



Video Games & Violent Extremism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Considering the popularity of gaming spaces, it is unsurprising that a variety of violent extremist ideologies have appeared in gaming communities, seeking to exploit their appeal. Despite this, there is relatively little research on the extent or severity of the nexus between gaming and violent extremism.

UNOCT commissioned this pilot study to contribute to this emerging research field by: (i) exploring the scope and nature of violent extremists' exploitation of gaming spaces; (ii) scouting potential avenues to prevent or mitigate this exploitation; and (iii) gaining insights regarding the possibility of using gaming to prevent and/or counter violent extremism (PCVE).

Methods

PHASE 1

In Phase 1, the project team conducted focus groups with six leading experts on virtual communities and online radicalization to gain insight into the current situation surrounding video games and extremism and potential avenues for PCVE.

PHASE 2

Phase 2 involved focus groups with six avid video game players and users of gaming-related platforms who had previously engaged with extremism research. These focus groups assisted in contextualizing professional knowledge on extremism with personal experience in gaming spaces.

PHASE 3

In Phase 3, the project team distributed an English-language survey to gamers through existing networks to minimize disruption by trolls. The survey received 622 responses and sought to examine gamers' experiences in gaming spaces, the types of content they are exposed to, and how they and their peers react to hateful or extremist content.





KEY FINDING 1: Positive Aspects of Gaming

- The focus group participants in Phases 1 and 2 highlighted the positive outcomes of video games and gaming communities, frequently citing how games can provide a strong sense of community, belonging and acceptance, and encourage social interaction, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Similarly, the survey respondents in Phase 3 emphasized the many positive elements of gaming. Many participants stressed that “video games aren’t the problem” and should not be seen as a scapegoat for violent or hateful conduct.
- When asked about the positive aspects of video gaming, Phase 3 participants highlighted several key themes: (i) community; (ii) entertainment; (iii) escapism; (iv) relaxation; (v) challenge and competition; and (vi) skill development.



KEY FINDING 2: Negative Aspects of Gaming

- Despite the emphasis on the positive aspects of gaming, participants from all three phases of the study discussed the negative impacts at length.
- In Phase 3, the most prominent complaint about video games and gaming platforms was the toxicity in gaming communities. They explained, for instance, that toxic people target and dehumanize female, PoC, and LGBTQIA+ gamers, deterring them from playing certain games or entire genres.
- When survey participants were asked how they react to hateful, toxic, or extremist content, respondents listed several options. In order of prominence, these reactions included: (i) ignoring, (ii) blocking, (iii) reporting, (iv) leaving, or (v) reacting.



KEY FINDING 3: Hateful, Violent, and Extremist Content

- In Phases 1 and 2, the focus group participants explained that the spaces where extremist content is easiest to find are not necessarily the spaces where it is most prevalent. Even if extremist content is easy to find in public gaming communities, the vast majority is shared in private groups and servers. This complicates delineating the scope of the exploitation and makes it difficult to determine where extremist content is most prevalent without infiltrating closed groups.
- When Phase 3 participants were asked how often they encounter specific forms of hateful conduct, the most common were examples of casually racist, homophobic, and misogynistic language, rather than specific targeting based on religious identity or explicitly extremist conduct.
- In relation to the examples of violent and hateful language, survey respondents also noted examples of death threats, threats of violence, doxing, DDOS-ing, and threatening to execute real life actions (such as stalking other players).



KEY FINDING 4: Potential Solutions and Mitigators

- Focus group participants in Phases 1 and 2 lamented the lack of moderation in online games and gaming-adjacent platforms, since it allows extremists to disseminate their ideas more widely. Some interviewees suggested that extremists use gaming spaces not because of their connection to gaming, but due to the ease of access and lack of moderation in those spaces.
- A majority of Phase 3 participants also felt that further moderation and accountability are required in gaming spaces, with clear consequences, such as warnings, in-game penalties, bans, IP-bans, deplatforming, and escalating the most extreme cases to law enforcement.
- Overall, however, Phase 3 participants believed that it is members of the gaming community, as opposed to outside stakeholders, that needs to take action to enforce lasting change in gaming culture.

Policy recommendations

- Further research into extremism in all gaming-related spaces is needed, but particularly in in-game chats, which appear to stand out as the space in which toxic content is encountered most regularly and intensely.
- PCVE actors need to be conscious that gaming itself is not a problem that needs to be solved and should ensure that they do not explicitly or implicitly make that suggestion.
- PCVE interventions in the gaming world require increased awareness of how extremists seek to use gaming spaces. To accomplish this, PCVE actors should make efforts to support bottom-up initiatives by gamers and for gamers.
- To help curb extremists’ exploitation of gaming spaces, PCVE actors should also seek to collaborate with gaming companies and platforms to work on enhanced moderation efforts without over-policing these communities.
- It is difficult to deduce best practices for PCVE in gaming spaces and platforms at this point in time, as research and programming initiatives are still in their infancy. Instead, PCVE actors should engage in iterative programming with strong measurement and evaluation to accumulate more practical experiences concerning gaming in counter-extremism projects.