CONCLUSIONS PAPER

Thematic Research Meeting on "Leveraging Gamification to Address Online Hate Speech"

12 July 2022 – Online

KEY OUTCOMES

This conclusions paper provides an overview of the key findings that have resulted from an online RAN PS Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) on "Leveraging Gamification to Address Online Hate Speech" held on 12 July 2022. The online event gathered 25 researchers, academics, and scholars as well as EU Member States.

The TRM explored the topic of gaming and gamification used by (violent) extremist groups and building on previous P/CVE interventions, discussed the benefits and challenges of using these approaches as a tool for the development of P/CVE interventions in relation to hate speech online.

SOME OF THE KEY OUTCOMES OF THE MEETING WERE:

1. There is a shared understanding that **gaming and gamification are relatively new topics that would benefit from further research** and resources that would also contribute to a better understanding of the relations between gaming and extremism.

2. There is a **plurality of gaming and gamification tools and approaches** that have been used by extremist groups.

3. **Games and gaming communities are spaces for socialisation**. While it is important to acknowledge that some members in these spaces espouse toxic values and extremist groups can use these spaces for recruitment, policymakers and researchers should not vilify games and gaming communities.

4. There are **opportunities for P/CVE practitioners to use gaming and gamification techniques**. The case studies and participant discussions highlighted examples of games and gamification for tackling online hate speech and suggestions for top-down and bottom-up P/CVE approaches.

This paper summarises the highlights of the discussion as well as the recommendations that were formulated by the participants and will give an outlook on possible follow-up topics.

HIGHLIGHTS
OF THE DISCUSSION

Gaming is very widespread. Within Europe, 2.5 billion people played video games in 2021, with most of these players being young people. Within games, players can socialise, explore fantasies, exercise control, create meaningful relationships, create communities, respond to challenges, relax and develop their creativity. Additionally, gamers can gather within communities to socialise with other gamers and plan future actions. However, extremist communities have also used games and inserted themselves into gaming communities. There has been little research conducted on this phenomenon which gained attention after the 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand.

USE OF GAMING AND GAMIFICATION BY EXTREMIST GROUPS

Extremist groups, including right-wing and Jihadist groups, are active within online communities. There are **six typologies** that **describe how online extremists use online video games to communicate with, and radicalise, their target audience**. Extremist groups can use video games themselves, through the production of bespoke video games, the modification of extremist video games, and in game communication features. The modification of existing games to extremist ideologies tends to be easier than the development of new games by extremist groups. Alternatively, extremist groups can use gaming adjacent platforms (e.g. Twitch, DLive, Odysee, Discord, Steam, Roblox), gaming cultural references and game design elements to connect with and motivate their target audiences, for example by mirroring first person video games during attacks. Extremist groups are openly recruiting from gaming communities, for example, there have been multiple cases in Denmark of would-be school shooters or extremist recruiters using gaming servers and gamification for recruitment.

Additionally, there are frequently **toxic gamers within gaming communities**, who **espouse racist, sexist or antisemitic values**. Right wing extremists feed off the narratives constructed by toxic gamers and attempt to pull these individuals into extremist spaces. Many right-wing groups, including the Identitarian movement, are openly talking about how they are using gaming to connect with a wider audience, including through biweekly Discord meetings where the Identitarian movement invites people to game with them and discuss ideologies. Participants also discussed the presence of influencers making six figure salaries promoting extremist content through these gaming platforms. Although influencers are typically forced onto smaller platforms as big platforms moderate content, the large salaries suggest influencers may have a significant audience.

Although **no causal relationship has been identified between playing video games and radicalisation**, participants identified possible ways that games could be utilised by extremist groups. Games may increase the pop culture appeal of the propaganda, thus increasing the attraction appeal of the group. Additionally, being present within gaming communities where hate speech and extremist ideas are being shared may contribute to cognitive radicalisation. Exposure to gaming communities that are centred around violence and misogyny may desensitise individuals and strengthen hateful mindsets, particularly in communities where individuals with divergent views have been forced out.

In addition to the use of gaming tools, participants also discussed gamification which designates the use of gaming elements in non-games contexts. These include a variety of point systems, scoreboards, and badges. There was a shared understanding that extremist groups are often early adopters of new technologies. Online platforms that utilise gaming and gaming-like elements do not moderate content in the same way and extremist groups are more likely to develop on platforms that are poorly moderated.

IMPACT OF HATE SPEECH

Hate speech in online communities targets minority groups, with many players (including women) feeling forced to hide their identity. There is a lack of legislation and support for minority players, meaning that many feel unable to tackle hate speech and thus either ignore it or leave the community.

Although girls and women are increasingly playing video games, misogyny and hate speech often forces them out of communities, with many women choosing to play alone and/or offline. The prevalence of misogyny within gaming communities encourages many young boys to link their gaming identity with a misogynistic identity. Experiencing online hate speech within gaming communities can lead to players developing depression, anxiety and expressing deviant behaviour. Furthermore, exposure to hate speech is correlated with a greater tendency to practice hate speech, suggesting a desensitization process. Nevertheless, games can be used as tools to reinforce empathic behaviours, tackle toxicity and reverse the desensitization process.

COUNTERING HATE SPEECH

Participants challenged the narrative that gaming leads to social isolation, suggesting instead that young people experiencing life crises either online or offline (such as bullying, parental divorce, weight, unhappiness) feel socially isolated and can therefore seek a sense of belonging through communities in video games. Thus, while policymakers and P/CVE practitioners can reach vulnerable youth through gaming, so can extremist groups. Participants were concerned about the lack of 'reference adults' within video game communities and recognised the need for adults to be present and engage with young people in these communities. Participants also emphasised the need for outreach and interventions within gaming communities to focus on listening to young gamers and being present in these online spaces rather than aiming specifically at deradicalization. For example, Project SCAMMED was established by the Centre for Digital Pædagogik to assist young people who have been scammed in online games. This provides a pathway for young people to understand what happened to them and to provide a safe community for them to raise other online issues.

Participants also emphasised the **importance of understanding the lives of children and the prevalence of the digital sphere in all areas of children's lives**. Participants recommended, for example, that parents discuss video games with their children and seek to understand the quality of the games their children are playing, rather than focusing on the quantity of time that their children are spending online. Participants emphasised that young people should not be removed from video game communities, instead parents should seek to understand which communities their children are engaged in and which games and activities their children are playing.

Interaction on gaming platforms is typically unmoderated and the data is not publicly released, thus making it hard for researchers and policymakers to conduct research and analyse what is happening within these online spaces. Some platforms are more likely to engage with counter extremism practitioners and policymakers, while others are not, arguing that moderation hampers freedom of expression. Participants also re-emphasised the absence of a causal link between video games and radicalisation and the risk this may have on alienating tech companies and online service providers to work jointly with researchers and policymakers in addressing the phenomenon. Instead, practitioners should seek to work with gaming communities to raise awareness that extremist groups are using the socialisation spaces within gaming communities and work together to find solutions.

Participants also suggested that **policymakers and practitioners should, where possible, work with platforms and influencers to start discussions around these issues**. While direct

discussions may not be successful, discussions around inclusion and mental health may help to engage young people within gaming communities. Participants also pointed out the need to provide direct information on infringements to platforms, as companies cannot create guidelines without knowledge of specific incidents. However, where platforms are not willing to engage, policymakers should be willing to cut off revenue as a coercive measure.

In addition to identifying how extremists can use gaming and gamification, **participants identified gaming as an opportunity for P/CVE**. Participants emphasised that gaming communities are often refusing to be associated with or viewed as violent or extremist and are interested in protecting their communities. In addition to top-down P/CVE interventions such as moderation of content, participants suggested opportunities for bottom-up P/CVE interventions, with practitioners working with communities to enable them to use countermeasures and counter speech to challenge hateful and extremist narratives to make their communities a better place. Participants emphasised that both communities and industry should work in spaces where hate speech has become normalised to change the narrative.

CASE STUDIES OF P/CVE INTERVENTIONS LEVERAGING GAMING AND GAMIFICATION

The second panel of the TRM focused on **understanding how existing P/CVE interventions have leveraged gaming and gamification tools**. Two interventions, **Play Your Role** and **Play 4 Your Rights** were presented to participants followed by a discussion on the benefits and challenges that were identified. Both interventions focused on engaging young people to address online hate speech and both highlighted challenges around working with teachers and young people of different ages because of their different experiences online.

The Play Your Role project aimed to address the phenomenon of online hate speech among young people who are likely to experience it online. The project comprised surveys and focus groups to understand perceptions of online hate speech in video games and gaming communities and subsequently identified opportunities for prevention strategies and developed a programme to counteract online hate in video games. The project developed four serious games and one pervasive game that can be used by teachers and educators to help young people to recognise and counteract online hate speech. The next steps in the project will be disseminating these games and examining whether they are working.

The Play 4 Your Rights project focuses specifically on targeting misogyny and gender-based violence, which has become normalised within the gaming community. The project aims to fight hate speech coming from sexism, gender stereotypes and gender discrimination among adolescents through social media education strategies and gamification practices. The project has developed two tools. The first is a card game designed for 12- to 18-year-olds that uses gamification to help players understand situations, reflect on stereotypes, explore emotions and help characters deal with the situation and respond with language to verbal violence. The second tool is the Play4 App, which is a digital urban game (treasure hunt through urban space) that puts users under new attack situations in the online world, thus opening up new types of reflections.

These projects both reflected on the issues of working with teachers and engaging them to use online games they may not be familiar with. Both projects identified the need to work with, and train, teachers to be able to run the projects themselves and to challenge the teachers' fears that video games are bad or inappropriate. The speakers also noted the need to include these tools in the curriculum, as teachers may be enthusiastic about including these projects in their lesson plans but do not have the resources to do so. Additionally, the teachers that have voluntarily engaged with the projects are those that are already engaged on the issue of online hate speech and interested in leveraging online tools. Both speakers mentioned the challenges of involving teachers and educators beyond those already engaged on the issue.

Participants also discussed the inclusion of large groups for the projects, with children between 12 and 18 included. The projects focused on helping younger children build an emotional dictionary, whereas older children had already developed resilience and were harder to work with as they often had a desensitised reaction. A recommendation for future studies was to tailor the games to a smaller age range so that it can be tailored more specifically for the needs of the specific age group.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND P/CVE INTERVENTIONS OPPORTUNITIES

All participants emphasised the **need for more research** on this topic and the need to better understand the mechanics of gaming and gamification as well as online behaviours within these communities. Participants identified the need for researchers to understand why extremist groups are using gamification elements and what the consequences may be.

Participants predicted that because extremists are often early adopters of new technologies, **researchers should keep up as technology and culture evolves rapidly** and are likely to be exploited by extremist groups. However, participants also highlighted the challenges in accessing gaming communities for research, as researchers often have to be present in gaming communities when conversations are happening. Researchers are not likely to actively contribute to the development of online content and are often passive participants in those platforms. The lack of moderation on many sites and platforms means that conversations are not recorded for researchers to be able to access later. Additionally, researchers may struggle to identify which communities are targeted by extremist groups and accessing these communities. These challenges may be amplified by countermeasures employed by extremist groups, such as directing potential recruits to gateway Discord servers before they are able to access the main Discord servers.

Participants also highlighted the need to **consider both the online and offline dimensions when developing P/CVE interventions**. Offline interventions may be more accessible for teachers, as they can be brought into school classes even if teachers are more reluctant and less familiar with video games. Both online and offline games can be used to help young people analyse and reflect on situations they encounter online and give students tools to resolve online situations. Additionally, offline interventions can help students to draw parallels between the digital and physical world so they can understand the impact of their actions online and build strategies for interacting online.

Participants also highlighted the **need to bring together all stakeholder groups**, including policymakers, online providers and researchers, to foster new opportunities.

RECNOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need to **conduct more research** on gaming and gamification online to better understand the phenomenon and how it interacts with the development of online hate speech. Without an acute understanding of the phenomenon, it may be difficult to develop bespoke P/CVE interventions.

- Additional research and resources should also contribute to a **better understanding of the links and relations that can be established between gaming and extremism**. Research currently does not establish a causal link. Additional research could also contribute to the wider debate on the definition of extremism.

- Gaming and gamification tools and approaches should not be considered only as a threat but also as an **opportunity to develop P/CVE interventions by the wider stakeholder community including policymakers and practitioners**.

- **P/CVE interventions leveraging gaming and gamification should consider both the online and offline dimensions**. Target audiences live both online and offline and some groups, including young people have fully integrated these two dimensions as part of a continuum rather than two impermeable dimensions.

- When developing gaming related P/CVE interventions addressed at young people in relations to hate speech, there is a need to **engage the wider community** around them, including parents, teachers etc.

- Policymakers should consider using **bottom-up P/CVE methods that involve gamers and gaming communities to make their spaces more positive**. Participants identified that gaming communities are interested in using countermeasures and counter speech to improve their communities but are often lacking the resources and support to do so.

- **Policymakers should explore further cooperation opportunities with tech companies and online service providers** to address the spread of hate speech online and the gaming phenomenon more widely.

FURTHER READING

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