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Pixels and Propaganda: A Primer on Gaming, Gaming-Adjacent Platforms, and Extremism

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Pixels and Propaganda: A Primer on Gaming, Gaming-Adjacent Platforms, and Extremism

Plain Language Summary

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Current Events

One trend found in the Christchurch (New Zealand) shooting, Halle (Germany) Synagogue shooting, Buffalo (New York) mass shooting, Hamas Israel conflict, and Houthi Red Sea attacks, is the use of recorded or livestreamed content in first-person shooter format making the attacks appear the same as content found in video games.

Takeaways

- The intersection of gaming and artificial intelligence with extremism raises complex challenges that demand careful consideration.
- While video games can serve as a platform for entertainment, social interaction, and skill development, these virtual realms can potentially amplify extremist ideologies.
- Immersive gaming environments, coupled with sophisticated AI algorithms, may facilitate the creation and spread of radicalizing content or serve as an extremist recruitment ground.
- Preserving positive aspects of gaming and reducing extremist risk requires collaboration from the gaming industry and community, AI developers, cybersecurity experts, and policymakers.

Games

The realm of gaming has experienced a remarkable expansion, diversifying into numerous genres and communities. Each type of game is unique in its own way and offers players many different experiences but also presents opportunities for malevolent users to exploit the games for their own agendas.

Sandbox Games

These games immerse players in a virtual environment, encouraging exploration and interaction with the virtual environment as they learn about the games' features, mechanics, and limitations through trial and error.

Military Simulations

These games recreate historical battles, campaigns, and settings with meticulous attention to detail, allowing players to step into the shoes of key figures or soldiers.

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FPS Games

First-person shooter (FPS) games immerse players in dynamic combat scenarios, challenging players to navigate intense environments and engage in thrilling gunfights from a protagonist's point of view. Known for their realistic graphics and responsive controls, these games often incorporate multiplayer modes, fostering competitive online communities.

Games that Act as Guides

These games provide players with the opportunity to construct, disassemble, and gain insights into the intricate workings of various firearms as well as learn the stats for each weapon.

VR Games

Virtual reality games immerse players in computer-generated environments, heightening their sense of presence and interaction through VR headsets and motion controllers. This immersive gaming environment could be utilized by extremist groups to recruit new members and develop games to teach members about their beliefs and how to build bombs/guns/weapons.



AI-generated image

Extremist Games/Mods

Since the early 2000s, extremist and terrorist organizations have been creating new video games and modifications ("mods") to existing popular games (See next page for examples). There is an even greater abundance of extremist mods accessible to players. Mods pose two significant dangers: they are considerably easier to create than developing an entire game, and they reach a broader audience since they are typically designed for popular games that players are already engaged with.

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Extremist Use of Video Games

Game	Category	Description	Real-World Examples
Roblox	Sandbox game	Users can make their own virtual worlds, environments, and games for others to join and play.	Reenactments of tragedies including the Holocaust.
Minecraft	Sandbox game	Immerse players in a world of manipulable blocks for building and crafting. Creative servers offer a threat-free environment, while survival mode introduces in-game enemies.	A Russian teenager was arrested for plotting an attack by simulating a Russian security agency's building layout using Minecraft servers.
Garry's Mod	Sandbox game	Players can create, manipulate, and interact with a wide variety of objects and environments using physics-based mechanics and user-generated content.	Due to lax blacklisting rules in the game, Nazi servers proliferated, enabling players to recreate Nazi imagery and propaganda within the game.
Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)	Sandbox game	An open world action-adventure game where players can engage in a variety of criminal activities, missions, and explore a vast, detailed landscape.	ISIS utilized GTA V gameplay footage as a recruitment tactic as well as different mods.
Sims 4	Sandbox game	A life simulation game where players create and control virtual characters, guiding them through daily activities, relationships, careers, and various life events in a customizable virtual world.	Mods that can make a Sims character murder, torture, and cannibalize other Sims allowing individuals to play out crude fantasies.

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Game	Category	Description	Real-World Examples
Arma 3	Historical Simulation	A military simulation game with expansive open worlds, realistic combat, and various modes including single-player, cooperative multiplayer, and PvP battles.	Game footage mistaken for Gaza conflict adds to social media misinformation. Nazi mods worsen the problem.
Call of Duty (COD)	First-Person Shooter (FPS)	A rapid first-person shooter series with intense multiplayer action, cinematic campaigns, and settings ranging from historical to futuristic warfare.	Anders Breivik used COD for training and planning his attack in July 2012. COD screen names referencing Jewish genocide or Nazi leaders are common.
Fortnite	First-Person Shooter (FPS)	Battle royale game where players compete to be the last one standing on a shrinking island, while they build structures and gather resources for victory.	A Fortnite Holocaust Museum honoring anti-Nazi fighters was delayed due to harassment from Holocaust deniers.
World of Guns: Gun Disassembly	Guiding Game	Teaches disassembly and reassembly of guns with historical and statistical context.	N/A
Gun Smith Simulator	Guiding Game	Teaches users gun crafting from scratch, covering required equipment for creation of guns.	N/A
Ethnic Cleansing	Extremist Game	Neo-Nazi label Resistance Records made game where players virtually kill people of different races and religions.	N/A

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Game	Category	Description	Real-World Examples
Special Force	Extremist Game	Hezbollah-created game where there are recreations of the South Lebanon conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, forcing the player to defeat the Israeli troops.	N/A
ZOG's Nightmare	Extremist Game	A National Socialist Movement extension of the Ethnic Cleansing game previously mentioned.	N/A

Gamification

A strategy that involves integrating elements of game design and mechanics into non-game contexts to engage and motivate individuals. The premise of gamification is to apply game-like features, such as points, rewards, challenges, and competition to enhance user participation, learning, and overall experience. This concept leverages the innate human desire for achievement and recognition, turning tasks or activities into more enjoyable and immersive experiences. Gamification has been used by extremist individuals and organizations for the better part of two decades.

AI Media

The advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) tools for generating mods or crafting new games empowers individuals to modify or create games without requiring coding or game development expertise. With the development of new and easier to use AI tools to create and modify games, we can expect an increase in extremist content in existing games and potential development of new games made by extremists. For the gaming community, deepfakes pose a specific threat to female gamers through synthetic non-consensual exploitative images.

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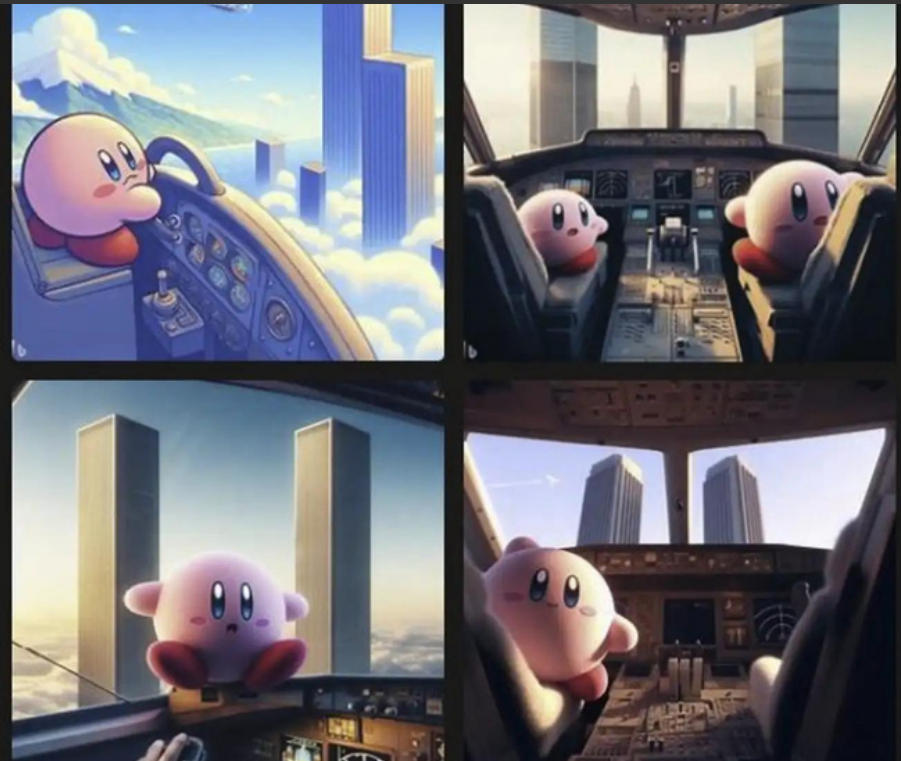


Gaming Culture

- The gaming community is made up of 3 billion gamers worldwide.
- 40% of the gaming population is female.
- 71% of American children play video games consistently.
- The gaming community is still riddled with sexism, hate speech, and extremist ideologies.



Image of ISIS soldiers using COD as a meme for recruitment



AI images of Kirby committing the 9/11 attacks

Gaming-Adjacent Platforms

These platforms give the gaming community an outlet to collaborate and discuss games but have a prevalent toxicity problem negatively impacting gamers. They can become breeding grounds for extremists to spread propaganda and spew hateful rhetoric.

Memes

Memes are humorous or culturally relevant images, videos, or text that spread rapidly across the internet, often evolving and taking on new meanings as they are shared and modified by different users. However, behind the humorous and relatable front often lies a vehicle that can further stereotypes, views, and ideologies that would be seen as unacceptable in other situations.

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Platforms	Description	Concern
Twitch	A popular livestreaming platform	As Twitch has pioneered livestreaming it has had to learn through trial and error how to effectively moderate inappropriate and extreme content on the platform.
DLive	Minimally moderated message platform	Due to lax rules, DLive attracted many extremists. During the January 6th Capitol attack, Tim Gionet livestreamed his actions there, allowing users to pay, direct, and chat with him.
Discord	Instant messaging platform that allows users to video call and text within servers (communities or group chats)	Discord's private chat rooms offer users a safe place for communities to spread ideas and views to other users.
Steam	Video game distribution service/store that also provides social networking through games	As extremism in online gaming has continued to grow, video game distribution stores like Steam are where much of the content will first pop up for gamers to find.
Newgrounds	Platform for video game designers and animators to produce and sell their games and gain a following	Newgrounds, founded in 1995, lacked strict rules for game creation and sales, allowing early extremist content to appear on the platform.
4Chan	Image board website that allows users to post and rate things anonymously	On 4chan, users post and rate content anonymously without creating profiles. This anonymity fosters the sharing of hate, terrorism, radicalization, violence, and antisocial views alongside other content.
Reddit	Social/news content board that allows users to post links, text, images, and videos that can then be voted on by other members	Reddit allows users to create new forums (subreddits) that can become an echo chamber. Many extremist groups have formed their own subreddits.
YouTube	Video sharing platform that allows users to post videos, interact and support creators	Despite heavy monitoring, YouTube still sees inappropriate content slip through its filters. Once live, the algorithm promotes these videos to interested audiences.