



VIDEO GAMING AND (VIOLENT) EXTREMISM:

An exploration of the current
landscape, trends, and threats

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Policy
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INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of the intersection between (violent) extremism and video gaming, examining the current landscape, trends, and threats. Analysing existing literature and open-source materials, this paper discusses the types of games, platforms, and services that are vulnerable to this type of infiltration and use; particularly focussing on content, platform features, and overlaps. The paper also examines a number of recurrent themes, including: ‘radicalisation, recruitment, and reinforcing views’; ‘community building and strengthening’; and ‘extremist online ecosystems’. Thereafter, the responses to (violent) extremism from various platforms will be explored, before reflecting on current challenges and future considerations.

Video gaming is considered to be one of the most consistent and fastest-growing sectors. It is estimated that there are around 2.8 billion gamers around the world (Gilbert, n.d.). As part of this, online gaming represents one of the biggest industries globally with over 900 million gamers and an estimated annual revenue of USD 18 billion (Clement, 2021). This growth is not only attributed to the development of online games and communities, but also to the game hosting and adjacent communications platforms that have been specifically designed for gamers and gaming, including Steam, Stadia, Twitch, Discord, and DLive (ADL, 2019).

There are numerous (often overlooked) positive economic, health, social, and psychological benefits of gaming (ADL, 2019; Schrier, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, in which people have been isolated from their social groups for lengthy periods of time, online gaming has brought numerous benefits, with players reporting positive experiences such as making friends, feeling as though they are a part of various communities, finding new interests, and discovering new aspects about themselves (ADL, 2020). However, as technology develops, so do the associated harms, with new challenges constantly presented.

VIDEO GAMES AND (VIOLENT) EXTREMISM

A growing concern within European Union (and for that matter global) policy, security, and counter-terrorism circles is the increasing intersection between video gaming and (violent) extremism (EU, 2020; RAN, 2021). In a recent Radicalisation Awareness Network paper (RAN, 2021), it was suggested that extremists and terrorists, who are often pioneers in the digital space, are afforded new opportunities through gaming and associated platforms. These individuals ‘have introduced innovations faster than we have been able to respond, and as a result, have grown their digital advantage’ (ibid: 3). There are concerns that video games and associated (adjacent) platforms can be used to disseminate digital propaganda (Lakomy, 2019), and for purposes of radicalisation and recruitment (EU, 2020; Europol, 2021). However, as will be discussed in depth in this paper, the relationship between radicalisation, recruitment, and gaming is often complicated, with current literature challenging whether these outcomes are (violent) extremists’ primary intentions, with, instead, reinforcing beliefs, community building and strengthening, and developing more robust online ecosystems appearing to hold more prominence (Davey, 2021). It is critical to mention, however, that there is a distinct lack of (particularly empirical) research and literature in this area of study (Lakomy, 2019), with work at a nascent stage (Robinson and Whittaker, 2021), something that is particularly evident in relation to online gaming, video game hosting, and adjacent communications platforms (Davey, 2021).

Although a varied and complex phenomenon (RAN, 2020), and one with numerous considerations, there have been various (often anecdotal) examples of the intersection between

video gaming and (violent) extremism by jihadists, far-right violent extremists, and ethnonationalist groups. Resultantly, ‘the search for any one narrative being used by such a varied group in such a varied array of circumstances would be an exercise in futility’ (ibid: 4). Saying that, most notably in Europe, there has been particular concern over the digital recruitment tactics of far-right (violent) extremists (RAN, 2021), where it is thought that they are ‘firmly anchored in the online gaming community, while the presence of Islamist terrorists can also be observed, albeit to a lesser extent’ (EU, 2020: 4). According to Europol’s (2021: 90) EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, ‘it can be noted that the use of video games, gaming platforms and forums, as well as gamer channels for spreading right-wing extremist propaganda has been a growing trend.’ Further, ‘(v)ideo games and video game communication applications were increasingly used in 2020 to share right-wing terrorist and extremist propaganda, in particular among young people’ (ibid: 78). This, of course, coincides with the rapid growth of far-right violent extremism and associated attacks, as documented by initiatives like the Global Terrorism Index. With this in mind, the focus of this paper predominantly lies with far-right (violent) extremism, though jihadist involvement is discussed where relevant, and arguably should not be overlooked nor underestimated.

PAPER OUTLINE

Within the context of the intersection between (violent) extremism and video gaming, there are numerous considerations. The first part of this paper considers the role and influence (or lack) of bespoke and modified games. The following section considers the infiltration and use of online and collaborative gaming spaces by (violent) extremists and their supporters. As discussed, as gaming has increased in popularity, a multitude of complimentary (adjacent) platforms have emerged to not only host and sell online games, but to facilitate communication, enhance collaboration, and develop communities. This paper focuses on four of these: Steam, Discord, Twitch, and DLive. Within this conversation, considerations around content, platform features, and overlaps will be outlined. From this analysis, a number of themes emerged that cut across the available research and literature: ‘Radicalisation, Recruitment, and Reinforcing Views’; ‘Community Building and Strengthening’; and ‘Extremist Online Ecosystems’. Finally, the responses to (violent) extremism from various platforms will be explored, before a reflection on current challenges and future considerations.

BESPOKE & MODIFIED GAMES

At one point, the creation of bespoke games by violent extremist and terrorist organisations was considered a pressing issue. During the early-to-mid 2000s, there were around a dozen high-profile games produced by violent extremist groups, a trend described by the Anti-Defamation League as ‘deeply troubling’ (Robinson and Whittaker, 2021). The key concern in the field has been the production of bespoke games by both jihadist and far-right violent extremist groups and their supporters; a selection of which will be discussed below.

With the far-right violent extremist games, although there were some differences, the majority, and those considered to be most prominent, were based on a First-Person Shooter (FPS) architecture, which normally included a White ‘hero’ killing Jews, Muslims, people of colour, and minorities (Selepak, 2010). For example, Resistance Records (part of National Alliance) in 2002 released *Ethnic Cleansing*, a disturbing game where users could play as a Klansman or neo-Nazi, which came with the marketing slogan, “‘Your skin is your uniform in this battle for the survival of your kind. The White Race depends on you to secure its existence’” (Souri, 2007: 543). More recently, 2019 saw the release of *Jesus Strikes Back: Judgment Day*, a third-person shooter, where players can choose from a number of highly controversial characters, including Christchurch assailant, Brenton Tarrant (Macklin, 2019). The game was produced by 2GenPro, who describe themselves as ‘a growing indie game studio’, and their games as ‘all satirical parodies mostly based on modern political culture’. At the time of writing, the game is still available for sale on the developer’s website – alongside other controversial titles – for the price of USD 14.88; ‘14’ and ‘88’ being two prominent neo-Nazi numbers, referring to both David Lane’s ‘14 words’, and to the 8th letter of the alphabet, relating to ‘HH’, or ‘Heil Hitler’.¹ A year earlier, *Angry Goy 2* was released, which allowed players to ‘shove Jewish characters into ovens’ (Condis, 2020: 147). Attributed to Wheel Maker Studios (Palmer, 2018), the game has been, and at the time of writing still is, promoted by various White nationalists, including Chris Cantwell, and available for download on his Radical Agenda website. The production of these titles by ‘game studios’ appears to be somewhat prominent, with the producers of *Heimatdefender: Rebellion*, for example, describing themselves as ‘a patriotic studio that has specialised on [sic] making games with “politically incorrect” themes!’

‘Mods’, on the other hand, are original games which have been modified to introduce new characters, images, backgrounds, landscapes, and other attributes, or for the gamer to be able to play the role of the original ‘enemy’ of the game. These include the early modifications to what are considered ‘classic’ games like *Wolfenstein*, to adaptations of war-based games such as *Quest for Bush*, or more recent modifications, including numerous strategy games released by Paradox Interactive, including *Hearts of Iron IV*, *Europa Universalis*, and *Crusader Kings*. These games ‘allowed for alternate history scenarios, catered to by moderators, some of them designed by white supremacists’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 7). Due to the ease of modification, as compared to creating bespoke games, numerous camps have engaged in this activity, including: violent extremist organisations themselves, such as al-Qaeda (more so its associate, the Global Islamic Media Front) (al-Rawi, 2018; Lakomy, 2019); ‘fan sites’, including the ‘Aryan Goddess’ (an ethnonationalist Taylor Swift fan page); individuals who claim that their intention was not to create games that are popular with violent extremists, but are nonetheless (Winkie, 2018); and supporters of various groups, including Islamic State (Lakomy, 2019).

¹ For an outline of the meaning of these, and other, symbols, see: <https://www.adl.org/hate-symbols>.

RELEVANCE, IMPORTANCE, AND LIMITATIONS

Recent literature looking at bespoke games and mods has argued that although they may have some radicalisation and recruitment function, much can be learned if they are also considered as sources of propaganda that attempt to reinforce and normalise the beliefs and motivations of those who are already empathetic or attuned to the organisations' messages, or already part of a movement (Robinson and Whittaker, 2021). A more nuanced approach is therefore required when considering the intended audience. In this regard, researchers have highlighted the importance of bespoke games and mods as opportunities to reimagine and reconstruct historical and current narratives (Schulzke, 2014; Sourì, 2007), their usefulness as a 'motif' (Dauber et al., 2019), and as 'one more weapon in the extremists' arsenal' (Selepak, 2010: 37).

However, with bespoke games in particular, the nature of the outdated and crude graphics (alongside limited gameplay and lack of serious storyline) is thought to be a serious limitation for both jihadist and far-right extremist audiences (Lakomy, 2019; Selepak, 2010). Mods, to some extent, overcome these issues and 'give the illusion of credibility and technical competence' (RAN, 2020: 3). Nevertheless, as these bespoke games are often created by supporters of these organisations, there is usually a lack of resources; something that often holds true for the majority of games created officially by the organisations too. There are, however, outliers to note here. Certain online subcultures (extending to (violent) extremists) have an interest in a more 'bottom-up' amateur and 'sloppy' approach to the internet, including through memes and graphics, described as 'Internet Ugly' (Douglas, 2014). Crude graphics for subcultures like these may well be appealing. It should therefore be contemplated whether this is always about gaming, game-play, or even ideological affiliation or historical context, or whether 'humour' (Fielitz and Ahmed, 2021), 'shitposting' (Evans, 2019), and the transmission of 'fun', should also be part of wider considerations when it comes to the intersection between video gaming and (violent) extremism, as observed on wider mainstream social media platforms, and more obscure sites like 4Chan and 8Kun.

Although the production of mods appears to be sustained, there has been a decline in the production of bespoke video games by violent extremists since its high point in the 2000s, even though there have been some significant attempts by extremist organisations to exploit the popularity of gaming (Robinson and Whittaker, 2021). However, the potential for (violent) extremists and their supporters to produce a popular bespoke video game should not be overlooked. There is the strong possibility that an individual or organisation produces a game that becomes an underground 'cult classic' which is shared widely amongst peer groups, both extremist and otherwise, providing a chance to disseminate propaganda and familiarise a wider audience with the core ideas of the group.

Finally, these types of games, including mainstream video games for that matter, also appear to function as educational and training resources. The interactive nature of games enables players to potentially train certain skills, with lower risk, and with added interactivity and enjoyment as compared to other mediums. This could include training in the use of weapons, attack planning scenarios, and flight simulators (Lakomy, 2019). With the latter, it was reported by the 9/11 Commission that the perpetrators used flight simulators 'to increase familiarity with aircraft models and functions, and to highlight gaps in cabin security' (9/11 Commission, 2004: 158). These games can even be modified to create artificial training grounds (Lakomy, 2019). Further, gaming can desensitise people to violence and provide further know-how (e.g., mission planning, equipment, tactics, etc.), in order to prepare for and carry out attacks (EU, 2020). A prime example of this is Anders Breivik, who was an avid gamer playing FPS games like the Call of Duty series and reportedly using them 'as training simulation to prepare for his attacks' (ibid: 10). Although currently with limited scope, the further development of both virtual and augmented reality will only benefit this type of activity in the future (EU, 2020).

ONLINE AND COLLABORATIVE GAMING

There has been much concern around the intersection between (violent) extremism and online gaming (ADL, 2019). In a paper by the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, for example, it was argued that online gaming can act as an ‘enabler of terrorist and other criminal activity’ (EU, 2020: 1). In this regard, these applications have been increasingly used to share far right (violent) extremist and jihadist ideologies and propaganda (Europol, 2021; RAN, 2021), and have served as other functions for (violent) extremists and their supporters.

Steam

Steam,² launched in 2003, is described on its own platform as the ‘ultimate destination for playing, discussing, and creating games’, and is currently thought to be the ‘single largest distribution site for PC games’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 4). It is a place for developers – from independents, to small studios, to some of the industry giants including Xbox, Ubisoft, Electronic Arts, Bethesda, and Valve (Steam’s parent company) – to make money selling video games (ADL, 2020). As well as playing games, Steam enables users to develop and build communities (Davey, 2021), where they can find friends, join groups, participate in discussion forums (Vaux et al., 2021), and communicate via instant messaging and voice chat (ADL, 2020).

Steam has become popular for White supremacists, ‘where they can openly express their ideology and calls for violence’ (ADL, n.d.). This was somewhat demonstrated in recent (albeit limited) research which found that ‘the extreme right use Steam as a hub for individual extremists to connect and socialise...[and that] Steam seems to have an entrenched and long-lasting extreme right community’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 4). It is therefore widely believed that Steam has been frequented by far-right violent extremists and hate speech (Maiberg, 2017; Campbell, 2018), in terms of specific games, in-game communication, Steam groups, and on community boards. Recent research found numerous groups which date back to 2016 or earlier (Vaux et al., 2021). Users, at one point in their thousands, openly demonstrated far-right violent extremist support on their profile pages (Campbell, 2018). This was evidenced in their screen names, bio descriptions, profile pictures and comments, which were often pro-Nazi in nature, where users ‘incorporated into their profiles Nazi imagery such as SS bolts and Nazitotenkopfs, or death’s heads, glorified prominent Nazi figures or fantasized about the 4th Reich’ (ADL, n.d.). Further, neo-Nazi ideologies were also evident across a wide swathe of groups without direct affiliation to any specific extremist organisations, though they were identifiable through various markers including symbols and terminology (Vaux et al., 2021).

There has also been the discovery of wider support – which according to researchers indicates a broader trend on the platform – of other transnational groups across the far-right extremist spectrum from non-violent to violent extremists, including historical fascists and groups dedicated to Mussolini and Oswald Mosley (ibid). In addition, recent work found two Steam groups explicitly affiliated with far-right violent extremist organisations: the Nordic Resistance Movement, who were implicated in various bombings in Gothenburg in 2016 and 2017 (the group appeared to be relatively small in nature, with 87 members, though active at the time the analysis was undertaken); and the Misanthropic Division, who had 487 members when the research was conducted (Davey, 2021). The same research found 45 groups which hosted

² Although Steam is discussed here, similar platforms, including Google’s ‘Stadia’ and Amazon’s ‘Prime Gaming’ should also be considered for future analysis/research.

far-right extremist content, with an average membership of 329; the largest of these groups contained 4 403 members. However, the researchers argue that this number should be understood as a sample of the 'larger network of potentially extremist groups on the platform, and as such should be seen as a snapshot indicating broader trends on the platform' (Vaux et al., 2021: 4).

DISCORD

Launched in 2015, Discord's initial purpose was to enable an effective means for gamers collaborating on multi-player video games to communicate with one another. It has the function of allowing gamers to talk in real time using voice, text, or video chat. Users are also able to share files, videos, and music (EU, 2020). Discord's chatrooms, known as 'servers' (many of which are self-moderated), have the ability to be created by anyone, and can be public or private in nature. It has been argued that one reason extremists use Discord is due to the platform's architecture, which enables the establishment of 'tight communities' (Guhl et al., 2020: 9). Of the 24 servers (averaging 108 users each) examined in a recent study, the largest had 367 users, and the majority were created in the 12 months leading up to April 2021. These servers appeared to have relatively short life cycles, potentially due to moderation efforts by the platform (Davey, 2021). It is suggested that Discord groups primarily serve two functions: first, as a safe space for young people curious about extremist ideologies to network, find more information, and share material (Gallagher et al., 2021); second, as a place to host communities which are dedicated to the trolling of minority groups online, through a coordinated approach (Davey, 2021).

In addition, Discord has been used for the planning of offline events, including the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. Here, Discord was used by organisers to both plan and promote the event, and for the spread of propaganda and far-right violent extremist rhetoric, such as praising Hitler within outwardly violent extremist servers (e.g., 'Führer's Gas Chamber') (Gallagher et al., 2021). Islamic State supporters have also reportedly suggested using in-game chats to reach wider online communities 'for recruitment and incitement of lone actor types of attacks' (EU, 2020: 4).

TWITCH

Originally launched in 2011, and acquired by Amazon in 2014, Twitch is a platform where users livestream themselves playing video games, with others being able to simply watch or interact with the gamer in real-time using the in-app chat function, or through additional platforms like Discord (O'Connor, 2021). It is this livestreaming function that has caused particular concern. Since the Christchurch attacks in 2019, in which the perpetrator streamed his assault on Facebook Live, mirroring 'Let's Play' videos which are popular within gaming communities (Schlegel, 2021a), there has been much anxiety about the strategic use of this tactic, something that was realised in a similar type of attack conducted by Stephan Balliet in Halle in 2019, which was livestreamed on Twitch. As outlined in a recent RAN paper on extremism and gaming, livestreaming is extremely difficult to monitor, because it occurs live and is far more difficult to detect than text-based material (Schlegel, 2021). Further, analysis post-event is also difficult unless the video has been recorded and shared, which of course poses additional problems (as discussed later). Twitch was also used, either directly or as a host for livestreams from other platforms, during the storming of the US Capitol in Washington DC on 6 January 2021 (Messner and Wilde, 2021). Although recent research has found limited evidence that a large far-right extremist community of content creators exists on the platform, 'suggesting extremist use of the platform is not currently endemic' (O'Connor, 2021: 10), there is the sporadic posting of extremist content on Twitch by users (Davey, 2021). There is caution with this finding in that, although not currently prevalent, the material that has been found does demonstrate there is

still an issue with extremism on the platform, and that there are likely other examples not captured within this work (O'Connor, 2021).

DLIVE

Created in 2017 and purchased by BitTorrent in 2019, DLive is a livestreaming platform which reportedly became popular with 'significant numbers' of far-right (violent) extremists and fringe streamers who had been banned from other mainstream social media platforms (Browning and Lorenz, 2021), due to its initial lack of content moderation. Within recent research, DLive was found to house a number of White supremacist and White nationalist influencers (Davey, 2021). Various content was found on the platform, which would likely be banned on other online spaces, including racist, sexist, homophobic and conspiracy theory-related material. In addition, the platform was thought to have played a lead role prior to and during the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, with some users livestreaming on the day including those affiliated with far-right extremism (Browning and Lorenz, 2021), where they engaged with audiences who were sending donations and voicing suggestions to "smash the window" or "hang all the Congressmen" (Schlegel, 2021).

CONTENT, PLATFORM FEATURES, AND OVERLAPS

Although the available research and literature is unclear about whether these platforms were and are specifically selected for the purposes outlined in this section so far, recent work has indicated that both 'strategic' and 'organic' approaches exist (Schlegel, 2021). The literature does, however, highlight a number of general considerations evident across these different game-hosting and adjacent platforms that are important to outline in order to better understand how (violent) extremists make use of these spaces, whether there are any overlapping features of interest, and what extremist-related content is available. These are discussed below.

- Social media functions: Although many of these platforms were originally developed to serve the purpose of gaming, many have started to evolve to resemble the functionality of more traditional social media and e-commerce platforms (RAN, 2021; EU, 2020). Discord, for example, is used by numerous non-gamers to engage in communication about various topics and causes they are interested in, including sports, music, book clubs, karaoke, Wall Street trading tips, and politics (Schlegel, 2021; Allyn, 2021). Twitch and DLive, similarly to Discord, also host streams on a number of topics, including eSports, cooking, music, and political talk shows. As these online spaces further resemble social media platforms, and considering they are less well known to wider society as compared to Facebook and Twitter, for example, there is the fear that online gaming and associated platforms can increasingly be used to spread propaganda, as recruitment and radicalisation mechanisms, as well as facilitating content propagation, combat training, money laundering, and terrorist financing (EU, 2020). Further, as with mainstream social media platforms, gaming-related platforms have, in the context of extremism, also been used to transmit subcultural factors linked to 'fun' and 'shitposting' (Schlegel, 2021). Finally, recent research on the four platforms argued that the majority of English-language communities they studied were 'country agnostic' and more transnational in nature, reflecting the current trend beyond gaming of far-right extremist activity online (Davey, 2021), including on, of course, wider social media platforms.

- Types of communities: Recent research on these four platforms found a wide range of far-right communities operating across them (albeit with a smaller variety on Twitch). The researchers argued that: Steam had the most diverse subgroups of far-right extremist communities; Discord appeared predominantly to host racist trolls who drew upon White nationalist and supremacist subculture, akin to that found on 4Chan and 8Kun (Evans, 2019); DLive was home to various influencers who promoted a range of far-right extremist talking points; and Twitch communities focused on conspiracy theories and White supremacist worldviews. Further, there was support

on Steam and Discord for violent extremist organisations, including affiliation with the Nordic Resistance Movement and Misanthropic Division on Steam, and instances of support for Atomwaffen Division and Sonnenkrieg Division on Discord (Davey, 2021).

- Types of material and format: The types of material and format available on these platforms are difficult to ascertain due to the limited nature of the scant research available. From what is known, there appears to be a range of material and formats, including books, documents, videos, livestream downloads, interviews, memes, and (particularly on DLive) talk shows. For example, on Discord, research has found evidence of material relating to the works of far-right violent extremists, interviews with the founder of the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer website, Andrew Anglin, handbooks of National Socialist propaganda, and videos on “The Nazi Economy” (Guhl et al., 2020). Other research on Discord (as a snapshot of current trends, rather than a comprehensive overview) has likewise found evidence of this, including servers that are explicitly supportive of the far-right violent extremist groups Atomwaffen Division and Sonnenkrieg Division, sharing graphics either created by or promoting the activity of these groups, propaganda videos, and other videos including the Christchurch attack (Gallagher et al., 2021). There were also more casual ‘racist, sexist, homophobic and antisemitic comments, memes and images, as well as overtly pro-Nazi or pro-Hitler content’, which resembled that of trolling or ‘shitposting’ often seen on spaces like 4chan or 8kun ‘as opposed to more committed and strategic forms of extremist activism’ (ibid: 10).

On Twitch also, authors have outlined the relative ease, using simple keywords, of finding material (in the form of ‘isolated clips’) pertaining to the Great Replacement theory, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and support for White supremacist narratives in four videos and the ‘White genocide’ in another (O’Connor, 2021). Wider material has also been found on DLive pertaining to the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, including QAnon- and COVID-19-related ones (Browning and Lorenz, 2021). Talk shows were, and possibly still are, also popular on DLive, which commonly promoted White nationalist ideologies and viewpoints, or glorified White culture (Thomas, 2021). Finally, chain messages were found on Steam, which encouraged users to spread hate and extremist narratives. In one example, researchers found a graphic of a knife with swastikas on it, which included the quote, “put this on your friends [sic] profile to protect them against [niggers] and Jews 14/88 WPWW”, with the commonly used acronym WPWW standing for ‘White Pride Worldwide’ (ADL, n.d.).

- Role of gaming: The role of gaming within the context of (violent) extremism, although ambivalent, appears to take on a variety of different functions. For instance, research on Steam has argued that the ‘use of gaming as an outwards [sic] projection of extreme-right identity was limited, with most “associated” games being generic, widely played titles’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 7). Thus, the ‘popular’ games played by these communities, including ‘Counter-Strike: Global Operations’, were about the game itself, rather than about being a tool to radicalise or recruit. Saying that, the researchers found evidence of ‘racist approaches to gameplay, such as organising a “right-wing death squad” on DayZ, or killing black characters in Grand Theft Auto’ (ibid: 8).

This suggests that whilst there is not a deliberate strategy to reach new recruits, ‘there is a notable extremist subset within broader gaming communities’ (Davey, 2021: 5). Thus, although these Steam groups bring together supporters of right-wing extremism, their primary focus on the platform remains on building shared communities around gaming, in order to connect with like-minded individuals over shared interests and hobbies (Vaux et al., 2021), in addition to the Steam groups discussed above which were not interested in gaming, but more on community building around (violent) extremism and outlinking to the broader extremist online ecosystem (as will be discussed later). For example, Nordic Resistance Movement appears to not be using Steam to host gaming-related content, but rather as a hub for the movement (Vaux et al., 2021).

Within Discord servers also, research has found general casual conversations about gaming (Gallagher et al., 2021). Here, ‘mentions of gaming were largely cultural, with individuals using gaming slang and memes and talking about games they enjoy playing alongside discussing extreme right ideology’ (Davey, 2021: 9). On DLive, out of the 100 far-right extremist accounts analysed, only seven appeared to be used for the streaming of games or to engage with gaming-type activity, of which three users utilised livestreaming to promote extremist viewpoints to their audience (Thomas, 2021). Research into Twitch has presented similar arguments, where the majority of the extremist content found in the study had little gaming-related content. However, the researchers did find 12 videos related to gaming content which did feature support for far-right extremist ideologies (seven 7 standalone and five from a pair of US White nationalist streamers). For example, in one video, a Twitch live streamer played the game *Monhun* while the audio of a White supremacist speech was present throughout (O’Connor, 2021). There are, however, caveats to this as researchers have not monitored online gaming and in-game voice chat, which could potentially tell a different story. Here, wider research has demonstrated that in-game harassment is rife (81% of users interviewed indicated they had experienced it), including being exposed to discussions around White supremacy (around 9% of respondents said they had been exposed to such discussions) (ADL, 2020).

However, there has been evidence to suggest that video games have been used to enact ideological fantasies, where Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and neo-Nazism was provided in commentary around games (Davey, 2021). Although these games do not contain any extremist content per se, they enable far-right extremists to ‘play out fantasies of destroying Muslim factions during the Crusades, or winning World War II for the Nazis’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 7). In this regard, certain games depicting WWII, such as the well-known *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Battlefield* game series, attracted users who glorified Nazism (ADL, n.d.).

- **In-game text and voice chat:** Many of the types of platforms discussed in this section have the facility to enable users to engage in voice and text chat, either in-game, or as a communication mechanism generally, or during a livestream. There is concern that users can use these functions to specifically or casually engage in conversations of an extremist nature. Research has found that there is an intersection between gaming and far-right (violent) extremism, with some streamers and commentators, whilst livestreaming their gaming, making casual racist or political comments, and even discussing the use of games to humanise White nationalists and promote “white positivity” (Thomas, 2021: 5). While text chat is easier to analyse, voice chat poses additional issues around content moderation. It has therefore been argued that there could be concerted efforts to radicalise and recruit in-game, something that is difficult to capture in current analysis (Davey, 2021).

- **Wider communication concerns:** As discussed above, as these platforms offer extensive communication via text, voice, and video chat, they are of particular concern and ‘vulnerable to hijacking by violent extremists’. Particularly as many platforms offer privacy and anonymity, connection in mostly secure settings, encryption, the ability for administrators of servers to oversee implementation of the moderation rules, and the ability to be used on the move (EU, 2020: 8). Another issue is that gaming platforms may have less priority for surveillance as compared to more conventional communication systems. ‘Often terrorist and violent extremist groups and actors, therefore, use these less moderated, less regulated and more anonymous gaming communication systems as a teaser to later share more radical content on alternative more secured platforms’ (ibid: 9).

- **Raiding:** An issue that was prevalent across Steam and Discord concerned ‘raiding’. Here, users name target sites and encourage their networks to join in the gamified harassment and trolling of others including, particularly in the case of far-right extremists, those from minority or LGBTIQ+ communities. One example of this was demonstrated when a White power music group shared a link to an Israeli Steam group, and encouraged other members to “help me raid

this juden [German word for Jew] group”, with Neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic comments continuously posted in the group just a couple of minutes after (Vaux et al., 2021: 8). This is a tactic that has long been used by extremists across more obscure spaces online as well as on mainstream social media platforms, including Islamic State supporters on Facebook (ibid). This is particularly widespread among far-right extremists, and can be seen as a method to bring young people in particular into contact with them and their ideologies (Gallagher et al., 2021).

- **Multiple accounts:** One issue that was only raised in relation to Twitch, though it has far wider implications, as it is also seen on mainstream social media platforms, concerns users simply setting up another account after being banned, or initially setting up multiple accounts as a precaution against disruption (O’Connor, 2021).

- **Ease of access:** Within research across most (if not all) of the types of platforms discussed in this paper, there have been arguments that extremist content, people, groups, and communities have been particularly easy to locate. For example, on Steam, a ‘basic search in the groups tab for words and phrases like “Nazis” or “Jews” or “school shooting” will bring up thousands of results’ (Campbell, 2018). It must be noted, however, that there have been some efforts to disrupt such content on the platform since this article was released, so numbers may differ. Wider work tells a similar story, with the Anti-Defamation League arguing that it was ‘disturbingly easy for ADL’s researchers to locate Steam users who espouse extremist beliefs, using language associated with white supremacist ideology and subcultures, including key terms, common numeric hate symbols and acronyms’ (ADL, n.d.). On Discord, also, servers have ‘tags’, making it easier to search for particular topics/content, including that which is extremist-related (Schlegel, 2021).

- **Monetisation, money laundering, and terrorist financing:** An aspect rarely discussed in relation to the intersection between (violent) extremism and gaming is the ability for people to make money using these types of platforms. For instance, it has been argued that far-right extremists have made considerable amounts of money streaming on Twitch (Schlegel, 2021), which could be through donations using its own digital currency, Bits; through third-party donation tools like Streamlabs; by employing more widely used options like PayPal; or by running ads on their content or channels, with paid subscriptions, with sponsorships, or by selling merchandise (O’Connor, 2021). DLive reportedly has similar issues, with examples of extremists asking for donations, answering paid questions, and promoting merchandise (similar to activity demonstrated on other social media sites, like YouTube) (Thomas, 2021). DLive also has built-in opportunities for making money using a blockchain-type cryptocurrency architecture (Davey, 2021). It is thought that some leading White supremacists and other extremists have, in the past, made substantial amounts of money on this platform (Gais and Hayden, 2020).

Further, there are concerns that due to the ability within online gaming to exchange virtual currencies to be traded within the game and, in certain circumstances, real money outside of the game, there are fears that this could be used for money laundering and terrorist financing, including across borders – quickly, almost invisibly, and with relative ease. Through multiplication of microtransactions, there is the possibility of the financing of “‘low-cost’ terrorism” (EU, 2020). ‘Popular games such as Fortnite, Call of Duty, Counter-Strike and Overwatch are ideal targets for money laundering. All have large player-bases, enable easy trading of in-game currencies and high-value items, and have robust secondary online markets for these assets, making them easily transferable into fiat currency’ (ibid: 12). Recent reports on Valve (Steam), for example, document the intersection between video gaming and money laundering (ibid).

THEMES

RADICALISATION, RECRUITMENT, AND REINFORCING VIEWS

The question of whether video gaming or associated platforms are deliberately used for purposes of radicalisation and recruitment is predictably complicated and often contradictory in nature. In recent work which analysed the use of video gaming-related platforms (Steam, Discord, Twitch, DLive), there was limited evidence to demonstrate radicalisation and recruitment were part of a concerted strategy (Davey, 2021); rather, these platforms were seen to provide wider functions and act as part of ‘the broader social activity of individual users’ (Gallagher et al., 2021: 10). This alludes to a consideration that is rarely mentioned in regard to violent extremism and video gaming: that, as well as some violent extremists and their organisations purposefully targeting video gaming spaces, numerous others who hold similar ideologies and beliefs will be gamers themselves, using video gaming in the same way many others do, i.e., to have fun, socialise, and develop communities (Davey, 2021). In addition, research has even demonstrated that these extremist communities appeared to be ‘inward facing’, with ‘little interest in actively trying to expand or grow their network via gaming platforms, content or communities’ (Gallagher et al., 2021: 7).

With Steam, for example, there was scant evidence to suggest that the platform was being used as a deliberate strategy for radicalisation and recruitment, instead serving as a way to connect with other like-minded people and strengthen communities over mutual interests (including gaming and extremism-related narratives) (Vaux et al., 2021). However, various researchers who have undertaken studies on these platforms caveat this with the limited scope of the work, which often did not explore more neutral gaming spaces, or in-game voice chat, concluding that further research is needed to determine the role of gaming for radicalisation and recruitment purposes (see Davey, 2021; ADL, n.d.). Thus, although these studies did not find evidence that radicalisation and recruitment was the primary intent of extremists or that it was widespread in nature, that does not mean its occurrence should be overlooked or that it cannot or does not take place (EU, 2020; Europol, 2021). This is particularly relevant when looking at wider platforms, such as Iron March chat, where there is evidence to suggest that ‘extremist groups used Steam to recruit possible members, especially Atomwaffen Division’ (ADL, n.d.). More recent work on Steam also found evidence of a small number of servers which appeared to be part of broader recruitment strategies. ‘One Steam group associated with a well-known alt-right podcast is described as a place for “fascists to play vidya” (video games), with a note that an admin “is still looking for guys to be in his racist shitposting CSGO clan”’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 8).

In fact, a recent paper from the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator argues that online gaming platforms could, in future, replace traditional social media platforms as the preferred mode for propaganda dissemination and recruitment, due to three factors (EU, 2020). First, there is a ‘huge target audience for radicalisation on gaming platforms, especially among young people, who tend to be more vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment’ (ibid: 4). Second, ‘gaming platforms, related apps and streaming services provide an ecosystem that is suitable for spreading violent propaganda’ (ibid: 5). Here, there are, through high levels of anonymity, sizeable social networking opportunities. It also needs to be considered that some gamers may already subscribe to or be interested in extremist ideologies, and be ‘seekers’ (Lakhani, 2014). Third, ‘in connection with the spread of online terrorist propaganda, various terrorist groups are increasingly exploiting popular elements from video games and the gaming culture to appeal to younger generations, to normalise their message as well as to desensitize users to violence’ (ibid: 6). Finally, it should be mentioned that although the primary function of these platforms is not to radicalise or recruit, any activity of this type that leads to violence can be devastating, where small

numbers of individuals can inflict large amounts of damage, which can result in high numbers of casualties.

As discussed earlier in the context of bespoke games and mods, there is also the possibility that activity on these platforms can act as a function to reinforce views. Recent research corroborates this, arguing that ‘reaching new audiences [is] seen as a “bonus” rather than the chief objective of such work...[suggesting that] gaming acts to strengthen bonds between already radicalised individuals’ (Thomas, 2021: 8). This is, therefore, not about underplaying the role of gaming in terms of radicalisation and recruitment; it is to highlight that the existing empirical research provides little evidence about this being the primary intent. Once again, it needs to be caveated that this may well be to do with the methodological limitations of current studies and lack of in-depth research in this already scant area of work, pointing to the urgent need for research in this area.

COMMUNITY BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING

Research has demonstrated that rather than radicalisation and recruitment being the primary function, as well as could be determined, community building and strengthening existing communities, as alluded to above, is considered to be one prominent outcome of engaging with online gaming platforms (Davey, 2021). One of the clearest examples present within this body of work relates to the British White nationalist group, Patriotic Alternative, who, through a series of livestreams and regular talk shows, attempted to foster a sense of community on DLive (Thomas, 2021). The group organised gaming tournaments, about which they outlined in their own words in a lengthy blog post: “‘In PA’s Warzone competitions, dozens of nationalists get together to play and spend that time interacting with like-minded people. Voice chat is an important part of the gameplay in a teambased game like Warzone, so most of the people who participate in the PA livestreams can chat with fellow players both before and during the games. This gives everyone an excellent opportunity to make new nationalist contacts and strengthen their friendships with those they already know. In short, it’s a free and easy way for us to “meet” online and network with one another”’ (ibid: 6).

In a similar fashion, extremists on Steam have regularly attempted to organise matches of popular FPS, in order to connect to other like-minded people, thus using gaming in a similar fashion to non-extremists, i.e., as a way to fulfil a social function (Vaux et al., 2021). What is particularly concerning, however, is that the ‘groups analysed here were identified through their common membership, demonstrating how communities expressing support for non-violent forms of far-right extremism are nevertheless interlinked by communities affiliated with paramilitary activity and highly egregious forms of white supremacist activity’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 5). This has also been demonstrated in the wider (non-gaming) literature which points to the overlapping and collaboration of previously distinct far-right extremist communities, and with increasing internationality also (Lakhani and James, 2021).

In some instances, within the available research, some of the servers ‘specify who is allowed to join, e.g., “no minorities, no women, no black people”’ (Schlegel, 2021: 5). Further, some ‘fascist’ communities have demanded that users prove their ‘membership’ and also ensure only ‘verified’ users can participate (Vaux et al., 2021). On Discord, certain servers even ask users to submit a photo of their hand or arm to demonstrate their ethnicity (Gallagher et al., 2021). This, once again, demonstrates the complexity of the issue in terms of radicalisation and recruitment. If groups attempt to ‘verify’ users before being admitted into the group, this suggests that radicalisation and recruitment functions are minimised due to the members already having some identification with ideologies. Other groups were open, which could attract a wider range of users; though, once again, this does not automatically assume that radicalisation and recruitment are the primary functions; nor does it overlook the possibility of this occurring.

EXTREMIST ECOSYSTEM

It is important to note that these video game hosting and complimentary platforms do not work in silos, but are used as part of wider online ecosystems by users who, in similar ways to the general population, use a plethora of online spaces for different purposes, to reach wider audiences, and to ensure content remains active during attempts at disruption of accounts and content (Conway et al., 2021; Baele et al., 2020). As a result, extremists adopt flexible, multi-platform approaches, where they can use and shift across multiple online spaces in order to maintain their presence (Thomas, 2021; O'Connor, 2021). There are also widespread concerns that video gaming can be an entry point where, once trust is established, there is the possibility that recruiters are able to guide people to alternative, less monitored, spaces (EU, 2020), via communication tools embedded in video games (RAN, 2021).

Research on Steam, for instance, has argued that the platform does not sit in isolation, but is part of a wider extremist ecosystem, 'with Steam groups acting as hubs for communities and organizations which span multiple platforms' (Vaux et al., 2021: 9). Thus, '[i]n addition to connecting individuals who support the extreme right, some groups also provide off-ramps to ideological content and other social media platforms, suggesting that some far-right extremist communities are using Steam to recruit to specific movements. This includes links to far-right blogs, podcasts and articles, as well as invitations to join Telegram groups and vetted Discord servers' (Vaux et al., 2021: 4). Further, researchers also found that servers associated with particular movements direct people to official websites of extremist groups, such as The Daily Stormer (Davey, 2021), and to 'a blog containing historical revisionist videos portraying Adolf Hitler as a heroic figure' (Vaux et al., 2021: 6). As well as directing people to wider spaces from Steam, it appears that other non-gaming spaces provide links to Steam, which works to further determine the use of the game-hosting platform by White supremacists (ADL, n.d.).

Work on DLive tells a similar story, where users on the platform have responded to an increase in disruption 'by adopting highly flexible, multi-platform strategies to maintain their presence online. They have learned to shift quickly from one platform to another, and to operate across a range of platforms for a variety of different purposes. They need specific capabilities on a platform but are not dependent on specific platforms' (Thomas, 2021: 7). Researchers also argued that there is no affection for any particular platform, and often, DLive – and Twitch, for that matter (O'Connor, 2021) – are used concurrently to livestream and upload content to other platforms including YouTube, Trovo, Odysee, Omegle, and BitChute (Thomas, 2021). 'The simultaneous use of multiple livestreams to spread hate, by verbally attacking or harassing people in one forum and broadcasting it to a supportive audience in another forum, represents a new arena favoured by extremists online as they seek new ways to further their movement' (O'Connor, 2021: 9). Further, some far-right extremists on DLive advertise their other accounts on wider platforms, including Telegram and Gab (Schlegel, 2021). Work on Discord also found links to other neo-Nazi Telegram channels (Gallagher et al., 2021).

One particular example that alludes to the value of the ecosystem beyond that discussed above relates to the livestreamed attacks discussed earlier, in reference to Twitch and Facebook. As well as some assailants being present on gaming platforms – such as the Christchurch shooter, Brenton Tarrant, who apparently had a Steam account and profile (ADL, n.d.) – and users on Steam and Discord celebrating the attacks and vowing to take similar actions (Macklin, 2019), the re-upload of their livestreams is an important problem to consider. For instance, the Halle attack stream was live for 35 minutes, with around 2200 views of the automatic download to Twitch (according to Twitch, only five people watched

the livestream itself) (Hsu, 2019). However, the stream was downloaded and outlinked to other platforms, including Twitter and Telegram, where it accumulated far more views (Schlegel, 2021). There were similar issues posed with the Christchurch attack with people sharing the recorded livestream to other platforms, including YouTube, and attempting to re-upload to Facebook. Within the first 24 hours of the attack alone, Facebook blocked 1.2 million attempts to upload the video and deleted another 300000 on the platform (BBC News, 2019).

Further, although sometimes taken down on more mainstream platforms like Steam, many of the extremist bespoke and modified games are still available for download from numerous surface-web sites, including the developers' webpages themselves, fan-created gaming-host sites (which are not necessarily extremist in nature), and internet archive sites, using simple internet searches within Google and Duck Duck Go, for example. Numerous instances of individuals asking where these games can be downloaded can also be found on major social networking sites like Reddit. Many of these controversial games are also found as part of 'Let's Play' videos YouTube, with a mix of some players who clearly identify with the extremist ideologies in the game, and others who denounce the ideologies but play the titles as games, rating them on graphics, playability, and storyline. As with uploading extremist content to mainstream social media platforms, the challenge here lies with whether platforms take down content that glorifies extremism and not content which is critical towards it, or instead whether a blanket approach is adopted to take down all instances of that material, an action which might prevent wider users becoming aware of its existence.

Overall, this indicates not only that there needs to be strong collaboration with gaming platforms (to exchange knowledge, experience, and good practice), but that it needs to be across the ecosystem, including more traditional social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As with the work undertaken by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), there is the opportunity to share hash-type databases which can help to identify attack videos (and wider extremist content) that has already been, or attempted to have been uploaded, to other platforms. Further, the support of smaller and emerging platforms can also be undertaken. There is also then the opportunity to co-produce solutions to some of the more challenging aspects associated with this area, such as reducing the risk of platforms being used to livestream attacks.

RESPONSE

It is important to discuss the responses, at the time of writing, from the gaming industry and related organisations in relation to the issues outlined throughout this paper so far. These platforms and organisations have often adopted different approaches and strategies to counter the threat of (violent) extremism, with varying levels of commitment. Further, although there are a number of potential responses by companies or actions they are able to take in order to counter the use of their platforms by extremists, this can be a complicated matter due to differing global legislation, which includes considerations around what constitutes freedom of speech and freedom of expression, something that can vary greatly between different states around the world, and differ due to broad understandings of the term by platforms themselves (Guhl et al., 2020). In addition, many of these platforms are in the very early stages of their existence and development, and smaller sites in particular may not have considered or prepared for the infiltration of their sites by (violent) extremists. Saying that, as has been demonstrated, with the right approach and support (such as from organisations like GIFCT and Tech Against Terrorism), some smaller platforms have made progress in this endeavour and are committed to removing extremism from their sites.

In terms of content moderation, there are various examples of platforms taking some form of action, albeit to differing degrees, to remove extremist content and users from their sites. In June 2018, Valve introduced a new content moderation policy for Steam, which stated that it would “allow everything onto the Steam Store, except for things that we decide are illegal, or straight up trolling” (ADL, n.d.). Since then, it has taken a number of actions, including the removal of over 170 games later that year in September (Macgregor, 2018), and, for the first time, has begun to moderate user-flagged content about specific games on Steam’s discussion boards. However, while other platforms appear to have proactive, though imperfect, moderation efforts, Steam, on the other hand, is thought to still have limited moderation and enforces what has been described as a ‘very loose set of content guidelines’ (Bedingfield, 2021).

Discord appears to be taking a proactive approach to content moderation on their platform, demonstrated in the recently published transparency reports. In fact, Discord is one of the few companies within this sector to use the term ‘extremism’ within its guidelines, including within its ‘Community Guidelines’, which state that ‘You may not use Discord for the organization, promotion, or support of violent extremism’ (Discord, 2020). Within its transparency report, Discord also states that it ‘continue[s] to believe there is no place on Discord for groups organizing around hate, violence, or extremist ideologies’ (Nelly, 2021). More recently, in August 2021, Discord’s Founder and CEO, Jason Citron, wrote a blog which explicitly outlined how the platform needs to create change, otherwise it can be considered as ‘complicit in perpetuating white supremacy and the oppression of marginalized people’ (Citron, 2021). He outlines the commitments Discord has made to ensure the platform is not used for hate, violence, and harm, and states that its ‘work here is never done and it’s imperative [it] continue[s] to hold [itself] accountable’. In this regard, Discord has also outlined that it will take an active role in promoting justice, rather than simply reacting to the misuse of the platform.

As well as ‘forming closer industry partnerships’ (Nelly, 2021), including with GIFCT in December 2020, Discord has a Trust & Safety team, amounting to 15% of its full-time workforce (a similar percentage to Facebook and Twitter) (Allyn, 2021). Discord has also expanded its policy team, who will engage with consultants to audit their hate speech policy to identify gaps or look for potential improvements. Finally, the platform has recently acquired Sentropy, ‘an AI-based software company focused on fighting abuse and harassment online.’

In response to the extremist activity that has taken place on the platform, Twitch instituted an in-house moderation team who work to disrupt channels breaching their rules. The company updated its community guidelines in October 2020 where it broadened its ban of terrorist and extremist-related content: 'Twitch does not allow content that depicts, glorifies, encourages, or supports terrorism, or violent extremist actors or acts...You may not display or link terrorist or extremist propaganda, including graphic pictures or footage of terrorist or extremist violence, even for the purposes of denouncing such content' (Twitch, 2020). According to Twitch's first transparency report of its kind, covering 2020, the company states that it 'takes a hard look at how [it] think[s] about safety', and that it 'believe[s] everyone in [its] community – creators, viewers, moderators, and Twitch – plays a big role in promoting the health and safety' of the community (Twitch, 2021). It outlines that due to the livestreaming nature of the platform, a range of approaches (including machine learning, moderators, user reporting, partnerships, etc.) need to be employed to deal with safety-related issues. In terms of content moderation, Twitch recognises that this job can expose people to 'extremely disturbing' content, and have taken various 'health and safety' steps to minimise the impact. Channel-level safety is left to 'creators to set their own standards of acceptable and unacceptable community behavior, with our Community Guidelines providing a baseline standard that all communities are required to uphold' (Twitch, 2021).

In 2021, the platform launched its 'Off-Service Conduct Policy', which dictated that 'if Twitch finds out about "serious offenses that pose a substantial safety risk to the Twitch community," it'll take action, even when those offenses took place entirely off the platform' (Schiffer, 2021). Twitch outlines that it 'will issue enforcements against the relevant accounts, up to an indefinite suspension on the first offense for some behaviors, which can take place offline or on other internet services, including [for]...violent extremism...terrorist activities and recruiting' (Twitch, 2021a). If implemented correctly, this could be a welcome tool in lessening the risk of the platform being used by extremists, and reduce the opportunity for extremists to post relatively innocuous content on the site in order to divert users to smaller platforms with more relaxed moderation and terms of service. Finally, there is evidence of counter-speech content on Twitch, which, although not a top-down initiative, is used to push back against far-right (violent) extremism on the platform (O'Connor, 2021).

In terms of DLive, it has been argued that (violent) extremists have an ambivalent relationship with the site, which at one point was used 'due to the relative freedom it afforded them to broadcast content which would not be allowed on other platforms' (Thomas, 2021: 4). However, an increase in content moderation has prompted some to voluntarily leave the platform for other online spaces, including Trovo and Odysee, due to a feeling that these platforms provide more 'permissive environments for extremist activity' (ibid). This indicates that DLive was used as a place to simply livestream, rather than that users have any particular affinity with it (Davey, 2021). Content moderation was increased after the storming of the Capitol in January 2021, where DLive (according to an open letter from CEO Charles Wayn to the DLive community) removed the factors that incentivised the growth of the far-right on the platform, including demonetisation, enforcing stricter content moderation policies, banning influential figures, undertaking a content moderation of all 'X tag' channels with significant viewership (those channels tagged as having political or adult content), and co-operating with law enforcement requests (Wayn, 2021; DLive, 2021). Charles Wayn also outlined how there is no place for 'repugnant ideas like white supremacism' on the platform (Wayn, 2021). Thus, the 'safe harbour' that was once available to extremists diminished on DLive (Thomas, 2021); though others argue that the existence of extremism remains on the platform despite these moves to expel it (Schlegel, 2021).

REFLECTION

CONTENT MODERATION

Within the literature, there are varied arguments about whether online gaming platforms are doing enough through their own moderation strategies, whether more could be done, and whether these strategies are having the desired effect. This includes: the insertion of key terms like ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ into the companies’ policy documentation (including content moderation, user/community guidelines, and terms of service); increased moderation efforts through dedicated teams and engagement with user reports; making users aware of reporting and moderating tools, and being transparent with how these reports are actioned; investment and updates with user reporting and content detection tools (including in-game voice chat); and the publishing of transparency reports. In terms of transparency reports, although a welcome development by some platforms, they only tell part of the story. As well as learning of how many accounts and how much content has been disrupted, determining how much has not been, and how much thus remains on the platform, is also vital. Further complications are added to the removal of extremists and their content from platforms when considering wider partnerships. For example, Steam shares direct formal business relationships with major game companies, including 2K, Electronic Arts, Xbox Game Studios, and Ubisoft. Many of these organisations have been forthcoming about the dedicated resources implemented in order to keep their products protected from exploitation from (violent) extremism, whilst continuing their partnership with Steam (ADL, n.d.), who have been criticised in recent research in this regard. It has been argued that due to Steam’s ‘permissive attitude to this harmful activity...these communities have a safe haven to promote and discuss extremist ideology and content’ (Vaux et al., 2021: 4). Similar arguments can be made with wider adjacent gaming platforms and business collaborations and advertising. Finally, game developers themselves also need to ensure appropriate safeguards are incorporated into their products, particularly in terms of in-game voice and text chat, and that stronger content moderation tools are included in all games (D’anastasio, 2020).

DEFINING FEATURES, CONTENT, AND STRATEGIC AIMS

Although there are, albeit limited, emerging pieces of research which provide a snapshot of the current landscape, there are certain key questions whose answers remain elusive. These primarily concern whether there are any particular defining features or characteristics of games or online (adjacent) platforms that make them attractive to (violent) extremists and are targeted specifically as such. Is this then about the purposeful search for online gaming spaces, somewhere to radicalise, recruit, build communities, and spread ideologies, due to, for example, a perception of lenient detection and content moderation rules, or particular defining platform attributes (such as infrastructure, networking abilities)? Or are these simply the platforms these individuals and networks use for their own gaming purposes? As argued in wider works, the encroachment of gaming spaces is by no means an accident, as it is expected that potentially large proportions of far-right (violent) extremists (and other violent extremists to some extent) will be gamers themselves (RAN, 2021). At the same time, it is possible there are further strategic decisions involved, such as migration between platforms due to disruption on others. More than likely, it will be a combination of all of these considerations to some extent (Schlegel, 2021). However, the who, what, when, where, why, and how remain heavily under-studied, which in turn greatly affects our understanding of the issues. Similarly, in terms of the (violent) extremist content available on these platforms, although recent studies provide a general overview, questions around type, frequency, and amount need to be addressed in far more detail.

There are also wider considerations here, such as whether (violent) extremists look to gaming spaces and see them as opportunities to engage with qualitatively different audiences, including those that are potentially younger in nature, through the medium of ‘fun’, similar to the use of memes (Fielitz and Ahmed, 2021), rather than other ‘serious’ propaganda materials via traditional channels (Lakomy, 2019). As with previous associations with jihadi ‘cool’ (al-Rawi, 2018), this connects to wider subcultural attractions including excitement and adventure (Lakhani and Hardie-Bick, 2020). This can be somewhat demonstrated by the ‘language on gaming (adjacent) platforms pertaining to dark-humoured memes, subcultural codes, and gaming references’ (Schlegel, 2021: 13). Due to the fast-changing nature of extremism, particularly relevant with the far-right, including increasing internationalisation, and merging and formation of new groups, it is often difficult for experts, let alone others, to keep up with various developments in the field, including emerging symbols, memes, sayings, images, names, etc. that have an affiliation to extremism and violent extremism. Further, previously benign markers, symbols, and sayings are co-opted by extremist groups, or their followers, and take on new meanings. This is particularly relevant when considering whether individuals are involved because they have a genuine interest in (violent) extremist ideologies, are ‘shitposting’, or because of a combination of both.

Finally, a couple of wider considerations need to be mentioned. First, the age of those participating in these types of extremist activities on gaming platforms will be a critical factor in efforts to counter the threat. There will thus be wider considerations around child safety and safeguarding, amongst others. Europol (2021) add to this narrative by arguing that the popularity of video games with young people could help to explain in part why those being arrested for terrorism-related activities are increasingly young. Wider literature has also outlined the possibility of reaching younger gamers through gaming and associated platforms (Selepak, 2010; Davey, 2021). Some of the research and literature on these platforms indicates average ages of users, which is normally under 18 years old. However, due to the normal practice of self-reporting age for users, further work needs to be undertaken. Second, it must be noted that although this paper has focused on particular platforms, the key considerations and messages are much more widely applicable, to include game developers, consoles (PlayStation, Xbox, etc.) and their services, amongst others.

THE URGENT NEED FOR RESEARCH

In reality, the intersection between (violent) extremism and gaming is a complex and multi-faceted area of consideration, one that ‘manifests itself in vastly different ways across platforms and extremism types’ (RAN, 2020: 6), and one that needs to be considered both holistically but also in its individual parts. The answers to the aforementioned questions are critical in order to respond to and tackle the issues. This is not just in relation to gaming, but also to wider online spaces, including social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This is due to users of this nature using the internet as an ecosystem in a similar way to the rest of society (Conway et al., 2021); and possibly in a more pronounced way when considering certain factors, such as age. In order to start having sustained progress in this area, in-depth, methodologically rigorous research needs to be conducted on each of these platforms and the wider ecosystem, parts of which can only be achieved through access to data on these sites being granted by the companies themselves. This is in the best interests of these companies, not only to expand, refine, and increase the disruption of extremist activity on their platforms, and to gauge how effective current strategies are, but also to explore (and potentially debunk) notions of gaming being a causal factor of (violent) extremism.

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