Extremism Online: Meaningful Transparency for the Gaming Industry

By Jon Deedman, on behalf of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) 2023 Transparency Working Group (TWG)

While there is no direct link between gaming and real-world extremist violence, there is substantial evidence as to the use of gaming platforms to recruit, spread propaganda, and disseminate terrorism livestreams. Additionally, games present a medium with which to create extremist actors' propagandist games or themes with which to prime their messages.

Gaming is an immense sub-sector within digital tech and includes games, gaming forums, streaming sites affiliated with gaming (e.g., Twitch), e-sports, game publishers, individual community servers and chatrooms (e.g., Discord), etc. The amount of extremist leveraging noted for each genre, subculture, title, and so forth, differs entirely between focal points; however, as a rapidly growing industry with a majority younger male user base (i.e., the prime recruitment demographic that extremist actors look to exploit), gaming spaces are poised to be a key conduit for extremist groups and individuals to leverage.

In order to address this vulnerability, the **Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)** (as the academic arm of the **Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism**; **GIFCT**) and the **Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN)** commissioned the report *The Online Gaming Ecosystem: Assessing Digital Socialisation, Extremism Risks and Harms Mitigation Efforts* Lamphere-Englund & White [1]. This report, in short, attempted to identify the gaming ecosystem, the forms of extremist harms and exploitation of gaming cultures and subcultures, existing mitigation efforts to combat extremist leveraging of gaming technologies, and recommendations to better prevent extremist leveraging of gaming technologies in the future.

Below are some of the key takeaways about what we know about games and extremism today:

— There is a distinct lack of research or shared knowledge regarding extremist use of gaming communities and technologies. Fundamentally, this is the central issue: we simply do not know enough about the problem to effectively combat it, as we cannot combat something whose true nature is a mystery to us.

— While they are just entertainment media, games can carry distinct gamer cultures and subcultures. These gaming communities and subcultures can have this socializing effect on their users, which can be positive (e.g., increased belonging for community members) or negative (e.g., increased reliance on anti-social behavior) and can therefore increase susceptibility to radicalization and act as an "entry point" where extremist actors gain the trust of other users within their specific communities.

—Certain games have a more significant impact on the extremist landscape than others. **First-person shooters (FPS)**, for example, have led to an increase in the gamification of terror attacks (e.g., through the use of helmet cameras) as well as providing a recognizable style for new propaganda. Additionally, some archive sites warehouse easily accessible hateful and racist games created by and for extremist actors.

Recognizing the above, GIFCT's 2023 **Transparency Working Group (TWG)** identified several areas where the industry can start to work more collaboratively to address these issues, specifically in relation to transparency Beall et al. [2]. In reality, the true use of gaming platforms and communities by extremist actors is likely unknown to much of the field of **countering violent extremism (CVE)**. A lack of research corresponds with a lack of transparency reporting, and a lack of *consistency* in transparency reporting across the gaming industry. Many game companies, for example, have only just produced their first transparency reports within the last year. In addition, the EGRN/GNET report notes that "9 of 14 leading gaming companies in the USA have made no public efforts to assess or mitigate extremist content in their products." This focus has likely left the gaming industry bereft of scrutiny and, therefore, ripe for operationalization by extremist actors.

So how can gaming companies pursue transparency pathways to achieve meaningful transparency? A first step should be to accept the realities of the tech sector; extremist actors will not stick to one platform or medium. Cross-platform extremist activity means that current transparency efforts and frameworks—for which there are few for gaming—are not comparable across industries. Extremists often seek to use gaming communities to build networks of sympathetic users before encouraging them to less-monitored sites. This cross-platform usage highlights the need for greater comparability of data and information in the sector, as well as the need for greater aggregate transparency reporting (and of greater quality where it already exists) from the gaming industry. This is exacerbated when we consider the true complexity of extremist activity on gaming platforms and communities, and the diversity of such platforms and cultures/subcultures.

While some gaming companies are already implementing contemporary technologies to combat the use of hate speech, effective CVE requires a broader focus than simply on individual instances of hate, and to do this, more industry transparency is needed as much as more innovation. Where gaming companies are identified as avoiding more holistic trust and safety efforts, there is room for improvement across the industry to impede extremist use of gaming platforms. We suggest a more comparable and longer-term outcomes-focused transparency reporting framework. We can better understand how extremist actors are using these platforms and communities to advance their goals by increasing transparency reporting in the gaming industry and the quality and comparability of such reporting. With a shift toward such reporting standards, we can better compare transparency reports across the tech sector providing a more holistic approach to CVE. Doing so in the future could ensure that CVE is as dynamic as the extremist activity it seeks to combat. Given the "entry point" role gaming communities can play in the cross-platform activity of extremist actors, a gaming industry shift toward more meaningful transparency is imperative for future CVE efforts.

REFERENCES

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