worldwide, with peak player counts ranging well over 6 million players. For the Jasenovac map see: [cleanbuild. “4064-2236-3655”](https://fortnite.gg) *fortnite.gg* (21 February 2024), last accessed at 14 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/yfudms43>. Archived at: <https://tinyurl.com/khmuhyxp>.

⁸² Moonshot. *Extremism across the online gaming ecosystem* (2024), 8-12. Report available at, Moonshot Team. “Extremism across the online gaming ecosystem.” *Moonshot Team* (03 June 2024), last accessed 04 August 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/3fymjp4z>. The incels.is as an outlier in this case, in fact compares well with other non-game extremist online spaces discussed earlier, wherein about 10% of the content was in fact extremist. See: Thomas J. Holt, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chermak. “Examining the Online Expression of Ideology among Far-Right Extremist Forum Users.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34:2 (2022), 364-384.



were portrayed as suspect communities during several iterations of moral panics. There is an inherent resilience and capacity for self-moderation within the gaming community that has been largely unexplored. It is these aspects of the gaming communities – the resilience and grassroots methods developed to seemingly successfully counter and minimize the extremist presence in gaming spaces – which should be the focus of future research.



4. Conclusion

This literature review has elucidated the intricate and dynamic interplay between gaming and extremism. Initially centered on the impact of violent video games—a theory now largely discredited—a more refined understanding has surfaced. It acknowledges the dual potential within the gaming ecosystem to either propagate harm or foster positive influences, even human well-being.⁸³ Our exploration highlights various tactics extremists deploy, from utilizing online games for recruitment and propaganda to gamifying violence and normalizing extremist ideologies within virtual communities, but the reviewed literature also stresses that ‘there is little evidence of overt large-scale recruitment in gaming communities’.⁸⁴

For academic researchers, precision in methodologies and terminology is vital to dissect the potentially complex nexus between gaming and extremism accurately. The prevailing inconsistency described above impair comparative analysis and could lead to erroneous conclusions. Additionally, the use of vague or sweeping terms may perpetuate negative stereotypes about gaming and its community, thereby overshadowing its diverse and predominantly positive culture.

Fostering closer ties with the gaming industry is crucial. Engaging game developers, platform operators, and the gaming community itself will grant researchers critical insights into the unique dynamics of these groups, their subcultural norms, and the challenges they encounter in online interactions. Such collaboration will not only heighten the precision and relevance of research outcomes but also cultivate a more detailed and informed perspective on the multifaceted relationship between gaming and extremism. This approach will help deter extremist exploitation of gamer grievances, as evidenced by incidents like Gamergate.

While this report does not delve into, it indirectly underscores a significant policy and security challenge: how to mitigate extremism in gaming without curbing innovation or infringing on free speech.

A purely restrictive strategy, focusing solely on content moderation and censorship, could inadvertently stifle the vibrant game development sector in the EU.⁸⁵ Excessively stringent regulations might disproportionately affect smaller studios, possibly driving them from the market and compromising the EU’s competitive edge in this rapidly expanding global industry.

Thus, a balanced and cooperative strategy is imperative. Policymakers and security agencies must collaborate with the gaming industry and gamers to devise effective measures that curb extremism while promoting a flourishing, profitable, and innovative gaming landscape. This strategy should include:

- **Promoting Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking:** This strategy should be twofold—educating gamers about online safety and responsible behaviours, while also learning from their experiences to better understand the subtleties of extremist manipulation and narrative techniques. Engaging with gamers directly provides a rich source of

⁸³ Rachel Kowert ed., *Video Games and Well-Being: Press Start* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁸⁴ Schlegel and Kowert, *Gaming and Extremism*, 19.

⁸⁵ For an overview of this burgeoning network see: Bledar Feta, and Ioannis Armalokas, “Gaming Stakeholders Mapping Report,” *GEMS Project Publication No.02/2024* (2024).

insights, making educational initiatives more relevant and grounded in the actual experiences and challenges faced by the community.

- **Empowering Gaming Communities:** Backing community-led initiatives that champion gamer's needs, positive social interaction, and anti-extremist messages within gaming environments.
- **Providing accessible moderation tools and resources:** Building on existing models, such as the EU's terrorist content online regulation, smaller studios and developers should be provided with access to effective moderation tools and resources to better manage harmful content within their games, without placing undue financial burdens on their operations.
- **Investing in Research:** Allocating funds for empirical studies to deepen understanding of gaming and extremism dynamics, including the influence of specific game genres, the role of streaming platforms, and the resilience of gaming communities.

By championing collaboration, transparency, and a nuanced comprehension of the gaming ecosystem, policymakers and industry leaders can balance risk mitigation with the promotion of the EU's continued prosperity in this critical cultural and economic sector.

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Wells, Garrison, Agnes Romhanyi, Jason G. Reitman, Reginald Gardner, and Kurt Squire. "Right-Wing Extremism in Mainstream Games: A Review of the Literature." *Games and Culture* 19, no. 4 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231167214>.



Appendix 01 – GEMS Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts⁸⁵

⁸⁵ This document was initially created for internal use by the consortium and was uploaded to the project's management platform (cf. D8.1) on March 11, 2024. It was later made publicly available through the project's website.

GEMS BASIC GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

C/PVE, or short for countering/preventing violent extremism, is a term used to describe methods and approaches focused on countering or preventing the growth and spread of violent extremist ideologies and activities. Put differently, this term aims to encompass “the ‘soft’ side of counterterrorism strategies that tackle the drivers which lead people to engage in politically or ideologically-motivated violence.” Recent meta analyses of available scholarship on the topic, reveal that the notion of *resilience* emerged as central throughout the discussions, with the term preventions appearing as ambiguous and thus in need of further refinement. Lastly, empirical data demonstrated that the effectiveness of C/PVE measures, and moreover, their implementation is positively related to the size of government and its social and healthcare expenditures.

Primary Sources: Frazer, Owen and Christian Nünlist. “The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism.” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 183 (2015), 1-4; Shanaah, Sadi and Charlotte Heath-Kelly. “What Drives Counter-Extremism? The Extent of P/CVE Policies in the West and Their Structural Correlates.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35:8 (2023), 1724-1752, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2080063>; Stephens, William, Stijn Sieckelinck, and Hans Boutellier. “Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature.” *Studies in conflict & terrorism* 44:4(2021), 346–361, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2018.1543144>;

Additional Literature: Beaujouan, Juline et al. eds.. *Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism: An Actor-Centric Approach*. London: Routledge (2024); Martini, Alice. *The UN and Counter-Terrorism: Global Hegemonies, Power and Identities*. London: Routledge, 2021; Halilovic-Pastuovic, Maja et al. *Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Framework*. PAVE Project Publications (2022), <http://tinyurl.com/2ijkjhek>.

Extremism, an umbrella term for numerous ideological movements fundamentally in opposition to a society's mainstream political and/or ethical values. At its most basic it is characterized by the creation of a distinct in-group in opposition to an out-group, adherence to anti-pluralist ideologies, and often, though not always, the promotion of violence, typically by non-state, irregular actors (see Violent Extremism).

Extremist Discourse, the use of language held by people when expressing their

extremist views. Relative to regular samples, extremist discourse is marked, among other aspects, by the higher use of first and third person plural pronouns, a more negative tone, and overall increase usage of words related to negative topics. In addition, there is a tendency to use discursive resources such as hate speech, otherness, and war narrative to convey actions and ideas toward others.

Extremist Narratives, an operationalization of the extremist discourse, which can be divided in five categories: political, historical, socio-psychological, instrumental and theological/moral.

- *Political*: the discourse includes references to grievances from one or more groups towards other groups.
- *Historical*: legitimization of the political grievance narratives through the use of historical examples and similes.
- *Socio-psychological*: glorification of acts against the system, either violent or not.
- *Instrumental*: justification of the violence and “self-defence” as a way towards reaching objectives.
- *Theological/moral*: legitimization of actions or reactions against political grievance or social oppression through religion, morality and/or ethics

Violent Extremism, a type of extremism which advocates for or condones the use of force and violence towards fulfilling the movement's goals.

Primary Sources: McNeil-Willson, Richard. “Assessing our Understanding of (Violent) Extremism.” In *Routledge Handbook of Violent Extremism and Resilience*, edited by Richard McNeil-Willson and Anna Triandafyllidou, 17-32. London: Routledge, 2023; Torregrosa, Javier, et al. “A Survey on Extremism Analysis Using Natural Language Processing: Definitions, Literature Review, Trends and Challenges.” *Journal of Ambient Intelligence and Humanized Computing* 14 (2023): 9869-9905. doi:10.1007/s12652-021-03658-z.

Additional Literature: Cassam, Quassim. *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis*. London: Routledge, 2022; Kruglanski, Arie

W., Catalina Kopetz, and Ewa Szumowska, eds. *The Psychology of Extremism: A Motivational Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2022; McNeil-Willson, Richard, and Anna Triandafyllidou, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Violent Extremism and Resilience*. London: Routledge, 2023; Onursal, Recep and Daniel Kirkpatrick. "Is Extremism the 'New' Terrorism? the Convergence of 'Extremism' and 'Terrorism' in British Parliamentary Discourse." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33:5 (2021), 1094-1116, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2019.1598391](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1598391); Scrivens, Ryan. "Examining Online Indicators of Extremism among Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 35:6 (2023), 1389-1409, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2022.2042270](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2042270)

Gamification, a technique that integrates game design elements such as points, leaderboards, badges, gaming language, and avatars into non-game contexts to drive behavioural change. The goal is to engage users and encourage them towards desired behaviours, leveraging the motivational power of gaming. Additionally, gamification inherently offers a means of measuring success through its gaming design metrics. In essence, gamification can be described as a method to 'gamify' or make activities game-like. This approach has been applied in various sectors, including education, employee experiences, fitness apps, healthcare, the military, and public services.

Gamification of Violence, the application of gamification in order to stimulate, encourage or reward violent behaviour.

Primary Sources: Marczewski, Andrzej. *The Gamification Design Handbook*. London: Gamified UK, 2023; Schlegel, Linda. *The Gamification of Violent Extremism & Lessons for P/CVE*. RAN, 2021. <http://tinyurl.com/yc6m84xu>.

Additional Literature: González-González, Carina Soledad. "Unplugged Gamification: Towards a Definition." In *Proceedings TEEM 2022: Tenth International Conference on Technological Ecosystems for Enhancing Multiculturality*, edited by Francisco José García-Peñalvo and Alicia García-Holgado, 642-649. New York: Springer, 2022; Lakhani, Suraj. "The Gamification Of Violent Extremism: An Empirical Exploration Of The Christchurch Attack." *Extremism and Gaming Research Network*. (10 June 2022). <http://tinyurl.com/czevmsxr>.

Games, understood in the broadest sense of the term as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict defined by rules that results in a quantifiable outcome." Games are as diverse as the players who play them, and they cover a broad spectrum of media and platforms; monetized or not; physical, or cerebral; adult or children oriented, etc. Within the scope of this

project we are interested in *digital games*, or *video games*, as they more commonly known.

Video Games, the term originated in the early 1970s in the United States and quickly gained popularity worldwide. The inclusion of "video" in the name was intended to differentiate these new forms of entertainment from existing electronic games that did not require a display or video device for gameplay. As digital technology has advanced, "video games" has become an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of game types, all of which require some form of video display to engage players.

Categorization: Platform Oriented

Currently, the most common way to categorize video games is by the platform on which they are played. This includes but is not limited to: Computer Games: Played on a personal computer, regardless of the operating system; Console Games: Played on gaming consoles, such as PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo Switch; Mobile Games: Played on mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets; VR/AR Games: Played on virtual and augmented reality devices, collectively known as XR devices.

It's crucial to recognize that this "traditional" categorization of games by platform has recently become more ambiguous. Many games are now designed to be played across a variety of platforms, and **cross-platform play** is becoming the norm. This shift enables players using different devices to interact within the same online matches, a notable change from earlier times when, for instance, only computer gamers could compete with one another. Additionally, the advent of **cloud gaming** has further blurred these distinctions by allowing games to be streamed to devices not originally intended for them, such as playing a game designed for a computer on a smartphone. This development has also impacted the classical categorization of games into **online and offline gaming**. Previously, online and offline gaming distinguished between games based on the necessity of an internet connection for gameplay. However, even games designed for offline play may require a stable internet connection when accessed via cloud gaming.

Categorization: Player Oriented

Alternatively, and more in line with the player's perspective, games are often categorized according to genres, which underscores the diversity in gameplay and thematic content that defines the gaming experience. This classification system encompasses everything from action-packed adventures to strategic puzzles, offering insights into the core mechanics and narrative styles that engage players. Games are also frequently categorized by the number of players they support, distinguishing between single-player, multiplayer and massive multiplayer experiences. However, a number of games are offering both single-player and multiplayer modes to accommodate different playing preferences.

Categorization: Development Oriented

Lastly, reflecting the production or, more specifically, the development side of video games, games are frequently classified based on their production type. This includes AAA titles, which are known for their high development budgets, large studio budgets, and production values; independent (*indie*) games that highlight creativity and innovation without the support of major studios; and crowdfunded projects that rely on community support for funding. However, much like the platform-based categorization, this framework is not absolute, with many projects defying clear classification in terms of both genre and production type. This situation highlights the video game industry's fluid and evolving nature. With the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) into games, this trend is expected to intensify. These technological advancements will continue to reshape the industry, challenging traditional categorizations and development models with even greater impact.

Gaming, understood most broadly is a term used to denote the human activity of playing video games. However, within the context of the project and the field at large, gaming can be considered as qualitatively different from "playing video games", nevertheless encompassing it. The nuances and broad applications of the term will be explored in greater detail in the project's deliverables.

Gamer, a term used to refer to shared identity with other members of the gaming community and culture. It denotes an alignment with the groups idiosyncrisies, traditions, and social practices. It is a part of one's self-conception and expression of affiliation with a group of society.

Player v Gamer disambiguation, a player is a term referring to someone who interacts with, or plays, games. It refers to the functional status or activity of playing a game, digital or otherwise.

Much like the diverse ways in which video games themselves are categorized (see, Video Games), the interpretation and the meaning of "gamer" varies widely, often depending on the context in which it is used, with no single way to classify, what or who are gamers are (e.g., PC gamers, console gamers, mobile gamers, casual gamers, hardcore gamers, etc.). It can sometimes carry a derogatory connotation, but also to denote a professional vocation, as seen with professional gamers. Additionally, apart from humans who game, products, styles, and even language can be described as being "gamer," e.g. "gamer products," having a "gamer aesthetic," using a "gamer language," or belonging to the "gamer culture," etc. The nuances and broad applications of the term will be explored in greater detail in the project's deliverables.

Gaming Disorder, as of 2019 included in the International Classification of Diseases (11th ed.). This disorder is characterised by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behaviour ('digital gaming' or 'video-gaming'), which may be online (i.e., over the internet) or offline, manifested by: 1. impaired control over gaming (e.g., onset, frequency, intensity, duration, termination, context); 2. increasing priority given to gaming to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other life interests and daily activities; and 3. continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences. The pattern of gaming behaviour may be continuous or episodic and recurrent. The pattern of gaming behaviour results in marked distress or significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational, or other important areas of

functioning. The gaming behaviour and other features are normally evident over a period of at least 12 months in order for a diagnosis to be assigned, although the required duration may be shortened if all diagnostic requirements are met and symptoms are severe.

Primary Sources: Kowert, Rachel and Jan Grooten. "Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal Discourse and Virtual Spaces." *The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9:14 (2015), 70-87; Steinkuehler, Constance, and Kurt Squire. "Introduction to Videogames and the extremist ecosystem." In *Gaming and extremism: the radicalization of digital playgrounds* edited by Rachel Kowert and Linda Schlegel, 9-31. New York: Routledge, 2024; Stevens, Matther Wr et al., "Global Prevalence of gaming disorder: A Systematic review and meta analysis." *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 55:6 (2020): 553-568. doi: 10.1177/000486742096285; Wolf, J.P. Mark. *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*. Westport: Greenwood, 2007; Salen, Katie, Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2004; Juul, Jesper. *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010.

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Radicalization, a complex process metaphorically described as 'what goes on before the bomb goes off.' Radicalization encompasses a series of psychological, social, and ideological developments by which individuals or groups adopt extremist views, which may not always involve violence. This process involves multi-dimensional changes, including shifts in belief systems, attitudes, and behaviours, that deviate significantly from dominant societal norms. Moreover, each process appear as distinct, reflecting the unique circumstances and influences of those involved. Within academic circles, it is also a contested term, with the central issue being whether radicalization denotes a process towards extreme *ideas*, or extreme *behaviour*.

Violent Radicalization, a type of radicalization defined by the EU as "the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism."

Primary Sources: Commission of the European Communities. *Communication from the commission to the European parliament and the council concerning Terrorist recruitment: addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalisation*. Brussels, 21 September 2005. <http://tinyurl.com/37m8mpdz>; Neumann, Peter. "The Trouble with Radicalization." *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 873-93; Sedgwick, Mark. "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (2010): 479-494. doi: 10.1080/09546553.2010.491009.

Additional Literature: McCauley, Clark and Sophia Moskalenko. "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:3 (2008): 415-433. doi: 10.1080/09546550802073367; McLaughlin, Gilbert. *Radicalisation: A Conceptual Inquiry*. London: Routledge, 2024; Muthuswamy, Moorthy S. "Radicalization ecosystem as a confounder of violent extremism's drivers." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (2024). doi: [10.1080/17467586.2024.2305443](https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2024.2305443); Sardoč, Mitja. *Making Sense of Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Interviews and Conversations*. London: Routledge, 2022.

Recruitment, generally refers to the process of incorporating individuals into a group. Specifically, in the realms of terrorism and extremist studies, it is defined as the process by which individuals are integrated into extremist groups or terrorist organizations. This process is highly specialized, often involving the identification and targeting of individuals who are susceptible to influence. It includes a tailored approach of influencing, persuading, or manipulating them to adopt extremist ideologies and, in some instances, to participate in terrorist activities. Crucially, the success of recruitment within violent extremist organizations depends on the effective attraction and selection of organizational members.

Online/Offline Recruitment, this dichotomy distinguishes between digital and "traditional" in-person recruitment methods. However, recent studies in radicalization suggest this distinction may hinder a full understanding. Experts recommend a more holistic approach. This proposed method would consider both online and offline means but emphasize individual risk factors and the recruit's environment.

Legal/Actionable Aspects, the European Union (EU) has specific legal frameworks and definitions regarding the recruitment FOR TERRORISM. According to the EU Directive 2017/541, recruitment for terrorism is considered as one of the criminal offenses related to terrorism. This directive, along with other EU policies and strategies, aims to establish a comprehensive approach to prevent and combat terrorism, including aspects of radicalization and recruitment. The Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism further strengthens the EU's stance by defining recruitment for terrorism as a criminal offense, amongst others, and sets out measures to be taken at the national level and through international cooperation. This convention reflects the EU's

commitment to upholding the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms while combating terrorism.

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A SHORTLIST OF KEY GAMING ADJACENT PLATFORMS

Chan/kun sites: "Chan" sites refer to a type of internet forum that typically allows users to post anonymously (4chan, 8chan, 7chan, tinychan, 8kun, etc.). These sites often have a unique culture and set of norms, which can vary widely depending on the specific site. They are known for their simple, image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. Here are a couple of general descriptions of "Chan" sites:

- **General Structure:** "Chan" sites are usually divided into a variety of boards, each dedicated to a specific topic, interest, or theme. These boards can cover a wide range of subjects, from hobbies and interests to more controversial topics.
- **Anonymity and Culture:** One of the key features of "Chan" sites is the option for users to post anonymously. This anonymity can sometimes lead to a culture that is very different from other social media and online communities, often characterized by a lack of accountability and a free-for-all attitude in discussions.
- **Image and Text Posts:** Users can start a thread by posting an image along with a comment. Other users then reply to these threads with their own comments and possibly images. This format leads to a very visually driven type of discussion.
- **Fast-Paced and Ephemeral:** Threads on "Chan" sites can be fast-paced and are often ephemeral. Popular or active threads stay on the first pages, while less active ones quickly fall behind and may eventually be deleted.
- **Influence on Internet Culture:** These sites have had a significant impact on internet culture, often being the birthplace of memes, viral images, and internet movements. However, they've also been associated with controversial and sometimes extreme content.

Discord: A communication platform popular among gamers for voice, video, and text communication, often used to coordinate multiplayer games.

Game Jolt: A platform hosting indie games, offering a space for developers to share and monetize their games.

GameFAQs: A website that hosts FAQs and walkthroughs for video games. It's a go-to resource for help with game strategy and completion.

GOG.com: A digital distribution platform with a focus on DRM-free games and classic games revived for modern systems.

itch.io: An online marketplace for indie video games, it's a platform for developers to host and sell their games.

Patreon: Often used by game developers and content creators to fund their projects with the support of their audience.

Reddit: Numerous gaming communities exist on Reddit, discussing games, sharing news, and providing a platform for Q&A.

Steam: A digital distribution platform for video games. It offers game hosting, a game store, and a community hub for gamers.

Twitch: A live streaming platform where gamers stream their gameplay or esports events. It's a hub for gaming communities.

YouTube Gaming: A section of YouTube dedicated to gaming videos, live streams, and gaming communities.

(ONLINE) GAMING BASIC TERMINOLOGY

AFK: "Away From Keyboard." Used when a player is not actively participating.

AoE: "Area of Effect." Refers to abilities or attacks that affect multiple targets within a specified area.

Buff: An effect that enhances a player's abilities or stats.

Camper: A player who stays in one spot, typically hidden, waiting to ambush other players.

CC: "Crowd Control." Abilities that limit or prevent the actions of other players or game characters.

Clan/Guild: A group of players who regularly play together and often have a structured hierarchy.

(Dirty) Console Peasant: Gamers who are using gaming consoles to game. Cf.: PCMR

Cooldown: A period of wait time after using a skill or item before it can be used again.

Crafting: The process of creating items or gear within the game.

Crit: Short for "Critical Hit," which is a strike that does more damage than a normal attack.

DLC: "Downloadable Content." Additional content for a game, available for download.

DPS: "Damage Per Second." Refers to how much damage a player or character can inflict.

Easter Egg: Hidden features or messages in games, often for humor or rewards.

ELO: A rating system originally used in chess, adopted by various online games to rank player skill.

F2P: "Free to Play." Games that are free to play but might include optional purchases.

Farming: Repeatedly gathering resources or defeating enemies for loot.

FTW: "For The Win." Used to express enthusiasm about a potential victory.

GG EZ: "Good Game, Easy." A boastful remark indicating a game was easily won.

GG: "Good Game." A term of sportsmanship expressed at the end of a match.

GGWP: "Good Game, Well Played." A respectful acknowledgment of a game well played.

Griefer: A player who deliberately irritates and harasses other players.

Grinding: Repeatedly performing tasks to advance in level or obtain items.

Hitbox: The area of a character that can be hit by an attack.

Hotkey: A keyboard shortcut for a specific action in a game.

HP: "Health Points." The measure of a character's life.

Instancing: Creating a separate instance or version of a game area for individual or group play.

KDA: "Kills, Deaths, Assists." A metric used to gauge a player's performance in certain games.

Kiting: The tactic of staying out of an enemy's range while attacking.

Lag: Slowing down of game response due to internet connectivity issues.

Loot Box: A virtual item that can be redeemed to receive a random selection of further virtual items.

Loot: Items or rewards gained from defeating enemies or completing tasks.

Meta: Refers to the most effective tactics and strategies currently used in the game.

MMO: "Massively Multiplayer Online." A genre of games capable of supporting large numbers of players simultaneously.

MMORPG: "Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game." A genre of games where many players interact in a virtual world.

Nerf: A change to a game that reduces the effectiveness of a particular item, ability, or character.

Noob/Newbie: A new or inexperienced player.

NPC: "Non-Player Character." Characters in the game not controlled by human players.

OP: "Overpowered." Refers to something in the game that is too strong or unbalanced.

OTK: "One Turn Kill." Defeating an opponent in a single turn in a turn-based game.

P2W: "Pay to Win." A system where players can buy advantages in a game with real money.

Patch: An update to a game that can include fixes, new content, or balance changes.

PCMR: "PC master race." Gamers who are using personal computers to game. Cf.: Console peasants.

Ping: The network latency between a player's computer and the game server.

PvE: "Player versus Environment." Combat or challenges against the game's AI.

PvM: "Player versus Monster." Similar to PvE but specifically refers to fighting non-player characters.

PvP: "Player versus Player." Competing against other human players.

Quest: A task or set of tasks that a player is given to complete in a game.

Rage Quit: Abruptly leaving a game out of frustration.

Raid: A challenging team-based activity against powerful in-game enemies.

Rekt: A slang term meaning thoroughly defeated or destroyed.

Respawn: Reappearing in the game after being defeated.

RNG: "Random Number Generator." Refers to elements of chance in games.

RPG: "Role-Playing Game." A game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting.

Sim: A simulation game that imitates real-world activities.

Skins: Cosmetic changes to a character's appearance or equipment.

Smurf: An experienced player creating a new account to play against less skilled players.

Spawn: The place where characters or items first appear in the game.

Squads: Teams or groups of players working together.

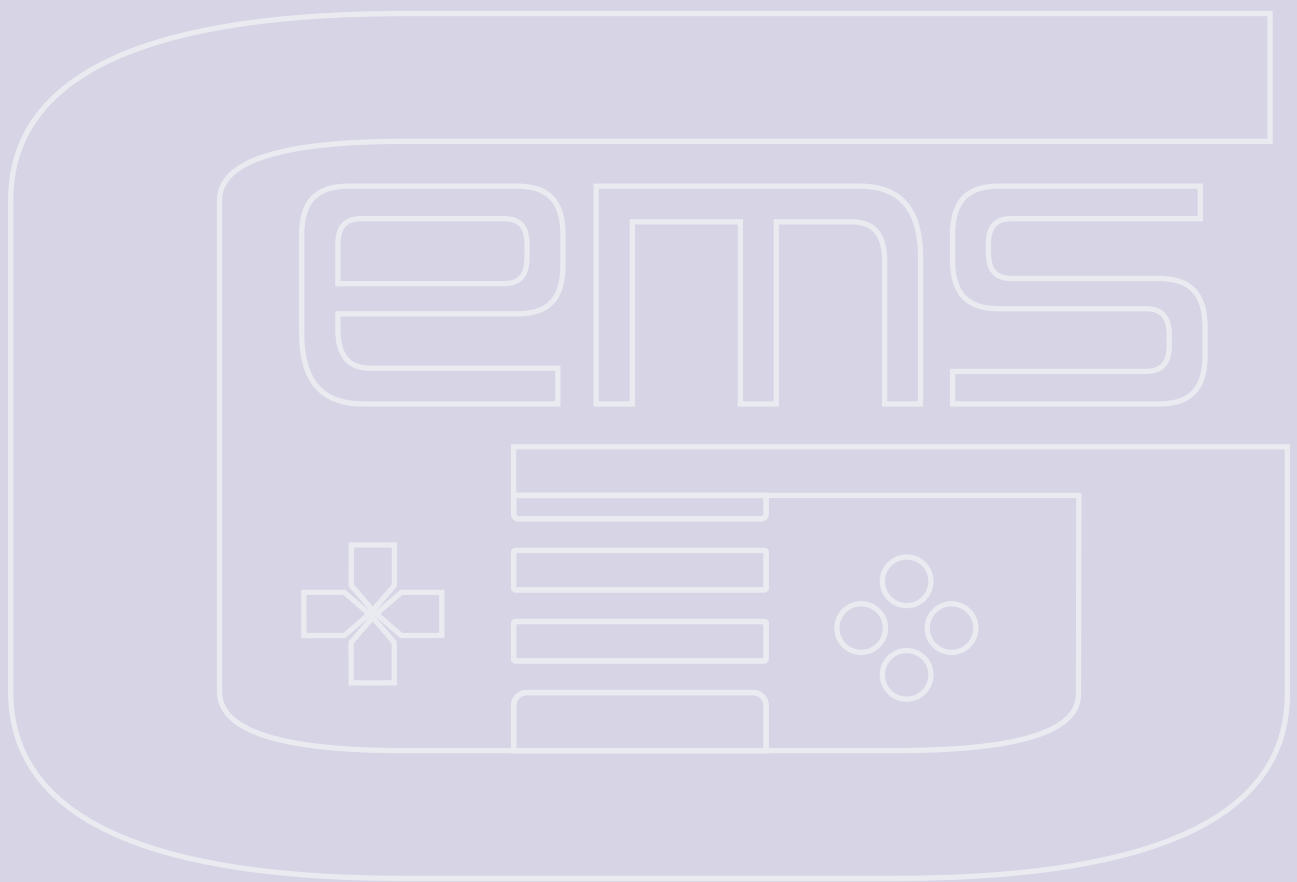
Tank: A character type designed to absorb damage and protect other players.

Ult: Short for "Ultimate." A powerful ability or move in a game.

VR: "Virtual Reality." A simulated experience that can be similar to or completely different from the real world.

XP Boost: An item or bonus that increases the rate at which a player gains experience points.

XP: "Experience Points." Points earned for completing tasks or defeating enemies, contributing to a character's growth.



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