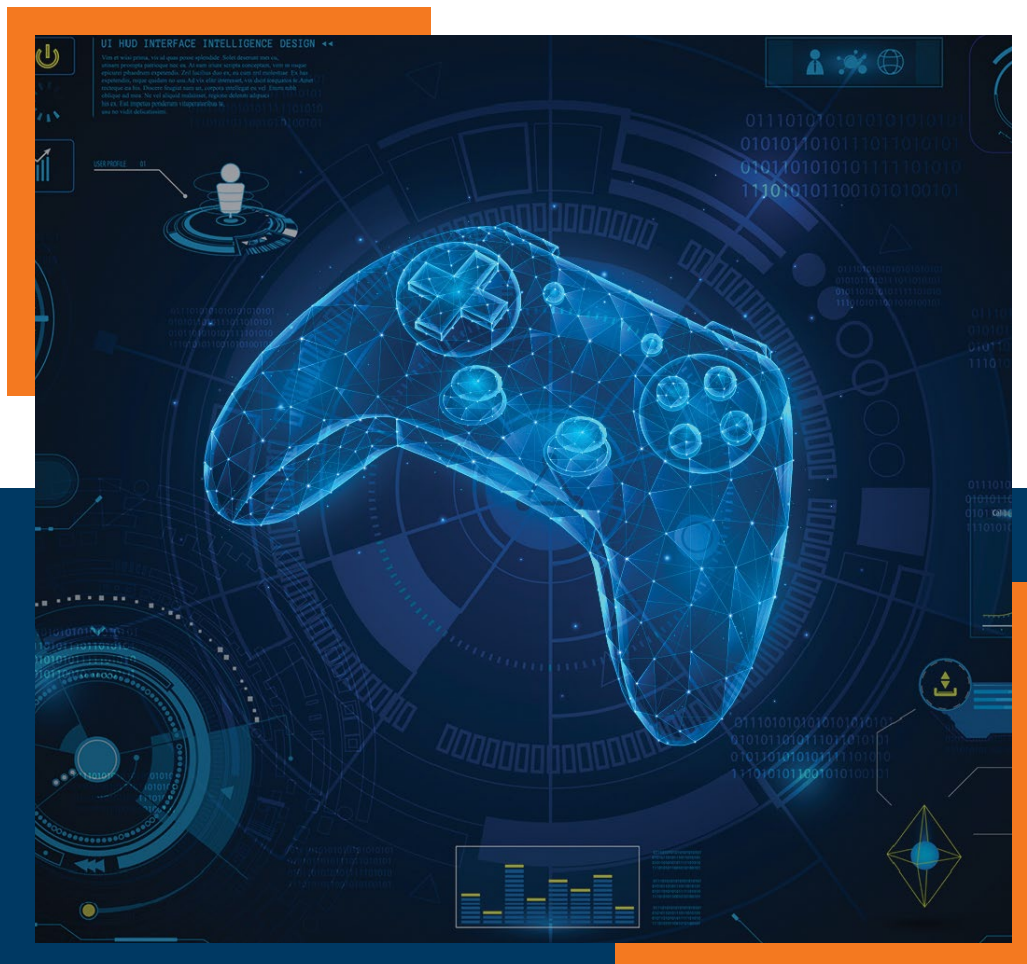# Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism

Global Programme on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Special Projects and Innovation Branch

Contents

1. Introduction

With over 3 billion gamers worldwide,[1] millions of monthly active users on gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms,[2] and an abundance of gaming-related content published daily, gaming culture is omnipresent in modern life. It is neither an activity reserved for children and teenagers – in fact, the average age of players is 34[3] – nor limited to males, as over 40% of players are female.[4] Rather, it is a widespread leisure-time activity deeply anchored in popular mainstream entertainment media. From playing mobile app games to browser games, speaking to others in massive multiplayer games or on gaming consoles, to posting about gaming-related content on social media and chat forums such as Discord, to watching Let's Play videos on livestreaming platforms such as Twitch, one third of the world's population is part of an ever-growing gaming culture.

This trend was further accelerated when the Coronavirus pandemic forced millions of people to refrain from offline social activities. Digital communities in gaming spaces became a substitute for the lack of offline interaction and grew exponentially.[5]

Considering the number of users in gaming spaces and the appeal of gaming-related content, it is unsurprising that a range of violent extremist ideologies have appeared on these platforms and extremists are seeking to exploit the popularity and attractiveness of gaming spaces for their own ends. While the use of video games has been part of propaganda efforts for twenty years,[6] the livestreamed attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 ignited a stark increase in attention from both researchers and policymakers to the potential nexus between gaming and extremism, violent or otherwise. This attention only increased after the 14 May 2022 terrorist attack in Buffalo.

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1. Clement, J. (2021), Number of Video Gamers Worldwide in 2021, By Region. Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/293304/number-video-gamers/
2. Gaming (-adjacent) platforms include gaming platforms such as Steam, livestreaming services such as Twitch and DLive, and chat applications such as Discord.
3. Yanev, V. (2022). Video Game Demographics – Who Plays Games in 2022. Techjury. https://techjury.net/blog/video-game-demographics/#gref
4. ibid.
5. Skwarczek, S. (2021). How The Gaming Industry Has Leveled Up During The Pandemic. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/06/17/how-the-gaming-industry-has-leveled-up-during-the-pandemic/?sh=1e9d4d46297c
6. Schlegel, L. (2018). Playing jihad: the gamification of radicalization. *The Defense Post*. https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/07/05/gamification-of-radicalization-opinion/

The attacker kept an extensive record of his attack planning on Discord and later livestreamed his mass shooting on Twitch.[7] Extremists seem to exploit gaming-related content and spaces in various ways, while growing evidence of the importance of gaming for extremist propaganda and communication efforts has been uncovered in the last few years.

While the potential nexus between gaming and violent extremism has gained considerable attention in recent times, research findings are sparse, limited in scope and largely anecdotal.[8] At the moment, not enough in-depth knowledge has been accumulated to judge the extent and severity of the issue with any acceptable degree of certainty.

In response, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) has commissioned a pilot study on gaming and violent extremism aimed at contributing to this emerging research field.

Research Methodology

This study explores the scope and nature of the exploitation of gaming spaces by violent extremists, scouts potential avenues to react to this exploitation and provides insights on the possibility to use gaming in preventing and/or countering violent extremism (PCVE). This report details the findings of this pilot study, conducted between May 2021 and May 2022. First, the relevant literature is briefly reviewed, then the findings from expert consultations (Phase I) and focus groups with gamers (Phase II) are presented. Finally, the results from a survey disseminated to over 600 gamers (Phase III) are described.[9] It is anticipated that the findings from this research will inform policy and practice for more coordinated responses to gaming and violent extremism.

3bn
gamers in the world

34
average age of gamers

40%
of gamers are female
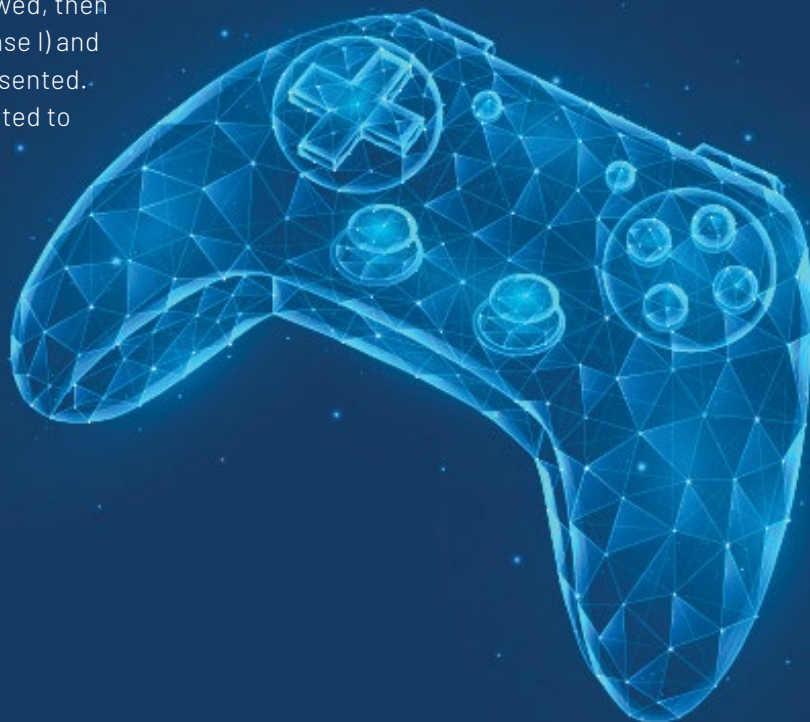
7. Prokupecz, S. et al. (2022). What we know about Buffalo supermarket shooting suspect Payton Gendron. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/15/us/payton-gendron-buffalo-shooting-suspect-what-we-know/index.html
8. For a recent review of the literature, see the annotated bibliography published by the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (2021). State of Play: Reviewing the Literature on Gaming and Extremism. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AatJSq8vhXenjnvXHFrsPLmxyH4aONRU/view
9. A discussion of the methodological approach and its limitations can be found in appendix I.

2. Gaming & Extremism

Ludology, the study of games and their impact, is a long-standing research field. Since the rise in school shootings during the 1990s, a considerable body of work discussing the potential linkages between gaming and violence has been amassed.[10] To this day, no final verdict on the influence of gaming on problematic behaviour has been reached. The assumption that violent games produce adverse effects has nevertheless coloured the public discourse on gaming for the past thirty years and has caused severe backlash from gaming communities. However, it has become clear that there is no direct and straightforward causal link between playing violent games and aggression and/or violent action.[11] Gaming does not cause violence and there is currently no evidence that gamers are more susceptible to violent influences than non-gamers.

The fact that extremists seek to exploit gaming and gaming-related content is not a new phenomenon. Since the early days of the Internet, extremists and terrorist groups have developed video games specifically designed to spread their ideology, such as *Al-Qaida's Quest for Bush*, released in 2003, *Hezbollah's Special Forces* series, and the Da'esh children's game *Huroof*.[12] This trend continues with the release of *Heimatdefender: Rebellion* in 2020 by the German-speaking Identitarian Movement.[13]

The perpetrator of the Oslo attack in 2011 even claimed to have practised for his killings with the video game Call of Duty.[14]

More recently, the Christchurch and Buffalo attacks were livestreamed in the manner of popular Let's Play videos and replicated the visual style of widely known first-person shooter (FPS) games, sparking a stark rise in attention paid by both researchers and policymakers to a potential nexus between gaming and extremism.[15] As of today, the issue of gaming and extremism has become a major concern for many stakeholders seeking to understand contemporary (digital) extremism and explore counter-measures to this ongoing trend.

While recent years have seen increasing evidence that extremists are using gaming-related content and are present on gaming or gaming-adjacent platforms, research on the reasons for and implications of the gaming–extremism nexus is slim and largely theoretical. Terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum are believed to utilize gaming-related content and spaces, but it remains unclear how they do so, why they do so and with what degree of success. Research so far has focused on right-wing extremists' use of gaming, mainly because they are more easily identified in gaming spaces,[16] but there is also initial evidence of 'gaming jihad'[17] and it is likely that extremists of varying ideological backgrounds seek to exploit the appeal of gaming.

10. APA (2020). APA RESOLUTION on Violent Video Games. https://www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-violent-video-games.pdf

11. Ferguson, C. and Wang, J. (2019). Aggressive Video Games are Not a Risk Factor for Future Aggression in Youth: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 48: 1: pp.439–51. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-019-01069-0

12. Schlegel, L. (2020). Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes. *Journal for Deradicalization* 23: pp.1–44. https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/359; Schlegel. Playing jihad.

13. Schlegel, L. (2020). No Child's Play: The Identitarian Movement's 'Patriotic' Video Game. GNET Insight. https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/17/no-childs-play-the-identitarian-movements-patriotic-video-game/

14. Pidd, H. (2012). Anders Breivik 'trained' for shooting attacks by playing Call of Duty. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/19/anders-breivik-call-of-duty

15. Macklin, G. (2019). The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age. *CTC Sentinel* 12 (6). https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/

16. Lee, B. (2021). Only Playing: Extreme-Right Gamification. CREST. https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/only-playing-extreme-right-gamification/

17. Lakomy, M. (2019). Let's Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42 (4): pp.383–406. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903

The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) differentiates six ways extremists are using gaming-related content:[18]

- **Production of bespoke video games:** Extremists are producing and launching their own video games to generate attention, exploit the popularity of video games and present their ideology in an entertaining and immersive format.[19]

- **Modification of existing games:** Far more popular than producing bespoke games is the development by extremists of modifications for popular video games. For example, extremists have built a map that allows the player to experience the Christchurch massacre in both *The Sims* and *Minecraft* and created white ethno-states in *Roblox*.

- **Use of in-game chats:** Extremists are believed to use in-game communication features to establish communication channels with target audiences or, potentially, for grooming purposes.[20]

- **Presence on gaming-adjacent platforms:** There is considerable evidence that extremists are utilizing gaming-adjacent platforms such as Discord, Steam, Twitch and DLive as well as related platforms such as Reddit and chan boards to communicate both among each other and with potential new followers.[21] Discord, for instance, was used in the organization of the Unite the Right rally in 2017 and the Buffalo attacker streamed his attack via Twitch in 2022.

- **Gaming cultural references:** Extremists have utilized gaming aesthetics or footage from popular video games such as *Call of Duty* as well as text-based references to popular video games in their propaganda output.[22]

- **Gamification:** Gamification is the use of game design elements outside gaming contexts; this might include the transfer of points, leaderboards, badges and other game components to other circumstances.[23] Extremists have, for instance, employed virtual leaderboards to keep 'high scores' of body counts from attacks and have used rankings and badges on Discord servers and detailed 'achievements' in their manifestos.[24]

18. RAN (2020). RAN C&N Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/ran-cn-extremists-use-video-gaming-strategies-and-narratives-online-meeting-15-17-september-2020_en

19. Robinson, N. and Whittaker, J. (2021). Playing for Hate? Extremism, Terrorism, and Videogames. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.* https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866740?journalCode=uter20

20. RAN (2021). Digital Grooming Tactics on Video Gaming & Video Gaming Adjacent Platforms: Threats and Opportunities. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/ran-cn-digital-grooming-tactics-video-gaming-video-gaming-adjacent-platforms-threats-and_de

21. Davey, J. (2021). Gamers Who Hate: An Introduction to ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series. https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/gamers-who-hate-an-introduction-to-isds-gaming-and-extremism-series/; RAN (2021). Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/extremists-use-gaming-adjacent-platforms-insights-regarding-primary-and-secondary-prevention_en

22. Dauber, C., Robinson, M., Baslious, J. and Blair, A. (2019). Call of Duty: Jihad – How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13 (3): pp.17–31. https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-3/02—dauber-et-al..pdf; Schlegel, L. (2020). Can You Hear Your Call of Duty? The Gamification of Radicalization and Extremist Violence. European Eye on Radicalization. https://eeradicalization.com/can-you-hear-your-call-of-duty-the-gamification-of-radicalization-and-extremist-violence/

23. Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R. and Nacke, L. (2011). From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining Gamification. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230854710_From_Game_Design_Elements_to_Gamefulness_Defining_Gamification

24. RAN (2021). The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for PCVE. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/gamification-violent-extremism-lessons-pcve-2021_en; Schlegel, L. (2021). Connecting, Competing, and Trolling: "User Types" in Digital Gamified Radicalization Processes. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15 (4): pp.54–64. https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2021/issue-4/schlegel.pdf

Extremist actors make use of gaming-related content and spaces both strategically and organically.[25] They use gaming-related content to generate attention and increase the familiarity and attractiveness of their propaganda output in the eyes of the target audience. Considering both that millions of users log into gaming-adjacent platforms every day and the level of content moderation found on many of these platforms, these spaces provide extremists with the opportunity to broadcast their messages widely and relatively undisturbed, especially when compared to other social media platforms with stricter content moderation practices. In addition, gaming communities, in which misogyny, hate towards minorities, expressions of violence, toxicity and 'politically incorrect' humour are prevalent, offer extremists the strategic benefit of being able to blend in and build on the problematic atmosphere to meet audiences where they are and then, potentially, motivate a deeper engagement with extremist ideas. Building on existing grievances and modes of communication of potential new recruits could possibly facilitate (cognitive) radicalization processes.

Gaming spaces are also used in a bottom-up or organic manner by individuals associated with extremist beliefs. While there is no evidence to suggest a causal link between gaming and radicalization, it is hardly surprising that there are radicalized individuals among the billions of gamers worldwide. As gaming spaces now function like social media platforms, in which users discuss everything they are interested in, it is reasonable to assume that some of these individuals take their political views to gaming spaces without guidance from extremist organizations. They may simply be in gaming spaces because they enjoy these platforms or have been users of these social spaces before their radicalization. In fact, the Christchurch and Halle perpetrators obviously understood themselves to be part of gaming-related online communities and tailored their livestreams and manifestos accordingly.
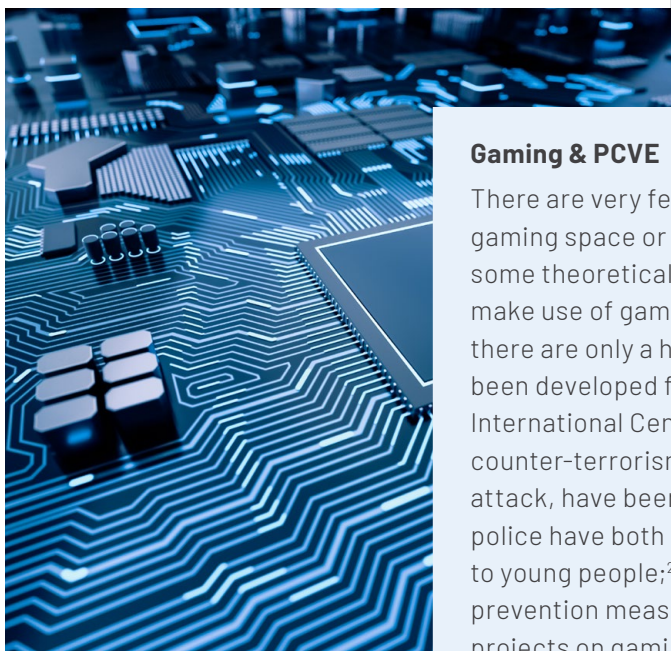
Gaming & PCVE

There are very few PCVE projects that have been carried out in the gaming space or utilized gaming or gaming-related content. While some theoretical work has been brought forward on how PCVE could make use of gaming-related content and gaming-adjacent platforms, there are only a handful of practical examples. Video games have been developed for PCVE purposes:[26] serious games, such as the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism's (ICCT) interactive counter-terrorism game,[27], focusing on the aftermath of the Norway attack, have been debated and implemented; the Dutch and British police have both used video gaming to open a communication channel to young people;[28] and RAN has discussed the use of eSports as a prevention measure.[29] Meanwhile, some PCVE actors have piloted projects on gaming-adjacent platforms.[30] Overall, however, gaming has largely been neglected in PCVE and more theoretical and practical work needs to be conducted to judge the potential benefits of gaming-related PCVE approaches with any acceptable degree of certainty.

25. RAN (2021). Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms.
26. For example, https://www.extremismus.info/home-en; https://www.klif-game.nl/ [in Dutch]; https://isistheend.com/#Accueil [in French]
27. See: http://icct.nl/flashpoints-game/
28. For example, https://gamenmetdepolitie.nl/ [in Dutch]
29. Frenett, R. and S., J. (2021). Online Gaming Platforms. In RAN Spotlight: Digital Challenges, pp.20–25. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/spotlight-digital-challenges_en
30. For example, the Gamers for Peace project by Veterans for Peace, found at https://www.veteransforpeace.org/take-action/gamers-peace; digital youthwork on gaming-adjacent platforms in the project Good Gaming – Well Played Democracy by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, found at https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/projekte/good-gaming-well-played-democracy/ [in German]

3. Key Findings: Phase I & II

Focus groups with eight of the world's leading experts (four men and four women) on virtual communities and online radicalization were conducted in Phase I to discuss the state of play of video games and extremism, the potential negative impacts of video games and possible avenues for PCVE. In Phase II, focus groups with six individuals (four men and two women) were conducted. These individuals were chosen because they are avid players of video games and users of gaming-related platforms, such as Discord and Twitch, who have also engaged with research on extremism to various degrees, enabling them to contextualize their personal experiences with professional knowledge. Three main topics emerged in the conversations: (lack of) research on gaming and extremism, how and why gaming spaces may be used by extremists, and how the positive effects of gaming can be used in PCVE. In the following, the key findings from the conversations are detailed:

Gaps in research on gaming and extremism

- There is a significant absence of evidence to substantiate any definitive causal relationship between exposure to (violent or non-violent) video games or other (propagandistic) gaming content and adverse effects, such as radicalization processes. Simply because extremists seek to exploit gaming spaces and gaming content does not automatically mean that they are successful in doing so or that mere exposure to such content can contribute to radicalization.

- It is difficult to contextualize the potential role and significance of gaming for radicalization and extremism because we lack comparative knowledge of the role and significance of other (intensive) hobbies, interests and types of activities as push or pull factors towards extremism. Since research has not yet understood why extremists seek to exploit gaming spaces, it is difficult to delineate how gaming and extremism may interlink beyond the fact that gaming may be a hobby or interest for some extremists.

- The spaces in which extremist content is easy to find may not be the spaces in which it is most prevalent. Generally speaking, fringe or even extremist content is "really easy, really fast to find" if one is specifically looking for it in gaming spaces. As one participant noted, "every second Nazi general has a Steam account apparently" and swastikas and other symbols are highly prevalent on member profiles. However, participants cautioned that "the places where it's most visible [are] not the places where it's most prominent". They assessed that the vast majority of extremist content is shared in private groups and servers, out of the sight of researchers and investigators. It is rare for extremist content to be shared in public forums. Rather, extremists post 'soft pill' memes, GIFs, humorous posts or anti-feminist, misogynistic or racist content, which is linked to toxic gaming culture and widely accepted in some gaming spaces, as an intentional gateway to catch attention "and then it goes into a kind of rabbit hole": individuals who respond positively to such content are then invited to private groups. In addition, 'softer' extremist content may blend in with general toxicity pertaining to racism or misogyny, making it difficult to detect. It is therefore extremely difficult to determine in which gaming spaces and on which gaming-adjacent platforms extremist content is most prevalent.

- It will be necessary for future research to approach the issue of gaming and extremism with more nuance:

  - Video games differ vastly in genre, style, content and level of violence, all of which could be potential variables to examine further (such as which games are used by which extremist actors and to what effect). For example, one could ask whether exposure to far-right, misogynistic or racist content is more prevalent in games with a higher level of violence and gaming spaces that revolve around particular topics of discussion.

  - There is not a single gaming community or unified group known as 'gamers'. Gamers who play game A may be vastly different people from gamers who play game B and the communities they build around or independently from these games may be just as heterogeneous. Furthermore, just like "there's a difference between a person who watches *Game of Thrones* and a person who's a fan of *Game of Thrones*", being a gamer is partially contingent upon how important gaming is perceived to be for one's identity. In addition, gamer identity may emerge "separate from the video games itself ... It's an identity built within Discord, within Reddit, even to a lesser extent within 4chan", i.e. via social interaction in gaming-related spaces, not merely by playing video games. Therefore, focus group participants advocated for more nuance in the research on gaming and extremism.

How and why gaming spaces may be used by extremists

- The focus group participants assessed that there are four main characteristics that make gaming spaces more prone to being exploited by extremists: lack of moderation, audience reach, networking and customization.

- All interviewees lamented the lack of moderation in both online games and gaming-adjacent platforms. This allows extremists to disseminate their ideas widely through audio conversations while playing, on livestreams and through chats. In part, extremists use gaming spaces not because of their relation to gaming, but simply due to the lack of resistance they experience while doing so.

- Extremists use gaming spaces to reach their target audience and are drawn to popular platforms and games frequented by those they seek to reach. "They go where culture goes. Games are popular with the demographic they want to recruit, so they follow the demographic" into gaming spaces. This too has little to do with gaming as such and could equally apply to, for instance, Instagram or TikTok. Being present in gaming spaces makes strategic sense for extremists because it allows them to reach millions of individuals who belong to their preferred target audience.

- The better the networking features, the higher the likelihood that games and gaming-adjacent platforms are used by extremists. Gaming spaces provide extremists with excellent networking opportunities, both among each other and with their target audience. Private chats or groups allow interaction with like-minded individuals without outside interference and are, as participants explained, probably far more prevalent in gaming spaces than currently known. Public forums, livestreams, in-game chats and games that compel strangers to collaborate with one other are especially useful to engage with a target audience and allow for both one-on-one interaction and one-to-many dissemination of extremist ideas. Gaming-adjacent platforms, which have become similar to social media platforms, and games with high-quality social networking features are particularly useful to this end.

- Participants mentioned the importance of customization. Since the production of bespoke video games is expensive and difficult, extremists have reverted to modifying existing games or customizing their gaming experience. For instance, games such as *Minecraft*, *Fortnite* and *Roblox* allow players to build their own world and are therefore interesting to extremists, despite the general assumption that extremists are drawn to FPS or strategy games.

- Interviewees also identified four important ways in which games and gaming culture are used by extremists: appealing to those with an interest in extremist ideology, seeking to create an interest in ideology, building on toxic masculinity and the potential differences in use by right-wing extremists, jihadists and other movements.

  - Gaming can help individuals feel wanted and heard, and extremists play on these sentiments to engage young people in particular in radical ideologies in fun and subtle ways. One expert participant explained that throughout their research they often found that (bespoke or modified) video games in particular "weren't being used to suck people in, target young people, or bring people in from the cold who weren't already ideologically [capable]"; rather, it seems more likely that "the ideal target audience is people who have already accepted [the ideology] and need to be motivated further". Potentially, then, games would not necessarily provide an entry point to radicalization but may further a commitment to an ideology. However, more research is needed to support this possibility.

  - However, some gamers may also 'fall into' extremist groups through gaming spaces frequented by radicalized individuals or by being attracted to gaming-related propaganda content, which may not be immediately identifiable as extremist in nature. Such content can then bring gamers "down the rabbit hole", e.g. because it is displayed in public forums, linked to certain (private) groups and chats, and shared with hyperlinks or reading suggestions for further information. How often such a trajectory occurs and how often individuals have to search for extremist content in gaming spaces in order to come into contact with such actors are questions that currently remain unanswered.

- European and North American gamer identity is sometimes linked to a very specific type of identity: young, white, male and heterosexual. This may be facilitated by some gaming companies, who use this specific type of masculine identity as the sole conceptualization of what a gamer is. In the words of one participant, those marketing these games "did intend to make a boys' club and they did make a boys' club", which contributed to the link between masculinity – toxic or otherwise – and gaming. To protect this narrow understanding of who qualifies as a gamer, certain gaming communities ringfence their identities by not just excluding women, minorities and LGBTQ+ people, but by facilitating a culture in which misogyny, toxicity, racism and hate can flourish. Since 'gamer' is an identity marker certain groups wish to keep exclusive, the hateful atmosphere in certain gaming communities can be partially explained by the wish for clear boundary-maintenance of an important identity marker and the protection of an identity seen as 'under threat' by women and minorities. The toxic culture that emerged in response is now further facilitated and exploited by extremists.

- The focus group participants hypothesized that extremists adhering to varying ideologies exploit gaming spaces slightly differently. Jihadists, they noted, have adopted video-game aesthetics to make their propaganda more appealing to young Western audiences (even as games like *Call of Duty* are popular in the Middle East and North Africa). It was a strategic choice to use a medium popular with young men aged between 16 and 34 whom jihadists sought to appeal to and recruit. The fact that video games, especially FPS games, were based on violence was an additional benefit as jihadist violence could be framed through a 'cool', attractive and familiar gaming lens. This is the reason propaganda videos sometimes mirrored the visual style of FPS games and made the use of gaming "really useful" for jihadist recruiters. Right-wing extremists may "do the exact same thing" for the same reasons, i.e. to appeal to young men and strategically utilize game content due to its popularity with the target audience. However, for them the "boys' club" gamer identity and the misogynistic and toxic parts

of gaming culture may be inherently appealing and may match their ideological beliefs. Therefore, gaming may not only be used strategically but may also be part of some right-wing extremist identity-building.

Positive effects of gaming and potential avenues for PCVE

- By and large, focus group participants emphasized the positive outcomes of gaming. The positive effect mentioned most regularly was that games can provide a strong sense of community, a sense of belonging and acceptance, and encourage social interaction. The bonds forged during gaming may be strong, as one participant argued that current research "underpins the strength of interpersonal relationships built during times of heightened adrenaline" and theorized that violent games in particular could provide gamers with a unique opportunity to form strong social connections with other players. The social aspect of playing games and interacting with others in gaming spaces became immensely important during the Coronavirus pandemic and provided substantial mental health benefits in trying times.

- Focus group participants signalled a general openness to implement PCVE measures in gaming spaces in addition to the classical safety-by-design measures (methods to minimize risks through design choices with an emphasis on protecting users), stronger community management and digital literacy campaigns aimed specifically at gaming (content). While extremists are likely to exploit these positive outcomes of gaming communities, "we [would] get the same benefits that the bad guys get", with regard to the design of PCVE measures incorporating gaming components and should seek to strengthen the positive effects gaming and gaming-related spaces can have on users. However, participants lamented that "none of the good people are taking advantage of the benefits" of gaming-related content and "only the bad people" are seeking to use gaming, which affords extremists a crucial advantage.

- Most interviewees identified the need for PCVE to approach and collaborate with gaming communities. These approaches should avoid reproducing the stereotypes from the 1990s and early 2000s about gaming and violence, which arose after some school shootings, or about gaming as a 'weird', inferior leisure-time activity. Rather, the potential for gaming to make a positive impact on players' lives should be emphasized. In addition, one of the participants suggested approaching gamers by offering initiatives to combat the misconception that gaming is causally linked to extremism, because "they hate that it makes them look bad ... They hate the idea that people think they're Nazis". Gamers instead would largely want to support efforts against this assumption.

- Although participants welcomed discussions on PCVE in gaming-related spaces, they also cautioned that the likelihood that such efforts create backlash is high. Multiple interviewees personally experienced such backlash due to their involvement in activism, including their removal from groups, death threats and doxing attempts. The toxicity found in certain parts of gaming communities and the desire felt by some to protect gaming spaces as a refuge against progressive influences, as spaces in which political incorrectness, misogyny and 'dark humour' are championed, means that resistance must be expected. Therefore, similar to other PCVE projects, implementing prevention or intervention campaigns in gaming-related spaces will require substantial subcultural knowledge, care not to be perceived as 'invaders', thorough risk assessments and digital safety protocols.

4. Survey Results: Phase III

Upon completion of the literature review and the Phase I and Phase II focus group discussions, insights from these phases were built into an English-language survey questionnaire. The survey sought to include gamers' own voices in this study and examine, among other things, the experiences they have in gaming spaces and the types of content they are exposed to, as well as how they and their peers in these spaces react to and possibly push back against hateful or extremist speech.[31] Some 622 gamers took part in the survey: 74% males, 15% females, 11% other (where male or female were not selected); 84% were aged between 16 and 35; most were located in North America (54%) and Europe (29%) (Figures 1-3). Therefore, this survey is not generalizable across all gaming communities, is skewed towards certain geographical areas and does not reflect the fact that around 40% of gamers are female.[32]

Gender breakdown of survey participants
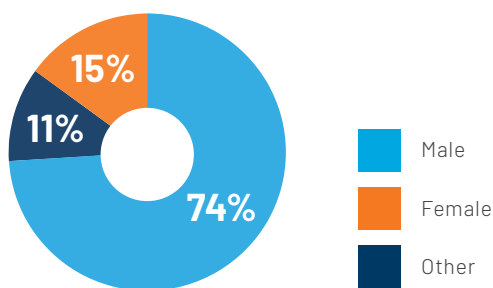
Survey participants spend vastly different amounts of hours per week on gaming, with 39% spending fewer than 10 hours and 28% spending more than 21 hours (Figure 4), suggesting that our sample included both casual gamers and individuals for whom gaming is a daily activity.[33] Some 51% of the survey sample play exclusively alone as single players, 35% play mainly with others, and 14% said they do both (Figure 5).

Respondents named a wide variety of games they like to play, most prominently roleplaying, shooter and strategy games (Figure 6). This suggests that the survey results are not skewed towards a particular type of game genre. Spending was more evenly distributed, with 85% of respondents stating that they spend between 0 and $100 per month (Figure 7).[34]

The focus groups indicated that many gamers choose to play alone to avoid toxicity, which could explain why just over half the respondents indicated that they play by themselves. However, this still leaves 43% of gamers in our sample engaging with other players at least sometimes and, consequently, potentially being exposed to hateful, toxic and/or extremist content.

Since gaming culture extends far beyond the immediate context of playing the games themselves, respondents were also asked to provide information on the additional gaming-adjacent platforms they use to speak to other gamers, consume gaming-related content and read about gaming-related activities. Participants generally use more than one platform, including Discord (83%), Twitch (45%), YouTube (39%) and Reddit (24%). Twitter, Steam, Facebook and general Internet forums were also mentioned frequently. A small percentage (less than 1%) uses 4chan, Instagram, Slack, Skype and Snapchat, indicating that these spaces are generally not of interest for most gaming-related activities.

Negative aspects of gaming

When asked to elaborate on the negative aspects of gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms, some participants unsurprisingly highlighted problems with the games themselves (e.g. bugs or the increasing

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31. See appendix I for more information on the survey methodology and its limitations.
32. Yanev, V. (2022) Video Game Demographics – Who Plays Games in 2022. Techjury. https://techjury.net/blog/video-game-demographics/#gref
33. Some open-ended responses to other questions suggest that a few respondents play more than 55 hours a week and have the feeling that it is a second job.
34. The remaining 15% spend anywhere between $101 and over $500 per month.

monetization of online gaming) as well as sometimes being distracted from the real world by spending (too much) time on games: for example, feeling that it is a "waste of time", "that it keeps me from doing more important things sometimes since I can use it as an escape so easily", that it "can be mind numbing" and make one feel "disconnected from the real world" or even that it can feel "almost [like] another job". Some also mentioned the stigma still associated with gaming: "Society makes me feel like I'm wasting time doing this activity and that I should be ashamed."

However, the toxicity found in gaming communities was by far the respondents' most prominent complaint about both games and gaming-adjacent platforms. They lamented that there are "so many toxic people" who engage in the targeting of female, PoC or LGBTQ+ gamers and the "dehumanization" of others, "which has deterred [some] from playing certain popular games or entire genres of games despite a desire to". Several participants suggested that the "frequent cases of people being rude and inconsiderate" have increased since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic since "more people are inside" and gaming-adjacent platforms became "one of my main sources of social interaction since COVID-19 started". In line with this general observation, when asked whether they had witnessed any toxic or problematic behaviour while playing video games or spending time on gaming platforms, 85% answered in the affirmative (Figure 8).

Most respondents reported that such comments were primarily verbal, either using in-game chats or voice-based communication. When participants were asked to provide examples they had personally encountered, they noted instances of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, homophobia and transphobia, as well as some examples of ableism. In relation to these, there were also answers mentioning death threats, threats of violence ("I hate [minority group] so I'm gonna shoot you in the head"), doxing, DDoS-ing and threatening or executing real life actions (such as calling the police on or stalking other players). Frequently, participants reported that they were told to kill themselves. In many cases, respondents note the casual use of slurs, name-calling and comments meant to be offensive by reinforcing negative stereotypes, such as "ur gay", "you play like a girl", and frequent use of the N-word.

Respondents who noted examples of misogyny, ranging from "women belong in the kitchen" and instances of catcalling on voice chats to name-calling ("b****"), rape threats and porn sprays on community servers. A handful of respondents also mentioned that they had seen Nazi and antisemitic content in avatar names.

Quite surprisingly, however, when asked how often they have been exposed to content they would deem hateful or violent, 62% said "a little" or "none at all", while only 14% said "a great deal" or "a lot" (Figure 10). The reason for this apparent imbalance between the types of discriminatory and toxic content participants have seen and the reply to this particular question remains opaque. It is possible that respondents did not deem the misogyny, racism, antisemitism or gender-based insults they reported witnessing as hateful and violent. It is also possible that the question was misunderstood by some of the participants. Further research into which types of content, slurs or threats are perceived to cross the threshold into violence and hate may be useful to contextualize this result.

Next, participants were asked specifically about how often they encounter misogyny, xenophobia, extremist content, antisemitism, Islamophobia and homophobia. The answers were quite revealing (Figures 11–17): while 30% to 34% of respondents noted that they had witnessed "a great deal" or "a lot" of misogyny, racism/xenophobia or homophobia, only 15% to 16% noted that they had witnessed similar levels of extremism, antisemitism or Islamophobia. This might suggest – and would confirm some of the thoughts expressed by the focus group participants in Phases I and II – that casually racist, heteronormative and misogynistic language often appears in open and public gaming spaces, but rarely targets individuals based on religious identity or is explicitly extremist in nature.[35] It also underlines, however, that misogyny, racism/xenophobia and homophobia are regular occurrences in gaming spaces and, as the focus group participants argued, may be used as a springboard for right-wing extremist actors.

At this point, respondents were asked explicitly to provide an example of misogyny, xenophobia, extremist content, antisemitism, Islamophobia or homophobia that has remained with them.

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35. This could indicate that participants from the Phase II focus groups were correct in their assessment that extremist content in particular is found mostly in closed and private gaming-related spaces, whereas more 'soft pill' content is found publicly.

Some respondents could not cite a specific example, either explaining that the comments were so common and used so casually that no specific instance stuck out or because they had all blended together. For example, one respondent explained that they "don't have specific examples … because years upon years of time blend together into a never ending stream of indistinct memories". Others, however, remembered examples that stuck with them:

- **Misogyny:** "One of my 'friends' threatened to kill a female we were gaming with because she messed up in game"; players talking "inappropriately [and] asking for explicit pictures of them in Discord direct messages", such as "show us your b**bs!"

- **Transphobia and homophobia:** "Every single stream, a trans streamer I watch gets multiple trolls in chat who ask things like … 'are you going to ch*p off your p*nis?'"; the use of 'gay' as a synonym for 'bad'; "Some guy on Discord telling lgbtq people to commit suicide."

- **Racism and xenophobia:** "Repeatedly hearing 'N****** you should kill yourself'"; "A person advocating the 'superiority of white people' and the 'inferiority of other races' in an in-game chat"; "A high end WoW [*World of Warcraft*] guild removing a player after finding out they are black in real life."

- **Antisemitism:** On a massive multiplayer online game, "I ran across a clean [*sic*, for clan] whose name was 'Hitler Was Right', with members whose names were '1488', 'K***Hater', … and similar names, who were going around and flooding voice comms with mostly anti-Semitic rhetoric"; discussions of "Jewish conspiracies to destroy the white race"; references to Jewish people as "degenerates spreading Cultural Marxism".

Interestingly, some respondents suggested that things have improved in the gaming community in the past decade, with the N-word and homophobic slurs used significantly less frequently. If they are used, then such behaviour is called out by other players. Other respondents, however, particularly those discussing examples of antisemitism, suggested that things have become worse in recent years.

For example, a respondent explained a situation where a developer made a negative comment about Nazis "but unlike 6-12 years ago, suddenly there were A LOT more people that turned it into a 'two sided'

thing, saying they're sick of hearing about it, that Jews should just shut up already, it wasn't a big deal". While these are both anecdotal examples, it certainly raises questions regarding the change in prevalence of different types of hateful behaviour and what audiences are witnessing them.

When prompted to report where they had encountered toxic, hateful or violent content, 30% reported witnessing it mostly in in-game chats, while 41% selected the "all of the above" option, which included in-game chats, live audio conversations and streams, as well as Discord servers (Figure 9). Participants were also asked which gaming spaces they deemed most prone to toxicity (see Appendix III). While some mentioned specific games and platforms, with *League of Legends*, first-person shooters, Discord and Twitch featuring most prominently, the majority of respondents spoke about general characteristics that, in their opinion, make it more likely that toxicity and hateful language occur. The more boxes one can tick for a particular video game on the following list, the more likely it is that the video game harbours toxic and hateful content:

- The video game has active in-game communication features such as voice- or text-based in-game chats.

- Interacting with others via chat is necessary or useful to coordinate and win.

- It is a popular game with a large player base.

- The game is highly competitive.

- It involves fighting and violence.

- It is an online multiplayer game.

- It is a PvP game.[36]

- Players are assigned into teams with strangers.

- Failure can be attributed to individual team members.

- There is little moderation or regulation.

- There are no real consequences for breaking the rules and using hateful language.

Considering that in-game chats have rarely been included in the analysis of how extremists seek to exploit video-game communication features, these characteristics present a valuable starting point for an in-depth look at in-game chats in relation to extremism. PCVE actors seeking to pilot the use of in-game chats in counter-extremism projects may also benefit from this list, especially in deciding which games may be worth focusing their efforts on.

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36. In PvP (Player vs. Player) games humans play against other humans, whereas in PvE (Player vs Environment) games, opponents are controlled by the game.

Reactions to negative aspects of gaming

Participants were asked how they or others reacted to toxic, hateful or extremist content they encountered in gaming spaces. The most-named reactions in order of prominence were: ignoring it, blocking the user, reporting the behaviour, leaving the space and, finally, reacting to it.

- **Ignoring:** By far the most common reaction reported in the survey was that users ignored the behaviour. This is because most respondents felt that there was "no point in arguing online", because "reacting gives attention", which will "only encourage more of it" as it gives these users satisfaction in knowing that they upset someone. Most respondents felt that these users want a reaction, therefore ignoring it is the best course of action. In addition, participants believed that "there's not a lot you can say that's constructive" and they "feel nothing … will convince them to stop".

- **Blocking:** Many respondents made use of in-game mute or block functions. Some went as far as disabling chats completely to avoid any engagement with other players. Others said that they not only blocked and removed abusive players from their own Twitch channels and Discord servers, but "informed other server owners and Twitch streamers of them and added them to community ban lists", implementing "bots to automatically ban such users in batches".

- **Reporting:** Some participants reported hateful content to moderators or platform providers. "Mute, report is [the] default action", they explained. Such reports were not always successful: sometimes they resulted in the ban of the user(s) who had posted the toxic content but on other occasions seemed to have no consequences.

- **Leaving:** A number of respondents explained that they had simply left the spaces and games or discontinued watching a streamer's channel in which such behaviour occurs, because "you can't fix people" and therefore they "stopped playing those games or left those communities".

- **Reacting:** Only very few participants reported that they had reacted when encountering hateful content. Some said they retaliated by "insulting them back" or "called them something much worse" because they "have no patience for that stuff". Others tried to speak up and confront the users in question by "calling them out on what

they said", replying with a sarcastic comment, or "explaining to them why they are wrong … in baby language … to make them feel like idiots".

In addition, respondents were asked what, if anything, should be done about abuse in gaming spaces and by whom, as well as how their personal experience in gaming spaces could be improved. Participants believed a range of actors need to address hateful content to improve the gamers' experiences in gaming spaces: a) gaming platforms and companies, b) moderators, c) the gaming community as a whole and d) offline entities, such as schools and parents.

a) Many open-ended replies called for gaming platforms and companies to address problematic content in their spaces. "I think the platforms have a responsibility to create open, inclusive spaces for groups to be able to communicate" by sanctioning users who display hateful conduct. Participants advocated for a greater level of accountability and clear consequences such as warnings, in-game penalties, bans, IP-bans, deplatforming or, if appropriate, escalating individual cases to law enforcement agencies. "Game companies are way too shy with the rod", some complained. If necessary, some participants explained, the platforms and companies should be held accountable by "independent third party oversight" or stricter laws and legislation.

Some participants lamented that reporting problematic content and user behaviour can be difficult and lacks transparency. Gaming platforms and game developers should "empower me to report toxicity better" was a sentiment shared by multiple respondents. There is little reporting, some argued, because "people are too used to reporting not working" due to certain users mysteriously having "impunity" in some spaces. "There is a reporting feature on games but it's unclear how much they actually do to help," said others who felt that the reports were not being taken seriously and offenders not (adequately) punished. Some complained, for example, that in many instances of sexism administrators tolerate too much and "users are often expected to ignore … someone who harasses them." There should be "strict no-bullying policies", which are actually enforced when reported.

Interestingly, a minority of participants also suggested rewarding kind behaviour instead of or in addition to punishing unwanted, hateful behaviour. Players and users would receive

rewards and recognition for positive interactions. Others spoke about how games are designed and suggested more elements of sportsmanship "like characters clapping for the victor at the end of a *Smash Bros* match", viable options not to kill and still win and engaging players in questions such as "is there a moral binary, encouraging black-and-white thinking so we can justify the violence, or is there complexity, gray areas, and acknowledgment that nobody is fundamentally evil? ... Are we romanticizing, glorifying, or trivializing war and violence, or are we acknowledging it for the tragedy that it is?" This, some argued, would make for better games and encourage less toxicity.

Participants also advocated for better options to curate gaming experiences, including by always being able to mute and block as well as better filters. "All platforms need to have an easy way for users to control who can contact them, to block users, and to report issues. Many of them still don't have this, or these features are only implemented partially." Some complained that chats are sometimes automatically re-enabled or users are not muted on all servers and they have to mute them on every single server individually.

b) In line with the general wish for more moderation, a number of respondents believe that dedicated (community) moderators, the owners of servers, in particular Discord servers, and content creators/streamers should enforce stricter rules in their communities. Not every 'offence' needs to be escalated to the platform or company level; more 'casual' and less severe breaches of community standards can often be taken care of by dedicated moderators, said multiple respondents. Teams of moderators need to be trained not only on the rules of interaction but in communication and de-escalation techniques. Participants also advocated for moderators to be paid, work in teams, be adequately staffed, and that such roles should only be filled by adults rather than teenagers. As explained by one respondent, "moderating is a stressful job" and it should be done by people "who are trained and are positively rewarded for such effort". Ideally, such moderation efforts should be available swiftly, especially in spaces such as in-game chats during play or livestreams, in which real-time communication is the norm.

c) Participants believed that ultimately it is the gaming community and the users/players who need to take action if lasting change is to be

realized, because "the part that needs the most improvement is the people". Change needs "to occur culturally within the gaming community", because "a systemic problem requires systemic change". Many explained that gaming communities need to do a better job of policing themselves, bystanders should speak up more often, "gamers should set strong boundaries and hold others accountable for crossing boundaries" and "make it a social norm to not act inappropriately in game". Ideally, players would display "more sportsmanship and have fun while mutually respecting each other", which requires a change in the gamers' attitude. This type of cultural change, respondents cautioned, cannot be brought about externally, it needs to emerge organically from gaming communities themselves. Some worried that "any attempt to restrict this behaviour from outside of these communities themselves will inevitably be met with more hostility" and that, therefore, change from within is the only viable option. Ultimately, "as the community as a whole improves, all gaming and related experiences will improve".

d) Since many respondents believe that toxicity and hateful conduct is a society-wide issue and originates offline, because, for example, individuals are angry and frustrated, have mental health issues, are unaware of the negative consequences of online hate or feel the need to provoke in order to receive the attention they crave, some advocated for addressing this issue in offline contexts. Some suggested that "it's always good to remember that the issues we see in gaming stem from issues in real life. No one has the issues they have in-game or gaming-related platforms only because of the games they play or the communities they interact with." Another stated that "the games or the platforms are not the problem. They are just places where people show their true faces, be that good or bad." Punishing players in a game is therefore an approach that may counter symptoms but leaves the cause of this anger and hatred unaddressed. Educational institutions, parents and mental health professionals were named as potential allies to address the root causes of offline hate.

In addition, anonymity emerged as an often-discussed topic with much disagreement between respondents. On the one hand, many expressed the assumption that toxicity is causally linked to anonymity, because offenders feel safe and protected to say whatever they want.

"Anonymity breeds a**hole and troll behavior" and makes holding users accountable extremely difficult as banned users usually simply re-join with new accounts. This prompted some to advocate for less anonymity in gaming spaces. "I think when playing online you should have to register with your ID or driver's license. So that people will be more aware that online actions have real consequences," said one participant. However, many also acknowledged that anonymity has positive effects, because it also protects potential victims of harassment and "allows users to feel a sense of security that whoever is behind the conduct cannot actually do anything to them outside of the game or platform". In addition, anonymity may be crucial for some users, such as those who wish to change or hide their sexual or gender identity. One respondent, for instance, explained that they are not out as trans and non-binary in the offline world, but in the anonymity of the online world they can be whoever they want to be. Another participant said that anonymity allows them to "separate my online identity from my offline one … which makes me feel safer." Therefore, anonymity remains a contentious issue.

A number of participants also expressed cautions and caveats, because "doing something about it in the wrong way could very possibly make it worse and/or bring up other issues". Over-regulation could cause backlash from many gamers and create more problems, multiple participants feared. Because "different people have different limits", individual solutions such as blocking and muting certain terms may sometimes be more appropriate tools than blanket solutions.

A delicate balance must be struck between top-down regulation and allowing communities to develop themselves independently, because "a certain level of trash talking should be allowed since that is also a part of the fun." Therefore, participants believe that there is a need to allow (dark) humour, rudeness, bantering and possibly even a certain level of trolling, which are "a big part of video games" and form a part of gaming culture, in order not to over-police gaming spaces and turn gamers against these measures.

Positive aspects of gaming

As anticipated in the survey, gamers stressed the positive aspects of gaming. If gaming consisted only of the negative experiences discussed above, few people would be willing to spend time in gaming spaces. Generally speaking, participants emphasized in their open-ended replies that gaming is a positive experience and yields a range of benefits for those who play. One of the most common themes in the open answers was that "video games aren't the problem" and should not be blamed for violent or hateful conduct, because "it's not the game, it's the gamers" who choose such behaviour. In fact, causally linking gaming to extremism or toxicity "would be like thinking that cars existing is part of the problem of drunk driving accidents". This is because "the vast majority of gamers are ordinary people. The hate I've seen is a small, vocal minority that is effective because it is loud and shocking, but most gamers I've met have been great people from all walks of life." Overall, video games can be a tremendous "force of good" for those who play and, despite the problems outlined above, should not be subjected to a "witch hunt" but treated like other hobbies are treated: as places of interaction with like-minded individuals, which may sometimes be hijacked by extremists, but which generally yield positive outcomes for those involved.

What do you like about playing video games?	If someone asked you why you play, what would you say?	In your opinion, what are positive outcomes of playing?
■ Challenge/competition **35%**	■ Entertainment **42%**	■ Community **36%**
■ Escapism **21%**	■ Community **25%**	■ Skill development **24%**
■ Community **16%**	■ Relaxation **17%**	■ Relaxation **16%**
■ Relaxation **14%**	■ Escapism **13%**	■ Entertainment **15%**

As illustrated above, when asked about the positive aspects of video gaming on three separate occasions in the survey, participants were largely in agreement on the key positive outcomes of gaming (see also Appendix III).

■ **Community:** Connecting with others, socializing with like-minded individuals and being part of a community were the most-often named positive outcomes of gaming. "You can build such an amazing community and have so much fun w [*sic*] friends and people you never met" describes the general tenor of most answers. Some participants explained that they had met the "best friends of my life" or even their spouses through gaming. Others emphasized the chance to make friends all over the world, which would have not been possible otherwise, and praised the "ability to connect across borders and cultures" that video games provide. Others described a feeling of belonging in a "collective culture" and a "feeling of acceptance" that they did not receive in real life. Video games also help to sustain friendships originating in the offline world: "I … have many friends that no longer live near me and video games help us stay in contact with each other through a shared interest."

■ **Entertainment:** Unsurprisingly, many participants play video games because it is their hobby, a fun and entertaining activity. One participant suggested that games are "fun [and the] brain chemicals go brrrr"; another explained that "it's fun and stress-free of my worries. I don't have to worry about this and that person, I don't have to worry about the competition in the real world, society, and in the classroom. It's just the game and my mind is free to enjoy it." "The highs of video games are incredibly high, nothing can make you feel much better on a consistent basis", added another participant. For many, gaming is a leisure activity and hobby that brings joy and entertainment.

■ **Escapism:** Many participants relayed that they use gaming to escape and cope with their everyday life. "Playing a game is like traveling to another existence. It helps me cope with life in this world," said one respondent. Multiple others described the need to "disconnect", "distance" and "distract" themselves from their worries, describing games as "a place to take solace" from the realities of their existence. Some respondents also explained that gaming provides a temporary relief from anxieties and mental illnesses such as depression and even PTSD. It was mentioned often that gaming is a positive and productive escape from reality, because gamers are "able to live out fantasies that real life can't provide" and games provide them with the "ability to create something more stable and wonderful than what I see in the world". Games, one participant explained, "allow me to do [and] see things that are impossible, impractical, or stressful in real life. I can go to space, be a lawyer, use magic, fly planes, and manage countries without worrying about messing up." This can go as far as living out one's true identity in games.

■ **Relaxation:** Like other hobbies, games provide relaxation. They "allow me to slow down, somewhat, after my mentally demanding job", help to "unwind", provide an outlet to "release pent up frustration without bothering or hurting someone" and may put players in a "zen state of mind". Gaming can be "therapeutic, meditative, relaxing [and] inspiring", according to respondents. In a similar vein to escapism, multiple participants stressed that the relaxing effects of video games support the management of their mental health, because it can "calm down strong negative emotions" and "shuts off the amygdala (the part of the brain that processes strong emotions like fear) so it helps with my anxiety in an otherwise panic-inducing situation".

- **Challenge/competition:** Multiple respondents stated that they play because they like competing with others and enjoy being constantly challenged. Some relish the feeling "that I am better than other people in a competitive environment" and "like kicking a** and feeling powerful". Others emphasize the desire to be challenged: "Games challenge me perfectly, they match my skill so that I'm always challenged but not too difficultly," said one participant, echoing the argument that Jane McGonigal,[37] among others, has made that games provide a more satisfactory experience than many real life situations because they create flow experiences, perfectly match the challenge to the skill level of the player and provide clear goals and pathways to succeed.

- **Skill development:** When asked about the positive outcomes of video games, many participants stressed that games teach players a range of useful skills, because gaming is "exercise for the brain". The list of skills they provided is long and includes (foreign) language development and communication skills, improved concentration, better reflexes, hand–eye coordination and dexterity, increased spatial awareness, teamwork, empathy, resource management, pattern recognition, dealing with losing/frustration and strategic thinking. Some also mentioned learning about stock markets, history, geography and different cultures, as well as programming, software development, linguistics and product management. Overall, one participant explained, "gamers intuitively understand that they can learn new things, change and evolve. The majority of games are based on the assumption that the player will learn new skills to progress. That's a valuable life lesson that some people around me are missing: That things can change and effort pays off and people can get better by practicing."

Other important reasons for and positive outcomes of playing respondents relayed included that:

- Games are works of art and offer high-quality storytelling – games tell "amazing stories and showcase unique and beautiful art"

- Playing provides gamers with a sense of accomplishment and the feeling that they are able to overcome obstacles through determination and practice – games "teach you how to overcome seemingly-insurmountable problems" and provide the opportunity to "enjoy … watching myself improve"

- Video games offer unique immersive experiences – they provide the opportunity to experience "stories in a way that one can't through books or film" because "I get to change what happens. I can actively participate in them."

- Video games can serve as educational tools – "video games are a great source of … knowledge. I know a lot of people who, when asked where they learned about how something related to physics, metallurgy, or English vocabulary, they would respond that they learned it in a video game."

In addition, participants were asked what they enjoy about spending time on gaming-adjacent platforms. The overwhelming majority emphasized the social and community aspects of these spaces, which allow them to interact with like-minded individuals across borders and have become, especially during the pandemic, an increasingly important way of socializing. Several participants also explained that they enjoy watching other players (e.g. streamers on Twitch), either to learn more about different games or because they enjoy the streamers' personalities.

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37. McGonigal, J. (2012). *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World.* Vintage Books: London

Overall, participants stressed time and time again that "games can do so much", that they have a range of positive effects for players and that gaming is not a problem to be solved but a hobby enjoyed by many. Gaming is not inherently linked to problematic behaviour, they "are not evil or good. It's what we make of them." Toxicity and extremism can and do occur in many other communities and some respondents explained that they "heard more extremist language and viewpoints from the people in [their] town's local pickleball club than a video game in-game chat". In fact, many participants explained that video games and the social connections they have made through gaming have helped them through difficult times, are a source of joy, provide a feeling of belonging, and are relaxing and entertaining. Therefore "it's high time we switch the narrative" from an emphasis on the negative aspects of gaming and its related culture to how it can be used as a "force of good", including in PCVE.

Reflections on trolling

As per the feedback from the focus groups, we did not post the survey to any public forum such as Facebook, Twitter or Reddit, because it was suggested that the survey data would potentially become tainted by online trolling. Despite this, the survey still received several responses that were evidently examples of trolling. There were a number of sexual trolling responses, e.g. about (large) male genitalia and "your mother" jokes. Some trolling attempts reproduced memes and film references, some were silly such as "I've got over 14000 hours in a roguelike. Bet you don't. Neener neener neener", whereas others amounted to rants against 'the system' such as "'Good and evil' is relative. Same with 'education' and 'propaganda.' There is no radicalization going on. Just common people that disagree with your totalitarian nonsense and challenge your authority. It wasn't video games or 'far-right' propaganda that 'radicalized' me. It was public school, your 'trusted sources' and government officials. Their moral grandstanding, hypocrisy, and lies. UN boomers are cringe and gay."

Other examples were significantly more offensive, using slurs, derogatory terms and hateful language, including towards certain sexual and ethnic minority groups. Antisemitism, transphobia and racism were the most common themes in these responses and included calls for violence and denial of the Holocaust. A minority of trolls went as far as reproducing far-right memes and phrases, such as "If I were to get kicked out of 109 bars, I don't think I'd be entitled to blame the bartenders", which alludes to the antisemitic narrative that Jews being expelled from 109 countries is evidence that they are a problem for societies.[38]

The motive for such trolling replies reproducing far-right narratives remains unclear. There are three possible explanations for this behaviour: a) respondents unknowingly reproduced ideological narratives, b) the sample included radicalized individuals, or, c) the main goal of these respondents was to upset readers and they chose whichever hateful comments they believed would produce the most outrage. In other contexts, many survey participants explained that they believe toxicity is motivated by the wish to provoke, which is an indication that c) might be the most likely explanation. However, without follow-up interviews of these trolls, there is no way to be sure of this. These trolling examples illustrate how difficult it can be to research gaming communities and gain insights into the true experiences of gamers. If surveys conducted within trusted networks can be disrupted by some trolls, it is likely to be substantially more difficult to administer surveys among wider gaming communities without significant disruptions.

38. ADL (n.d.) "109/110". https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/109110

5. Conclusion

It is apparent from the above discussion that gaming, gaming-related content and gaming-adjacent platforms are used for the dissemination of hateful, toxic and potentially extremist content – and gamers are very aware of this fact. However, it is also abundantly clear that gaming has tremendous positive outcomes for those who engage in it.[39] The focus group participants and survey data suggest that gamers and users of gaming-adjacent platforms are exposed to toxic content on a regular basis, although 'hardcore' extremist content is less likely to appear in open and public spaces. However, it remains unclear whether there is a causal relationship between gaming-related content and radicalization and how such a relationship interacts with or amplifies other drivers of radicalization, if at all. The presence of hateful and extremist speech on gaming platforms could both familiarize and desensitize individuals to hateful content and afford extremists the opportunity to build upon misogynistic or racist ideas to facilitate engagement with their ideology. While all gaming-related spaces are in need of further examination, in-game chats in particular stand out as the space where toxic content is encountered most prominently and, therefore, merit special attention in further research efforts.

However, we have also seen throughout this report that gaming can yield a number of positive effects, most prominently by supporting social connections and the building of communities, but also by facilitating relaxation, escapism and entertainment. In addition, video games can serve as tools for skill development, education and overcoming challenges. For many, these positive outcomes of playing video games and spending time on gaming-adjacent platforms draw them to gaming despite the toxicity.

While certain problematic behaviours cannot be denied, gaming communities are not simply places of hate. They are also places of belonging and should be treated as such; it is of crucial importance to acknowledge gaming not only as not inherently linked to negative outcomes but as a force for good in people's lives. Any discussion of toxicity, hate and extremism in gaming spaces should be grounded in the knowledge that gaming offers the opportunity for positive experiences and connections. In the future, therefore, exploring how gaming can support political education and PCVE projects and collaborating with gaming communities to empower them to take charge of their gaming experiences and counter hateful conduct will be essential.
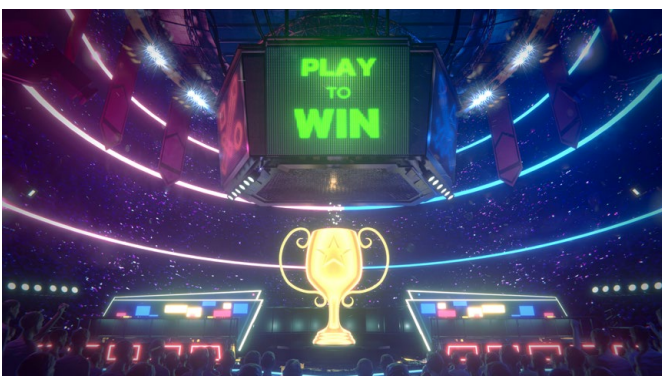
39. This study confirmed and expanded upon two recent ADL studies on positive and negative experiences of gamers: ADL (2019). Free to Play? Hate, Harassment, and Positive Social Experiences in Online Games. https://www.adl.org/free-to-play; ADL (2020). Free to Play? Hate, Harassment and Positive Social Experience in Online Games 2020. https://www.adl.org/free-to-play-2020

Overall, there seems to be little doubt that extremists seek to exploit the attractiveness and popularity of video games, gaming-related content and gaming-adjacent platforms, albeit sometimes not as openly as one might expect. While the effects and 'success' of this exploitation remain unknown, the presence of extremist actors and toxic, hateful, sometimes extremist content in gaming-related spaces suggests that PCVE actors are well advised to engage with the topic of gaming and extremism to gauge whether and how measures in these spaces should be designed and implemented.

Recommendations and future steps

■ When discussing the issue of gaming and extremism, all actors involved should take care not to suggest that gaming as such is a problem to be solved, either explicitly or implicitly. They should take into consideration that there is currently no evidence that being a gamer or frequenting gaming spaces makes individuals more susceptible to radicalization processes. On the contrary, it should be recognized and emphasized that gaming provides many positive outcomes and any discussion of gaming and extremism should be anchored in this knowledge.

■ More evidence-based research into extremists' use of gaming spaces and gaming content is needed to delineate the scope and prevalence of the issue. It is also crucial to understand more about how different gaming spaces are used by extremists, whether certain spaces are more prone to being exploited than others, the differences between the exploitation of gaming by right-wing or jihadist extremists, and whether (and how) extremists target individuals differently based on their age, gender or background. In addition, a deeper understanding of the reasons for extremists' presence in gaming spaces and the potential consequences of this presence, especially on radicalization processes, is needed. Special emphasis, as this study demonstrates, should be placed on in-game chats and on communication platforms as a large part of hateful content seems to appear in these spaces. Overall, it will be crucial that researchers continue to speak to the gaming community, rather than only about it, in their efforts to understand more about how extremists act in gaming spaces.

■ While moderation efforts differ widely between platforms and many are already taking action, it will nevertheless be necessary for PCVE actors, policymakers and researchers to work closely with platforms to curb extremists' exploitation of gaming spaces, such as by devising programmes to train moderators in identifying fringe and extremist content and to ensure that users are held accountable for their actions. However, a balance must be struck. Gaming and gaming spaces should not be over-policed and efforts to moderate and regulate should include input from the gaming communities affected.

■ The exploitation of gaming spaces and content by extremist actors is not an issue that can be addressed by a single entity but represents a multi-stakeholder problem. To commence this work, UNOCT hosted an expert roundtable on the intersection of video games and violent extremism and invited speakers and panelists from across sectors to discuss the research findings and to explore innovative ways to use gaming in PCVE projects. The discussion was centred on the misuse of gaming exploitation as well as a multi-stakeholder exploration of opportunities for innovative PCVE policy and programming support.[40] In the future, UNOCT will continue to support networking and knowledge-exchange formats between gamers, video game and tech companies, GIFCT and related entities, policymakers, governments, law enforcement, international organizations, PCVE actors, researchers and other relevant stakeholders. Through continuous dialogue, it can be ensured that relevant voices are heard and cooperation is strengthened.

■ So far, PCVE interventions in gaming spaces have been rare. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate how extremists seek to use gaming spaces to PCVE practitioners and raise awareness on the various dimensions of this exploitation, including video games, gaming-adjacent platforms and the use of gaming content in propaganda material. If future PCVE efforts in gaming spaces are to be successful, practitioners also need to develop subcultural knowledge of gaming spaces and learn to navigate gaming platforms. This is a necessary precondition to develop effective PCVE campaigns with a gaming dimension.

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40. The roundtable is available on UN WebTV: https://media.un.org/en/asset/k14/k14ggj6o92

- As the focus group participants suggested, PCVE actors should encourage and support positive, bottom-up initiatives by gamers and for gamers aimed at reducing the prevalence of hateful content in gaming spaces. This will ensure that the positive voices within the community are strengthened and empowered to facilitate change from within rather than seeking to drive change through external intervention.

- Given the popularity and reach of video games, gaming-adjacent platforms and related content, and considering the positive outcomes of engaging with gaming content and spaces, it is advisable that PCVE actors delineate the possibilities of including gaming content in counter-extremism efforts or positive intervention campaigns and transfer existing digital PCVE measures to gaming spaces. At this point in time, it is not feasible to deduce best practices for PCVE regarding the use of gaming content and platforms. Rather, PCVE actors need to engage in trial and error to accumulate more practical experience regarding gaming in counter-extremism projects. Through the Extremism and Gaming Research Network, UNOCT will be involved in the design and implementation of innovative projects, support research efforts to gather more evidence and, subsequently, extrapolate recommendations for PCVE interventions using gaming.

APPENDIX I

Methodology and Limitations

Insights from the literature review as well as Phase I and II of the research project were incorporated into the design of an online survey, which was delivered via SurveyMonkey and was live from 29 November 2021 to 10 March 2022. The survey link was distributed through trusted networks, including networks that UNOCT had already established with gaming-adjacent organizations, through the networks of our focus group participants and through additional contacts from the authors' personal and professional networks. From these trusted networks, 622 participants filled out the survey.

On the advice of several of our focus group participants, we did not post the survey to any public forum such as Facebook, Twitter, Steam or Reddit, because it was suggested that the survey data would quite quickly become tainted by online trolling. As such, UNOCT distributed the survey strictly within the network of trusted colleagues and organizations. It is likely that this skewed the survey replies. The trusted networks were not only limited geographically and linguistically – preventing a generalization to gaming communities in other geographical locations and/or communicating in languages other than English – but may not even be indicative of the attitudes and perceptions of the gaming communities in North America and Europe, as the trusted networks are likely to include many individuals with a more left-leaning, liberal, pro-democratic political worldview.

Consequently, their responses on, for instance, hateful comments they encounter during gaming, may partially be coloured by their political convictions. This is an important limitation and should be taken into account when judging the survey results presented above. While the trusted network approach kept trolling to a minimum, it also means that the findings are perhaps less generalizable than they would have been with a more open approach.

The survey contained 39 questions, with over 20 of these being open-ended questions, which allowed gamers to express their experiences and feelings in their own words. This ensured that the participants were given ample opportunities to relay personal experiences and opinions, including on issues not specifically asked about in the closed questions. Many participants gave elaborate responses to the open-ended questions, which enabled the researchers to take a deep look into both the challenges and benefits users experience from playing video games and from being present in gaming-related spaces such as gaming platforms. The replies to the open-ended questions were coded inductively according to the main themes discussed by respondents. Overall, this approach ensured that the report above is firmly anchored in gamers' personal experiences and gives gamers a voice, which has been largely absent in the literature on gaming and extremism so far.
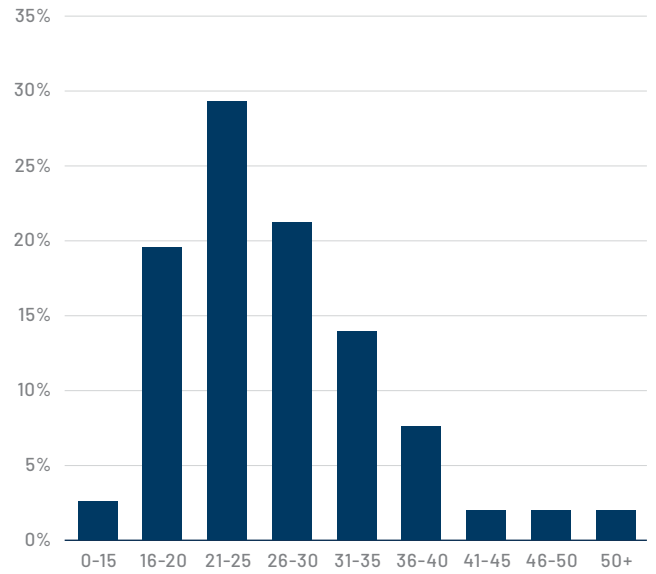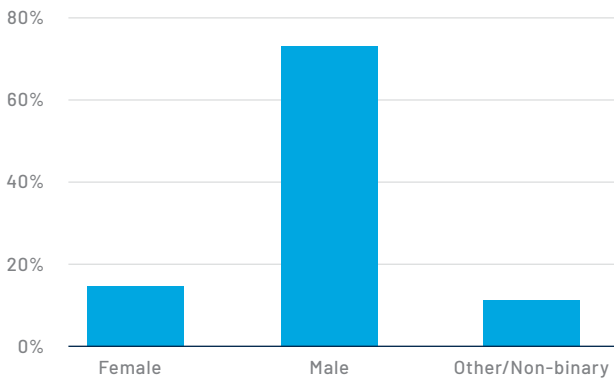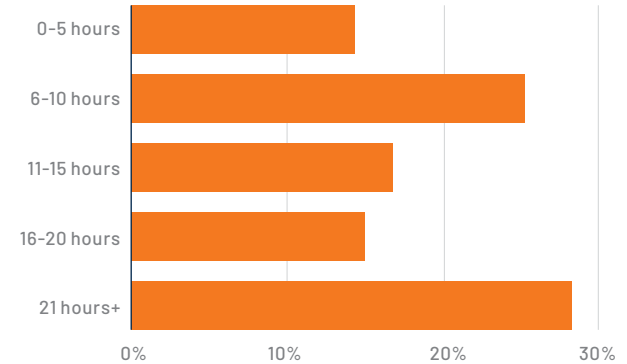
APPENDIX II

Quantitative Survey Data
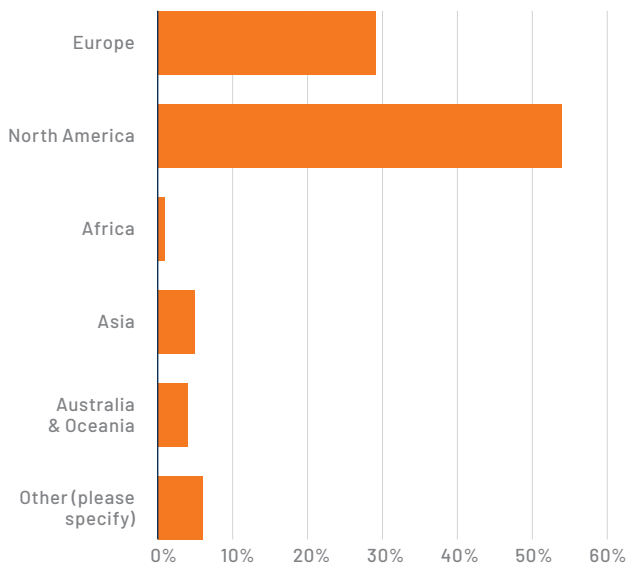
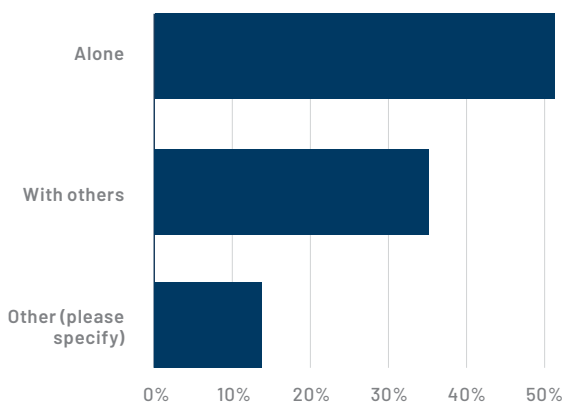**Figure 1** Locations of survey respondents
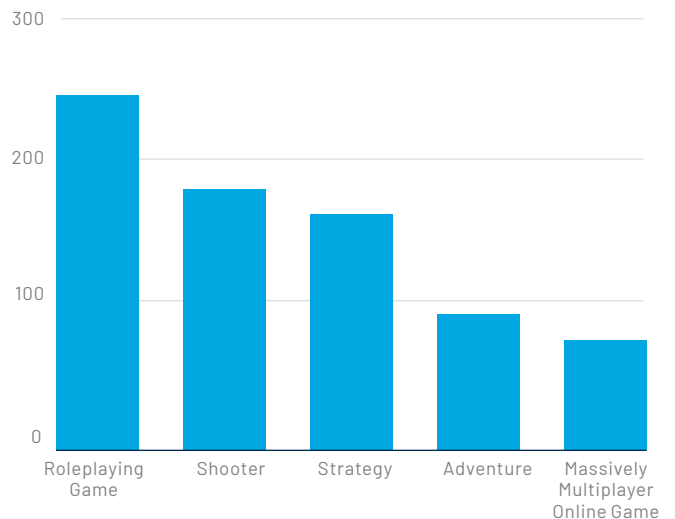

Figure 2 Age range of survey respondents

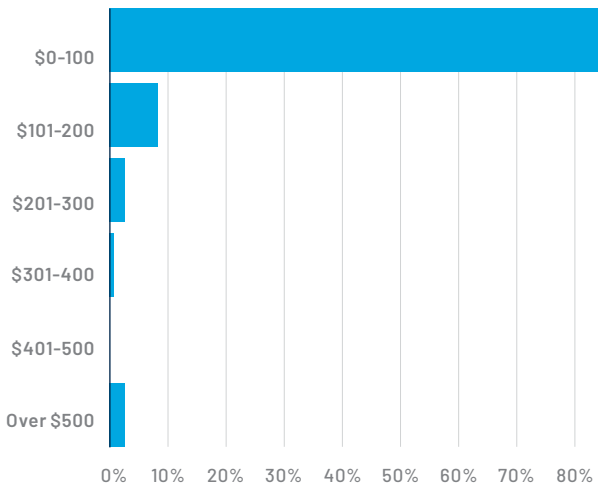**Figure 3** Gender breakdown of survey respondents

Figure 4 Survey responses to "How many hours do you spend gaming per week?"
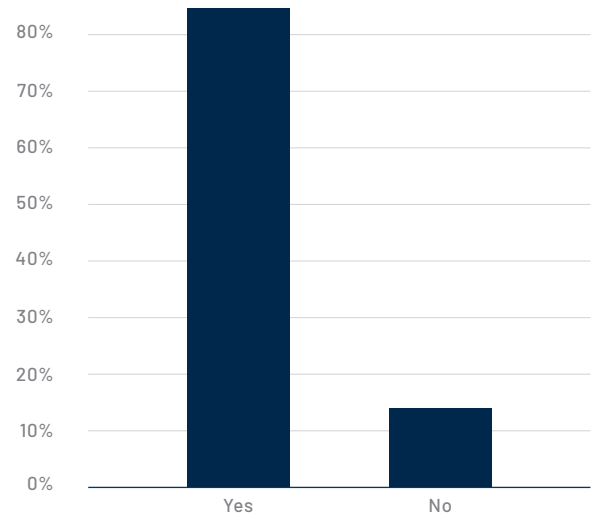

**Figure 5** Survey responses to "Do you usually play alone or with others?"

**Figure 6** Top 5 survey responses to the question "What genres of games do you most often play?"

Figure 7 Survey responses to "How much money do you spend on gaming every month?"

Figure 8 Survey responses to a question related to whether the respondent has seen any hateful or violent behaviour while playing video games or on gaming platforms
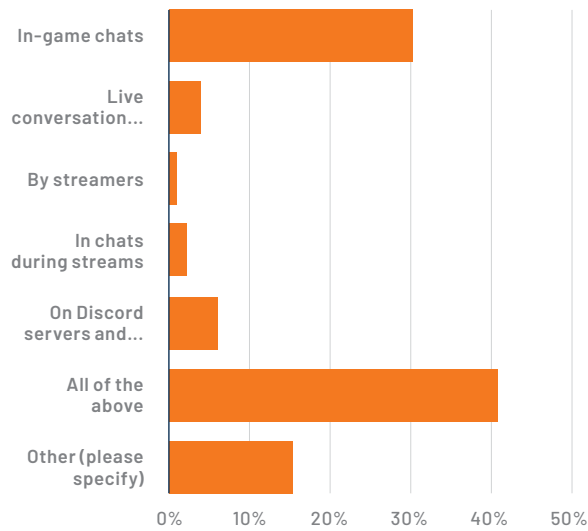
Figure 9 Survey responses to a question related to where a respondent witnessed hateful or violent content while gaming
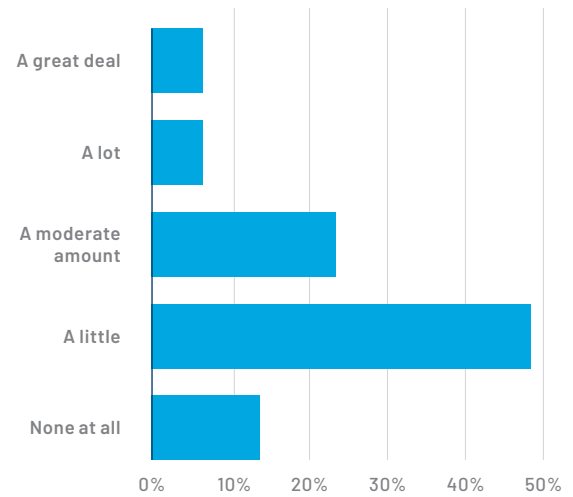
Figure 10 Survey responses to how often a respondent is exposed to hateful or violent content while gaming
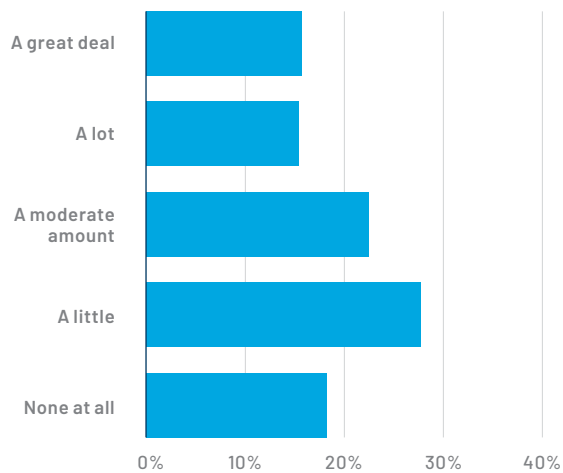
Figure 11 Survey responses when asked how much misogyny they see
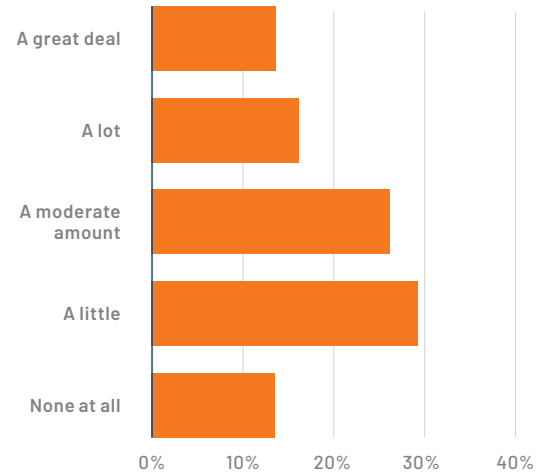
Figure 12 Survey responses when asked how much racism/ xenophobia they see
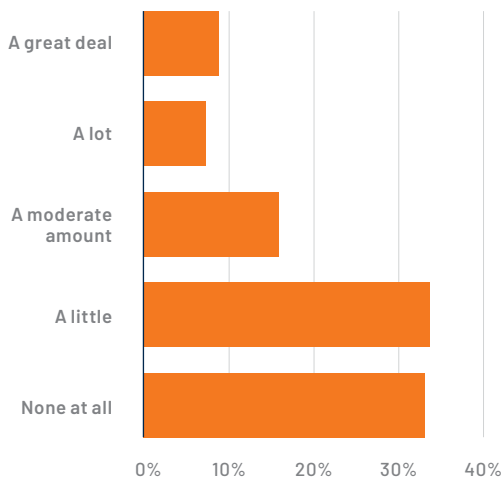
Figure 13 Survey responses when asked how much extremist content they see
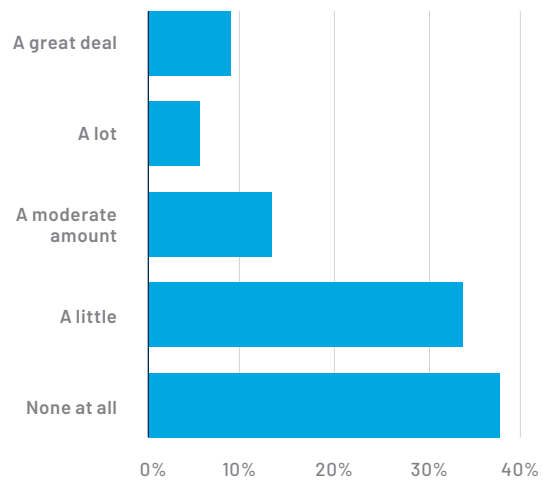
Figure 14 Survey responses when asked how much antisemitism they see
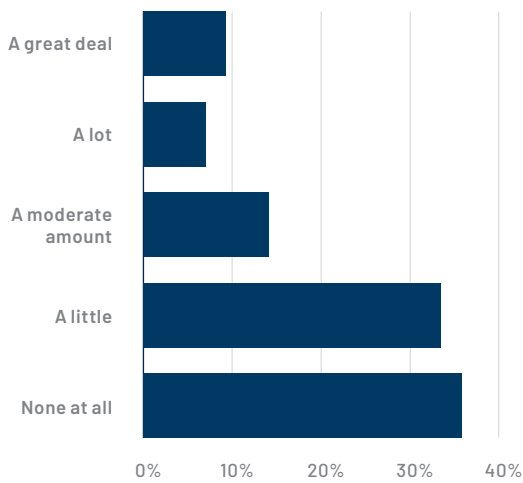
Figure 15 Survey responses when asked how much Islamophobia they see
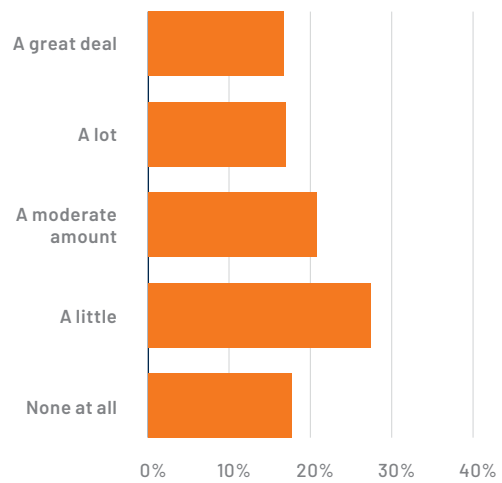
Figure 16 Survey responses when asked how much homophobia they see

	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all
Misogynistic	16%	15%	23%	28%	18%
Racist/Xenophobic	14%	16%	26%	30%	14%
Extremist	9%	7%	16%	34%	33%
Antisemitic	9%	6%	13%	34%	38%
Islamophobic	9%	7%	14%	34%	36%
Homophobic	17%	17%	21%	28%	18%

Figure 17 Summary of figures 11-16 – survey responses to questions related to the frequency of exposure to different kinds of hateful or extremist content

Additional Details of Survey Responses

On which platforms and in which games does toxic behaviour occur most often?

Everywhere 7.4%

Platforms

Discord 16.5%

Twitch 11.1%

Reddit 5.7%

Twitter 5.7%

YouTube 3.4%

Steam 2.2%

Other 3.4%

Types of Games

League of Legends 17%

Call of Duty 6.9%

Other Shooters 15.5%

Other Multiplayer
Online Battle Arena 7.6%

Massively Multiplayer
Online Game 3%

Other 3.7%

Which platforms (Steam etc) do you use to play video games?

Steam 80.5%

Nintendo, esp. Switch 23%

PC 16.5%

Epic Games 14.6%

Phone/mobile 9.4%

Playstation 9.4%

GoG 9.4%

Xbox 9.0%

Riot 7.7%

Origin 6.0%

Battle.net 5.2%

Itch < 3%

Minecraft < 3%

Blizzard < 3%

Roblox < 3%

Ubisoft Connect < 3%

Wii < 3%

Amazon Games < 3%

League of Legends < 3%

Humble Bundle < 3%

Oculus < 3%

Emulation < 3%

Thunderspygaming < 3%

Mojang < 3%

Byond < 3%

Discord < 3%

Twitch < 3%

World of Warcraft < 3%

Other < 3%

In your opinion, what are the positive outcomes of playing video games?

Community/Socializing/
Friendships 36%

Skill development 24%

Relaxation 16%

Entertainment 15%

Other answers, in descending
number of replies (all less than
10% each, but still relevant):

Storytelling

Escapism

Sense of accomplishment

Art

Education

Hobby

Game Features (for example,
immersion)

If someone asked you why you play video games, what would you say?

Entertainment 42%

Community 25%

Relaxation 17%

Escapism 13%

Other themes, in descending
number of replies (all less than
10%, but still relevant):

Challenge/Skill

Storytelling

Hobby

Art

Sense of accomplishment

Game elements

Education

About the Authors

Linda Schlegel

Linda is a PhD student at the Goethe University Frankfurt and a founding member of the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN). She is also a Research Fellow at modus | Center for Applied Research on Deradicalization and an Associate Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). Her research interests include gaming and (counter-)extremism, storytelling and narrative campaigns, digital radicalization processes, and online PCVE. She tweets at **@LiSchlegel**.

Amarnath Amarasingam

Amarnath Amarasingam is an Assistant Professor in the School of Religion, and is cross-appointed to the Department of Political Studies, at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. He is also a Senior Fellow with the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. His research interests are in terrorism, radicalization and extremism, online communities, diaspora politics, postwar reconstruction, and the sociology of religion. He is the author of *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Sri Lankan Tamil Activism in Canada* (2015), and the co-editor of *Stress Tested: The COVID-19 Pandemic & Canadian National Security* (2021) and *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War* (2016). He tweets at **@AmarAmarasingam**.