Exploitation of Gaming Platforms by Violent Extremists

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What is the EGRN?

Extremism and Gaming Research Network

The Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN) brings together over 60 world-leading counter-extremism researchers, practitioners, and policy makers together with the private sector to:

Develop solutions for the exploitation of online gaming by terrorists and violent extremists.

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Gaming: A primer

- **Gaming is king.** Above music, film, and TV, it is the most profitable entertainment sector. Revenues for 2022 are estimated to be **$196.8 billion USD.**

- **It is not niche:** 2.81 billion people are now gamers, a figure concentrated among 16-24 year olds. That's 1 in 4 people.
  Nearly 50% are women.
  The Latin-American market is one of the fastest growing (4.8% users, 6.9% revenue). 315 million people game across the region.

- **Gaming has pro-social benefits**: stress relief, community-building, and *fun*.
  COVID-19 also led to a surge in online gaming. A lifeline in isolation.

- **They are far more than just entertainment.**
  Games, and the many platforms around them, are **social spaces.**

- **And depictions of violence in games are not definitively connected to offline violence**

Gaming Ecosystem

Gaming

- Studios/Developers: Make games
- Hardware: Manufacturers of the things needed to play games
- Publishers: Sell games, often own studios
- E-sports: Including teams, sponsors, and venues
- Markets: Sell games, often have social functions online
- Content creation: media and users
- Livestreaming Platforms: Show gameplay online
- Gaming forums: Gamer-focused communication
- Video platforms: Host static video content about games

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Extremism Threats

1. **The connectivity on gaming platforms** brings risks for social harms, including the use of platforms by violent extremist and terrorist actors.

2. **We have seen gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms exploited by the far right in the UK, US and Europe.**

3. **And Hezbollah and Daesh affiliates and recruiters in the Philippines, Indonesia, and MENA;** along with other violent extremist organizations globally

Typology of Harms

Extremists' Use of Gaming-Content and Spaces

New Videogames +Modifications

Recruitment & Retention

Using Gaming Culture References

Recruitment & Propoganda

Games for Communication

Grooming and Communication

Gamification for Radicalisation

Recruitment & Retention

Gaming Ecosystem Platforms

Grooming, Communication, Mobilization
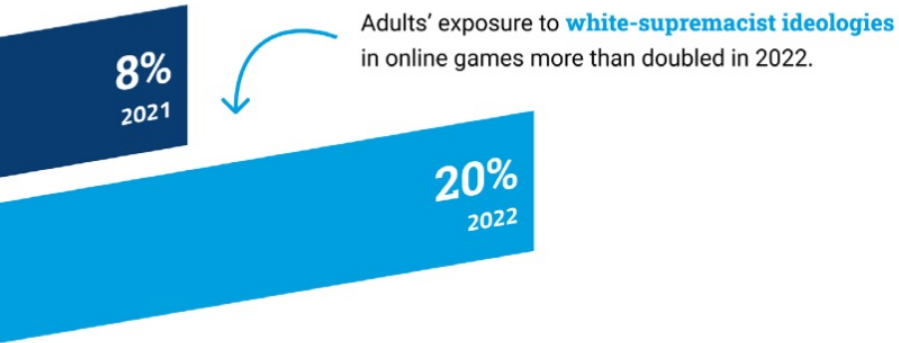
Financing and Money Laundering

Fundraising

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Harms are Increasing

Exposure to white-supremacist ideology on the rise among gamers

8% 2021

Adults' exposure to **white-supremacist ideologies** in online games more than doubled in 2022.
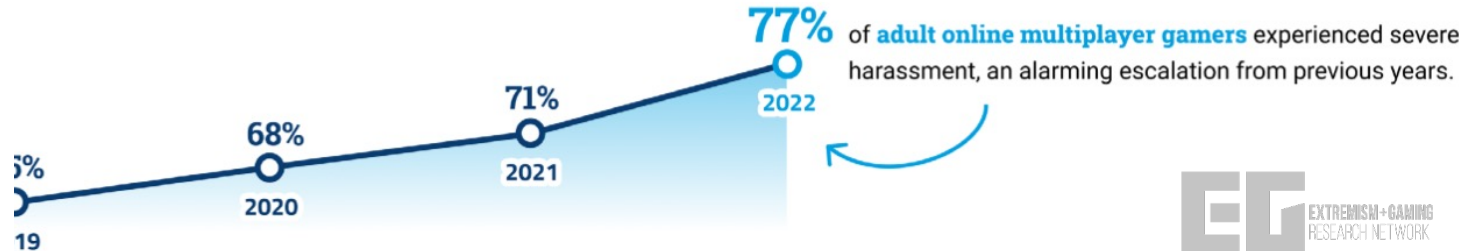
20% 2022

15% of **young people**, ages 10–17, reported exposure to **white-supremacist ideologies** in 2022.

Harassment is increasing among those in the gaming community

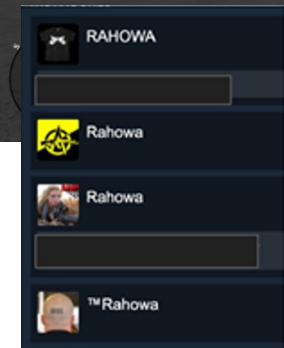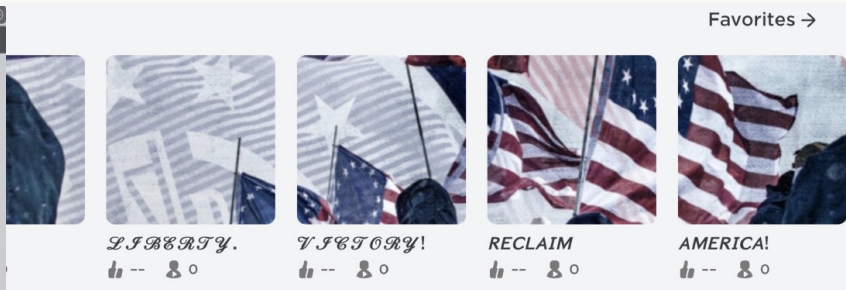**77%** of **adult online multiplayer gamers** experienced severe harassment, an alarming escalation from previous years.

2022

71%
2021

68%
2020

%
19

ADL, US-Based Polling (2022)

Across a Varity of Ideologies

	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

Global non-rep polling by Schlegel and Amarasingham, UNOCT, 2022

Far Right Cases

Hardened mobilization networks

Favorites →

LIBERTY. 👍 -- 👤 0   *VICTORY!* 👍 -- 👤 0   *RECLAIM* 👍 -- 👤 0   *AMERICA!* 👍 -- 👤 0

RAHOWA

Rahowa

Rahowa

™Rahowa

Hardened mobilization networks

AstroZelea ▾
Orangutuan 🏴 Oregon, United States

#SayHisName #SaintFloyd #ICantBreathe #ACAB
#JusticeForGeorgeFloyd #FreeFloyd

This user has also played as:
AstroZelea
Nefarious Nigga

- Ex-leader of Feuerkrieg Division, a UK-, Canada-, and Australia-designated terrorist group
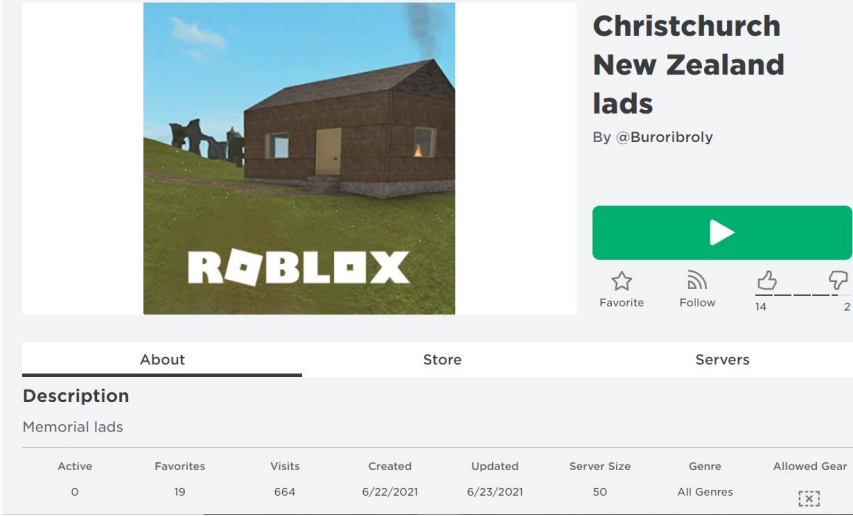- Currently engaged in propaganda creation for neo-Nazi groups on Telegram

TOPS

Prinz, Amadeus Stiftung, 2022
Kowert and Newhouse, 2022

Why? *Strategic Exploit and Organic Use.*

Strategic (Exploit)
- Reach
- Prime target audience for recruitment
- Pop cultural appeal
- (Private) Communication
- Less moderation than elsewhere
- Exploit toxic content, misogyny, dark humor, etc
- Grooming

Organic (Use)
- Billions of gamers include radicalized individuals
- Feeling of acceptance in toxic spaces
- Imagined community

Christchurch New Zealand lads
By @Buroribroly

About	Store	Servers

Description
Memorial lads

Active	Favorites	Visits	Created	Updated	Server Size	Genre	Allowed Gear
0	19	664	6/22/2021	6/23/2021	50	All Genres	

Radicalization Awareness Network & Schlegel, 2021

Why? *Social spaces and community.*

- Limited evidence that gaming was being used as part of a concerted strategy to radicalize and recruit new individuals.

- **Rather, in online spaces populated by extremists, gaming acts as a means of bringing already radicalized people together.**

- Less strategic organizational far-right recruitment campaigns, but rather **multidirectional social-networking**

- Historical strategy and role-playing games provide the opportunity for extremists to fulfil their fantasies

- Small number of political or extremist games used as a signifier of political identity or to provoke a response from outsiders

- Raiding provided a gamified opportunity to engage in extremist activity
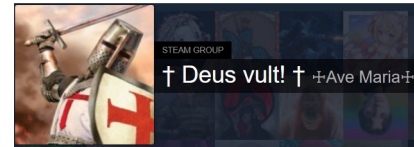
Koehler et al, 2022
Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021

Why? *Identity Fusion.*

- Identity fusion is a psychological construct that refers to a sense of oneness felt between oneself (i.e. individual identity) and a group (i.e. social identity).

- Online gaming provides a collective, world-building experience.

- **When fusion happens, an individual is more willing to enlist the personal self in service of the group.**

- **A fused 'gamer' identity was associated with:**

- **willingness to fight/die (for other gamers),**

  - **recent aggressive behaviors,**

  - **Machiavellianism (a personality trait characterized by interpersonal manipulation, being deceitful, cynical, and lacking morality),**

  - **narcissism, psychopathy (lack of empathy), sexism, racism,**

  - **and the endorsement of beliefs and policies centred on ideas of white nationalism.**

Kowert et al, 2022

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Why? *Gamification Works.*

	Top-down gamification	Bottom-up gamification
Who	Extremist organisations, recruiters, strategists	Individuals, small groups, online communities
What	Strategic use of rankings, badges, points, leader boards	Livestreaming, gamified language, virtual scoreboards, personal 'quests'
Why	Facilitate engagement with content and peers, visibility of commitment, motivate users to participate, appeal to young audience	Appeal to online community/subcultural milieu, look cool, make sense of reality via gaming content
Examples	Rankings, badges, etc. in forums; apps such as Patriot Peer	Attacks in Christchurch and Halle; small-group WhatsApp radicalisation; discussions on social media — e.g. desire to "beat his score" ([15])

Schlegel for RAN, 2021

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Platform Analysis

Platform Exploits

Live-Streaming (Mainstream)

- Popular with gamers and e-sports
- Used to broadcast a range of attacks
- Improving regulation
- Allows for monetisation through donations and subscriptions

Livestreaming (Far Right Niche)

- Standalone livestreaming and video platforms popular with far-right audiences
- Built around blockchain-based cryptocurrencies + content systems
- Streamers and viewers can earn money through watching videos
- Deliberately built to attract extremist or fringe audiences

Game distribution platforms

- Provide in-game chat and forum capabilities
- Function as social network platforms in many ways
- Less moderation and regulation than mainstream social media
- Younger audiences

Gaming adjacent chat platforms

- Offer voice and text chat designed to run alongside games
- Allow public and private chat servers
- Moderation and T&S efforts improving
- Exploited by far right and jihadist actors for organizing and socializing

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Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021

P/CVE in gaming spaces

Avenues for P/CVE in gaming spaces

We need: **More data and evidence**

Opporunities: Platform-side
- Safety by design
- Behvaioral vs content-based VE enforcement policies
- Improved reporting & takedown methods
- Community norm change (online SBCC)
- Buillding "digital resilience" in gamer communities

Opportunites: Support P/CVE actors in gaming spaces
- Identify at-risk users
- Advice & guidance
- Implement counter-measures
- Facilitate positive interventions

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Recommendations

We also see opportunities. We recommend:

1. **Pushing to understand less resilient users,** including those lacking strong communities or who may be struggling with mental health or isolation.

2. **Providing funding for advice and guidance,** such as through mental health interventions, along with training for educators, parents, and youth leaders.

3. **Implementing counter-measures**, like the re-direction from extremist content to valuable educational or self-improvement materials using gamified elements.

4. And we recommend **facilitating positive interventions** leveraging gaming for pro-social, inclusive ends. Our EGRN members and peers have piloted see promise in:

   1. **Custom games and narratives, either for learning or to change behaviors**

   2. **Partnerships with gaming influencers and livestreaming stars**

   3. **Mentorship programs with e-sports leagues**

   4. **Local-police led cops versus kids e-sports gaming competitions**

   5. **Improving safety-by-design platform policies** designed to improve content moderation, re-direct away from toxic content, and react immediately to active terrorist incidents. **EGRN, GIFCT and TaT can assist here.**

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EGRN as a solution

We uncover how malign actors exploit gaming, and also the opportunities to use gaming for good to counter those online harms.

Our three priority areas of work are:

1. **Why and how are video games, gaming platforms, and gaming content used by extremist individuals or organizations? (What are the implications for radicalization and recruitment?)**

2. **How does this trend differ across geographies, cultures, ideologies, and genders?**

3. **How can gaming, gaming-related spaces, and gamers themselves help prevent extremism? (How can gamers and gaming platforms be empowered to combat hate and facilitate building positive, resilient communities? At the same time, how can the positive effects of gaming be strengthened?)**

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EGRN as a solution

Extremism and Gaming Research Network Membership: EGRN conveners our Institutional and Individual members monthly to discuss cutting edge extremism and gaming related subjects and projects. We provide:
- Monthly briefings
- Short-form Insights with GNET
- Long-form reports
- Custom briefings for members and supporters
- Upcoming global research

Industry and policy stakeholders can join the EGRN as partners or observers to be at the forefront of a multi-layered research effort in an exciting, unexplored field.

Policy partners can commission research and program design beyond written outputs, and provides opportunities for actionable outcomes, e.g. through designing and executing digital interventions.

In 2023, we will expand our research and programmatic work.

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Thank you.

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