How are terrorists and violent extremists using gamification?

Flora: Did you know...

Maygane: That elements from well-known video games such as Call of Duty and World of Warcraft are being utilized by terrorist and violent extremist organisations for radicalisation and recruitment purposes?

Flora: A well-known ISIS hacker and propagandist once tweeted: ‘You can sit at home and play call of duty or you can come and respond to the real call of duty...the choice is yours’.

Maygane: that following the 2019 Christchurch attack, when dozens of people were killed during two consecutive mass shootings, a number of users of the online forum 8chan commented on the ‘high body count’ and expressed a desire to beat the perpetrators’ “score”?

Flora: This is Tech Against Terrorism, I’m Flora Deverell,

Maygane: And I’m Maygane Janin. In this episode we’re exploring how violent extremist groups are exploiting gaming culture and using gamification processes to serve their radicalisation agenda and distort perceptions of reality.

Flora: The Christchurch and Halle attacks, both motivated by far-right violent extremist ideologies, were live streamed by their perpetrators. Many researchers have commented on the fact that once online, those watching these attacks experience them through the perspective of the attackers, akin to first-person shooter games.

Maygane: Such exploitation of gaming culture is neither a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to far-right violent extremists. The Islamic State is one of the most well-known groups to use gaming language and video game imagery, especially through its production of first-person shooter propaganda videos. In addition to the exploitation of gaming visuals, other terrorist and violent extremists groups have been known to develop their
own video games to aid recruitment, from Hezbollah’s holy defence to the Daily Stormer’s Doom 2.

Flora: The exploitation of gaming culture often relies on a process that experts call “gamification,” which is when gaming elements are implemented into non-gaming settings with the end-goal of behavioral change. While this is often used by companies to increase engagement with their products via point collection and leaderboards, terrorist and violent extremists groups have also adopted this process to serve their own agenda. Video games, and gaming elements, are exploited to desensitize users to violence, especially through first-person shooter perspective, and anchoring existing beliefs by displaying visuals and iconography reminiscent of their ideologies. However, this isn’t solely a top-down process, and those engaging with terrorist and violent extremist content can also enter a process of self-gamification to modify their perception of their own radicalisation process, especially by bringing gaming elements into the real world.

Maygane: Many violent extremists exploit gaming platforms as well. An ever growing industry, these platforms are varied and serve different purposes for gamers, from enabling playing to livestreaming and discussion, and are especially popular amongst young internet users. Due to the technological offerings of some of these platforms, some terrorist and violent extremist actors are creating whole online gaming environments to serve their propaganda and reinforce community ties.

Flora: To get a better understanding of how terrorist and violent extremists exploit gaming culture for their own ends, we are joined today by Linda Schlegel and Dr. Nick Robinson. Linda is a senior editor at The Counterterrorism Group, and a regular contributor for the European Eye on Radicalization, where she recently published a number of articles on the exploitation of gaming culture. Nick is an associate professor in politics and international studies at Leeds University. He has been researching the links between videogames, social media, militarism, and terrorism for over a decade. Linda, Nick, welcome to the show.

Nick: Hi.

Linda: Hi there.

Maygane: First question to set the scene of today’s discussion. Could you tell us a little bit about why terrorist and violent extremist actors are exploiting gaming culture?

Linda: So I think the main part for that is that they choose to do it because it presents a discursive opportunity structure. Gaming culture is familiar in referencing familiar images, familiar speech, familiar references to games many people play, in exploiting this familiarity extremists can sort of try to make their frames more resonant with their target audiences, and especially for right wing extremists, there is a sort of subcultural repertoire that they can play on the whole sort of 8chan culture. A bit neolistic, ironic, satirical. You're not really sure whether it's a joke or serious. So they can really sort of try to move the discourse in a certain direction that they would like it to. And that way
inspire people to possibly take action and exploit their knowledge of gaming culture and their liking of gaming culture and their radicalization processes.

Nick: Well, I would sort of differentiate between I guess is the historical focus really and the more contemporary one. And I think historically, just to sort of add to what Linda was saying, that there was a time, you know, back in the sort of early noughties if you like, when actors like Hezbollah for example, were actually actively making video games at the time, they made Special Force and Special Force 2 and indeed also right-wing affiliate groups and groups directly associated with right wing extremism also actually making games. I think it's probably worth, you know, as the conversation carries on, talking about in some senses why they've stopped doing that. But I think I totally agree with Linda that the big shift now has been into kind of almost the exploitation of or relationships to kind of gamey culture.

Nick: It's just one of the things about all of that though, which is slightly I think we need to do much more research on if I'm honest, is that there are quite a lot of assumptions that are often made about gamer culture that it naturally segways straight out of into the same sort of cultures. And I think, I mean, again, we can come back to this if like, but there is a lot of reflexivity and self awareness within the gaming community because there is actually a real concern I think after exactly the things that Linda was mentioning really that, you know, this sort of massage misogynistic and unpleasant side to gamer culture. So there are, you know, strong moves within the community itself to actually kind of sweep a lot of this stuff out, which I think is also pretty important to emphasize.

Maygane: Recently there has been much discussion around the “gamification of radicalization”, so to say. Linda, in your research you distinguish between top-down gamification and self-gamification, could you explain what’s the difference between those two and what’s gamification in general?

Linda: Yes, so gamification in general is the introduction of gaming elements into non-gaming context. So for example, competing with your friends on a fitness app who runs the most miles, who loses the most weight, that's part of gamification. So it has actually been used in a lot of commercial applications and usually it's used with the intention of changing behavior. So nudging people into behaving a certain way and this sort of gamification can be seen also in extremists forums, for example, that's where it first occurred. That would be top down, top-down gamification is the gamification done by extremist organizations with the aim of keeping people engaged and potentially facilitating their radicalization processes. Whereas bottom-up or self-gamification is the process done by people who are currently undergoing the process of radicalization or were at the end of their radicalization. An example would be the Christchurch live streaming or the live streaming in Halle.

So perpetrators trying to tap into gamification in order to gain more publicity or to facilitate the engagement of people with their attacks and a top-down, so as I said has been pioneered in jihadist forums. Very early on there were points to be collected, so-called reputation points, the more comments you made and the better they were ranked by others. The better your reputation. You could earn privileges of adding a picture to your account or even getting into secret groups. So it was a system of
attaching rewards to increase engagement. And then for self-radicalization, it’s done in a bottom-up manner by the people themselves without necessarily an instruction from an extremist organization.

Nick: Very early on in the sort of early noughties, what I think is really striking was that groups like Hezbollah were actively making games. They explicitly set them out, they were launched by their propaganda wing and they were explicitly stated as integral to what they then actively saw as a set of recruitment strategies. So in a lot of ways that listeners would probably understand that, you know, the idea that a game has produced, which has an aim to kind of engage and persuade somebody to join the sort of objectives of a group. The reasons for that, and this is probably going to be quite a controversial thing to say in some senses, but I would suggest to you that what those organizations at the time were doing is just actually replicating what were deemed to be highly successful strategies by non-terrorist organizations.

Nick: It’s probably not remotely surprising. I mean obviously far-right groups and Islamist groups replicate one another, right? And they learn almost continuously from developments in broader society. But the key thing I think here to bear in mind is that the US military itself produced a game called, America’s Army, which they themselves self-evaluated and saw as the “most successful recruitment tool that they had ever developed”. So in light of all of that, it’s not terribly surprising that these organizations would at least initially make use of these kinds of tools and, but what I think is quite important to emphasize as Linda really rightly has said, is that they’ve moved quite strikingly away from this kind of activity. And there were a number of reasons for that, which obviously we can talk about, but the general shift now has been much more towards processes of gamification, which Linda has summarized extremely well, I’ve got very little to add to that, you know, but through the utilization of video gaming style, iconography, the usage of memes, this kind of thing. And particularly through producing videos and stuff like that, which often replicate kind of first-person perspectives and which you would quite often see in a video game. So that is a really significant shift away from the making of games, which pretty much died out, there are a lot of modifications to existing games. But the actual production of games is very much on the back burner rather now towards this strategy of gamification, which I think has now become much, much more prevalent in their strategies.

Flora: Absolutely. Perhaps I could ask you for a couple of reasons or why you think that this shift might have happened?

Nick: Well, I think there are two major sets of reasons. Lakomy has written a really nice little piece actually, which I think is certainly worth people having a look at if they’re interested in this, where he talks much more on the kind of production side. He talks about questions of production, distribution, the fact that actually these video games are very difficult to make in terms of the quality of them. You know, often being quite poor, it’s very hard to make a good game, you need access to the tools and technologies and you won’t be surprised to realize that video game developers like Epic who make the Fortnite game, are not very happy with licensing their technologies to a violent extremist organization. But I think there are things that we would add in a sense from our own research findings to what the Lakomy said.
And I think one of the things that's really important to emphasize is that when you're producing a game, what a game does, a Jesper Juul who’s a games theorist talks about this, what a game specializes in, is what Jesper Juul terms, “The Art of Failure”. Now what he means by that is there is a sweet spot with a video game where you derive pleasure from your failings. So in other words, you know, it's exciting partly because you succeed and fail, you overcome obstacles, this kind of thing. You don't need me to tell you that if you're trying to produce an arresting piece of political propaganda, recruitment tool, what have you and the player or the person engaging with that is then failing, it might actually put them off. So I would also suggest that there is something quite difficult about producing games that hit the sweet spot if you like, that are arresting, engaging, enjoyable and pleasurable, which is after all what the game, a successful propaganda tool would need to be is a very, very hard thing to do actually. So a lack of technology, difficulties of distribution, you know, a lack of competence as if you like on behalf of these organizations. But also the real challenges that come actually from just making engaging games is one of the reasons that I think they've moved much more to things like gamification, memes and other forms of political propaganda.

Linda: Nick, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought that maybe it's also an ideological issue. We've seen a sort of progression by ISIS for example, to forbid music, forbid TV, forbid any type of entertainment. So I thought that maybe from an ideological standpoint, it's not exactly the best idea to promote your ideology via a video game if you actually forbid video games. So I think there's a sort of ambivalence and attention between trying to utilize games and gaming elements in the propaganda, especially aimed at Western recruits, but then also saying, Oh, but we're not really supporting gaming culture as a whole.

Nick: Yeah, I think that's a really good point Linda. I completely agree with that. It's an interesting ambiguity here isn't it? Because on the one hand, as you rightly say, there's a hostility if you like to gaming, to kind of leisure in that sense, but also there is this utilization of these sort of gaming memes. You know the kind of Call of Duty memes, the Grand Theft Auto memes, this sort of stuff, which obviously then provides a certain set of ambiguities. But I guess one of the things that most people suggest isn’t it, is that a lot of those memes come out of non-affiliated organizations or those sorts of people rather than necessarily coming directly out of official propagandas. But no, I think you’re absolutely right. I think ideology really is important here. Yeah.

Linda: Yeah. I think it's a sort of trade off between doctrine and recruitment. My guess is that the stronger the organization is at a certain point in time, the less it has to rely on games for recruiting even more people. But the weaker the organization is, the more they will try to utilize every tool they can possibly have to engage more people.

Maygane: So talking about memes, we actually recorded a podcast episode on the exploitation of meme culture last week. So that was focused on far-right violent extremists and one of the insights that came out of it is that visual culture appears to be a central element of terrorist and violent extremist strategies for propaganda and reinforcement purposes. Could you develop on how this has played out in relation to gaming culture?
Linda: I think that sort of the visuals are especially important. Yes, in using games, the sort of Call of Duty visuals of first person shooter games that were used by ISIS, for example in their propaganda videos. But I also think there is a different element of the visuals and that's the sort of leader boards that are associated with gamification. I think providing people with a visible measure of their progress, let's say of how many points they have or in the right-wing culture, how many people they shot and if they would shoot 15 where would they be on the scoreboard, it adds an element of certainty for people as to what to do.

Nick: I mean I think mainly the key point I'd make I guess is that clearly we live in a world, don't we, where increasingly people are talking about it being a visual world in the context of all of that and it relates I guess to the sort of the interrelationships, the intertextual associations to use the sort of jargon I guess that I was making in the broader point about the usage of video games from reshaping US military strategy and recruitment terms. I mean it's hardly a surprise I guess given that we live in a world of the rapid distribution and circulation of images, that images would be so profound. I mean, one of the things just on images of course that comes out of all of this is of course as you produce images that what we do know is that human beings are now suffering from what we call compassion fatigue. We suffer from violence fatigue, so we've seen it all before so to speak. And one of the issues there, of course when you're trying to produce evermore arresting or engaging images is how, if at all, you continue to engage an audience when they've “seen it all before”. And that's of course, you know, a challenge which confronts every group, whether they be a humanitarian organization trying to raise money for disaster relief right across to a group or using in much more kind of ethically and morally problematic fashion. But it's this, it's a kind of very much for me and manifestations as a kind of visualization of world politics. To put it in kind of crude or simplistic terms I guess.

Flora: So just picking up on what you both said about the importance of visual culture and also Linda with leaderboards and scoring. So we've seen this also in obviously in far-right terrorist attacks, both with Christchurch and Halle, another trend that emerged out of this was the live streaming of attacks and with analysts pointing out the importance or the resemblance of this live streaming trend with first person shooter games. And then the live stream is being shared thereafter on gaming platforms. Obviously we know that the IS Islamic state also use this first person perspective in propaganda videos. Is this perspective an important element in the exploitation of gaming culture with gaming processes? Has this been overemphasized? What are your thoughts on this?

Linda: So I think the perspective is fairly important because it creates intimacy so watching a livestream where you know, it's real people in a real event and getting really shot, that's as intimate as you can get without being physically present. So I think taking the perspective of the shooter is a very, very important and very potentially radicalizing experience just because you create the feeling that you are sort of in his spot or in the perpetrator's spot. I think for a first person shooter games, it's the same, the immersion into the game and the identification with the avatars is higher when it's a first person
perspective than when you have a sort of strategic perspective looking at a map for example. So I do think that it's very decisive for radicalization potentially.

Nick: Yeah. I think, I think that the key isn't it, is that a third person perspective is very much me as an outsider looking on at an unfolding sequence of events. The whole issue here is of course embodiment, isn't it? I come to embody the very perspective that I come to see so clearly on that. There's an interesting paradox here. I mean with a first person shooter game, it's me controlling the controller and in theory at least, and there's a lot of research which again, we can talk about which problematizes quite a lot of these assumptions. But in, in broad terms, the general argument is that if I'm pulling the trigger and it's a first person perspective, that somehow that's more engaging and so forth. Clearly the interesting thing about a first person perspective in an experience which is slightly more disembodied insofar as it's not me controlling the action is the extent to which that may or may not be more arresting versus more off-putting, because there's something about the shocking nature of first person imagery. So in that sense of course, the kind of appeal of this stuff. This is where we moved to where whether it's, it's appealing to kind of those with predisposed to the attitudes which the person is trying to communicate or the extent to which it actually “alters people's attitudes”. Now I think that again is a really interesting set of research questions because it's, you know, for a lot of people looking at first person images and when they're not in control of them would actually put them off rather than them be found to be more arresting. So it's a very difficult balancing act. But this is it. This issue of embodiment is crucial. But I think the question, you're absolutely right there's a very deliberate set of frames in which the images that are produced in the video are deliberately trying to rearticulate and learn from what is being produced within first person video games. That's clear and you can see the parallels really strikingly actually

Maygane: To move on to a slightly different angle, perhaps, Nick, your research also focuses on the central role of “interactive gameplay”. How does interactivity play out in the context of terrorist/violent extremist exploitation of games?

Nick: Right, well, the interactivity obviously plays in different sorts of ways. I mean, I think as you know, as we've been talking about at a very broad level, interactivity through gamification stuff. Obviously games themselves are interactive objects now in the context broadly speaking of a terrorist relationship to a game, then obviously interactivity can play in different ways. Either player can be, if you like shooting terrorists, which is often the situation in the mainstream, Call of Duty style battlefield, whatever you want to call it. Or I can of course be perpetrating the terrorist atrocities as a terrorist. Now obviously from the perspective of the normal discussion here, we're talking about a game in which the player is cast as a terrorist who's then shooting the “enemy” of the terrorist, which is often, you know, an ethnic minority group or so forth. Now the interesting question here about interactivity is the limited possibility space to use a phrase by Ian Bogost that many of these games promote. So in other words, the average “terrorist game” involves the player basically just shooting and destroying and killing lots and lots of people. Now one interesting question that I think is worth considering is how effective that then proves to be actually to the interests of a group that might be trying to communicate a slightly more nuanced set of messages to a potential audience. So in other words, if I experienced the game and all I get to do is to
shoot, kill and destroy people, then that may actually serve again to undermine some of my strategic interest. If actually I’m trying to make the point, for example, that my organization is about building a new society or is building a particular set of social practices and political interactions.

Nick: Now, in other words, the point about video gaming and interactivity and whilst I’m not for a minute trying to suggest ways that terrorists might make better games. But it would seem to me that one of the interesting things here is how limited they are in terms of how they thought about how to use interactivity insofar as they all are relying on this very particular set of practices and processes in and around shooting and destroying not least this, you know, as organizations like IS are trying to communicate, they’re not just about killing, right? They’re also about trying to build “different” sorts of societies. Now that for me is a really interesting thing because actually video gaming offers much more scope for interactivity than as hitherto anyway, be utilized by these groups. And I say all of that, you know, very aware that it raises all kinds of other ethical questions about whether or not that’s “giving advice” as to how to make better games so to speak, which is obviously, you know, that itself quite a fraught set of questions.

Linda: I think one of the main factors that I would add to that is the sort of moral disengagement. Bandura says that you can sort of selectively deactivate your moral compass. And that can be aided by a certain set of frames like euphemistic labeling, calling it “to neutralize someone” not “to kill someone”, whereas a sort of sanitized display of violence. And I think some games might nudge the players into a sort of practicing moral disengagement because actually a lot of first person shooter games are based exactly on the moral disengagement factors that Bandura details. Like setting the stage in such a way that your enemy has perpetrated horrible crimes and what you’re doing as retaliatory violence is sort of very diminished in comparison with that. And I think in that way you get players to sort of rehearse aggressive cognitive scripts and sort of cognitively simulate the violence that then could possibly lead to habituation effect or sort of not viewing real world violence as terrible as they made without that exposure.

Nick: Yeah, I mean, can I just come back on that, I mean, again, this might be somewhere, Linda, you and I may come at this from a slightly different perspective. I don’t know. I mean one of the things you know about this conversation about violence and about players is that a lot of the research that’s been done so far is what’s termed an active media approach, broadly speaking, comes out of the position of psychology and it does, in my judgment anyway, work on the assumption that players are somehow kind of affected by exposure to violent content. And again, there are huge ethical questions here about how you do this kind of research. But one of the kind of positions that somebody like Miguel Sicart takes in his book, The Ethics of Video Games is actually that players themselves are, in his perspective anyway, hugely reflexive, right. In other words, when they play games, they are very aware that this is a video game and not reality. They themselves play games. They do often seek pleasure and violence, but that violence has got no relationship to real world violence. But this of course is where it gets a very complicated set of questions because what he also says, and I think this is the key point in a lot of ways is that that ethics is going to be experienced or engaged with very differently depending on who that person is. So, you know, there are going to be people who are less reflexive, more susceptible and particularly those who are younger and or
more impressionable. So it's a really complicated set of ethical questions. But I suppose my final observation would be we don't, we still haven't done enough research on the direct relationship between content in this area and users of that content. And again, you know, it's an ethical, ethical minefield. Like you put, you know, you don't, are you going to get citizens to start playing terrorists games? I mean, clearly that's complicated set of ethical questions. But in the absence of it, I think it's always worth problematizing at least, or at least thinking through about the reflexivity that that large numbers of players do have not least because you know, millions and millions and millions of people are playing “violent games” and apparently are not being affected by them.

Linda: Yeah, I absolutely agree. I think it's sort of in terms of radicalization, it's the age old puzzle of why people, some people radicalized and then others exposed to similar circumstances or a similar frame, similar propaganda are not radicalized. And I think you're raising a very important point that you cannot really, yet maybe, make a causal link between violent games and violent behavior, much less terrorist behavior. So it would definitely be wrong to sort of blame games or blame gaming culture and work in that direction rather than finding out who is most susceptible to these kinds of images or frames.

Flora: Yeah, I mean, thinking about susceptibility then. Nick, I know that your recent research has focused a lot on how games aren't so much of a recruitment tool, but more as a way to reinforce or normalize beliefs for those already in the know, so to speak. I mean, perhaps you could give us a couple of lines about this area of research and how that fits into exactly what you've just been saying.

Nick: Yeah, I mean I think that's really important. I mean, it's also just an on this point, it's worth mentioning my of the person I'll be working closely with at the moment, if that's okay, a guy called Joe Whitaker, who's just finishing his PhD at the University of Swansea and I've worked very closely with Joe. But yeah, very much so. And what we're trying to argue I guess is that these games often are really better seen rather than as recruitment tools are better seen as forms of propaganda, which are targeted often at those who are already predisposed to or at least interested in and or informed by or off the messages of an organization. So in other words, a lot of kind of particular games are in fairly hard to reach areas of the internet and they contain, for example, particular kinds of what we often call Easter eggs or hidden little messages and stuff like that, which assume that the person playing it would have some understanding of what the group is trying to say. So what we're sort of saying is that a lot of the time people search out a game to actually express pleasures in the process of killing, for example, an ethnic minority because that is the kind of attitude they already have rather than being transformed by playing that sort of a game. And I think the question then for us is how do they step toward that place, you know, rather than assuming that the game itself is doing a lot of work, they've already got these predisposed attitudes, search these things out in the first place. That's what kind of, where we're coming at this from.

Maygane: Far-right and Islamist extremism spheres tend to learn from each other when it comes to new technologies, what are the similarities and differences in this case?
Linda: As we already discussed, there is a bit of a difference in ideological approach to gamification and games. That's not to say that Islamist forums aren't gamified and that we will not see a gamified app, for example, in the future published by a jihadist organization. But I think there's a bit of an ambivalent relationship to games, possibly maybe the right wing culture of sort of keeping scoreboards for different types of attacks. Like the Encyclopedia Dramatica did, this sort of alt-right Wikipedia page kept the high score lists before they were taken down with Breivik leading it. Of course, and I haven't come across this sort of a leaderboard for martyrs jihadist martyr organisations. I think it might be that there's a more egalitarian approach, let's say, not so much comparison between different perpetrators of who shot more or sort of beating his score, the famous line on 8chan, that the Christchurch perpetrator posted, but maybe more sort of every single person that you kill counts rather than as a competition between killing. But I do think that there are copycat text within right-wing extremism the right wing extremist new you let's say. And it's not unfeasible to think that at some point there will be a live stream of a jihadist attack. In the West for example, just because it has been “so successful” in gaining attention in Western media. And I doubt that the jihadist extremist organizations will not try to play on that and use that to their ends.

Nick: Well, I was actually gonna, I think what Linda said was really, really interesting to me. I was gonna make a slightly different point actually, which sort of builds around in a slightly different way on what she was saying was that what are the things that I think is really striking, similar yet different for me is the relationship that these groups and their messages, how they resonate if you like, with broader socio-cultural developments within gaming. Now what I mean by that is, and this, this is again a slightly controversial point in some senses I guess, but David Leonard for example, who's a leading academic who's written a lot on game studies more broadly, he's written and he's going back now for several decades really. He's been writing extensively about how particular kinds of games normalize messages, mainstream games. He's interested in normalized messages that might actually resonate with extremist groups.

Now he started his analysis with the Grand Theft Auto series and what he said was that why would you bother to make a game as a right wing extremist group and this was, this was these, he was quoting people from things like Storefront. When GTA San Andreas says everything that we want to say more effectively than we ever could. Now, one of the things that I think is worth considering through that is how now we can contest and argue about the messages within the mainstream games. Again, to a large degree, but it's worth just thinking a little bit about what might stem from that. If you're a right wing group, for example, and historically at least your broad brush view has been to, you know, to produce games in which you are killing people of the Islamic faith. And there are thousands of games out there, hundreds of games out that allow you to do that, why would you bother to make a game? For the Islamist groups the difference is obviously extremely striking because of course there are very few Western made mainstream games that allow you to play the role of an Islamist or Islamist supporting individual. And so in other words, that's something I think to think about and the reason I think that isn't a trivial observation is for two recent events or relatively recent events. You know, in academia or anything in the last 10 years is recent of course, but for
normal people it's less recent. But the controversy in and around the game Medal of Honor was quite an interesting thing to think through, which is this was a game set in the early periods of the Afghan war. The multiplayer component originally at least was to allow you to play as both sides of the conflict. So you could fight, in other words as the Afghan “resistors” immediately the developer gets caught up in a thing and they take away that option from the game, you get to play as op force or opposing force. Now, in other words, the politics of allowing you to shoot a Western soldier in an online element was deemed to be politically unpalatable. So that's just, I think is a really important difference here. And what's been really striking here is how right wing groups have similarly responded or reacted to the prospect of killing fascists. So, for example, the game Wolfenstein, the new colossal where you shoot, you know, fascists in a kind of fantasy setting as sort of zombie fascist, zombie Nazis. A number of right wing groups in America responded to that and said that was politically unacceptable. And indeed the recent game Far Cry Five has been caught up in a controversy where again, right when groups in the US have said it's unacceptable for a game in which you get to shoot fanatical right wing people in a kind of contemporary game. So the point of that sort of potentially slightly long comment really was just to make the observation that is for me, what is interesting about this is the way in which these particular games sit with a milieu if you like, of a massive number of commercially made games, which are often engaging with similar kinds of themes and topics, which is again, really important to kind of contextualize because it comes back to the point that why bother to make a game if somebody else is saying what you want to be said for you. And I think that's sometimes, sometimes we kind of forget about it because we don't focus on the whole story, so to speak.

Flora: Absolutely. I think that's a really helpful distinction to make Nick so thank you. You know, thinking about what “mainstream resources” are out there for these groups and their supporting networks already, but at Tech Against Terrorism, we support the global tech sector in helping them build capacity to tackle terrorist exploitation. So a lot of this is working with smaller platforms often across different types of technologies. And we are increasingly of course working with gaming platforms as well. So I was wondering if either of you could give any perspective on this, so gaming culture obviously evolves partly in his own online environment with dedicated gaming platforms. Could you tell us a little bit about how these platforms are exploited by terrorist, violent extremists and their supporting networks?

Speaker 3: So for example the gaming platform Discord hosts a lot of private chats that can be attributed to right wing extremists groups and they have really let's say graphic names like oven baked jews or reich lord or something like that. So very easily identifiable that this is probably not something to chat about your dogs, but very different type of group. So I would say if it's sort of this obvious, it should be a rather easy fix to take a look at these groups more closely and to check what's going on there. Of course with everything online it's the problem of where's the server and which company are we talking about? How are the freedom of speech rights in the country in question but I think if there are things that are this obvious it should hopefully be possible to detect these groups and then potentially shut them down if the legal system allows.
Flora: Exactly. And of course there are different manifestations for how these gaming platforms can enable playing, so obviously you have the VoIP as with Discord and then you have these distributed servers. But then also just being able to actually build your whole gaming environment from scratch. I know there are some particularly prominent platforms and that goes to have a very young user base. I think, you know, something like 9 to 13 year olds. So, which is obviously a particular area of worry. So. Yeah, absolutely and thank you Nick, was there anything you wanted to add to that?

Nick: I mean, I guess that clearly one thing on online interactivity is obviously hellishly difficult to police. I mean, even basic things like, like, you know, Microsoft Xbox live, you know, people are swearing at each other and Microsoft, I've never wanted to get involved in listening in and, or moderating behaviors. Textual chat I think as Linda rightly said it's easier to identify particular kinds of practices. I suppose that the one thing that, that the gaming industry more generally I suppose could start to talk more actively about is what they feel about mods. Now. Clearly the DNA of the PC community is very different here to the console landscape. So in other words, if you produce modifications so if you were to for example, produce a paint job for a car, you know, in a prominent driving game for example on Xbox or PlayStation, the light that you could adapt that is almost certainly going to get pulled, right?

I mean, you know, Microsoft, Sony etc. keep a very, very, very tight set of reins on those, on that sort of content and they just haul it off. Obviously the PC community is much, much more free form. It's had a much more kind of flexible set of practices. And one of the questions, I guess that they themselves right across the piece here, it seems to me you would have to ask themselves is what they want to do about that because obviously the PC community has been very adept at using the labor of gamers historically not least to recruit people for the future. Organizations like Val for example, have historically recruited a lot of their developers straight out of modifications that were made to their games like counter strike, this sort of stuff. This is a very common thing. So, you know, freedom, giving the code away, letting people modify the game, produce them what they want to produce.

Sometimes on private servers, other times on more public servers. That is where I think it gets really ethically problematic. But obviously for you know, a smaller text, not at the size of the files is obviously going to be instructive in and of itself, right? If it's a mod or something like that, it's going to be reasonably sizeable. But I mean even on steam you can go on and download mods and so forth that for a number of people would find ethically problematic. You know, they're allowing you to play conflicts from different perspectives. That for a lot of people is ethically going too far already. So I think the first question probably is about how much tools are you willing to let, from my perspective anyway, the lay public have access to because almost all the games that I've talked about at least initially, certainly the right wing extremist games are modifications to existing games and, or utilize off the shelf technologies to produce something and then distribute it. And that might be an interesting set of ethical questions about whether the games industry needs to do more. I mean I guess the flip side would be would you tell a guitar manufacturer that they are responsible for the songs that somebody sings and writes and plays with a guitar and the general view so far of the games industry has
been that where like a game, you know like a guitar maker, we're not like a broadcaster and that I guess is the really interesting ethical moral question here for me anyway.

Flora: Yeah, absolutely. It's the million dollar question in a lot of ways and and really is the basis for the majority of the work that we do, how we can actually regard these technology platforms and what role they should or shouldn't be playing. What should listeners really take away from this?

Nick: There still remains in my view, a general tendency to see the relationship between games and gamification and the users of those games, you know, in a kind of critically reflexive fashion. So that we still seem to me at least often to assume much more so I guess in the public conversation than potentially in an academic one. But there's still a lot of academics guilty of this, this idea that somehow a user, experience a game and we will be radicalized by that artifact. And I think what I suppose my takeaway would be is that, you know, you'll be unsurprised to say that I'm going to say this as an academic, but we do feel as though certainly the research that I've been doing with my colleague Joe Whitaker is that that to see these things much more as systems of propaganda is actually more constructive. In other words, that games, particularly the actual artifact of a game are much, much more likely to be engaged with by those who are already predisposed to the attitudes of an organization. Now clearly memes, other forms of visual iconography that we were talking about earlier. Videos and stuff like this which utilize intersectionality understanding from games and gamification are more likely to operate in a more generalized way. But I think it's important to distinguish between something like a game which involves the player undertaking particular actions as a representative of a terrorist organization in often different kinds of ways. That I guess would be my final, my sort of overwhelming thought, but obviously watch this space, right, what we do know is that organizations are using games for active forms of recruitment. They haven't been certainly in the violent extremist realm around me in my view for a while, but you know it is, it is a trend being used by other actors with certain degrees of success.

So it is something that we need to be highly vigilant of not least because of course games are very, very attractive for a lot of impressionable people who are often young. And that is for me, one of the biggest concerns I have about the video gaming industry more generally is that I would suggest that it doesn't do enough to think seriously about the content that they know is getting into the hands of those who are under age. And that is, you know, remains an ongoing concern to me that we know a lot of kids playing games are under 18 and clearly, you know, they would be more impressionable. Similarly there is a danger here where this kind of content could get into those, you know, more impressionable hands, which is obviously more deeply worrying.

Flora: Linda, is there anything you'd like to add?

Linda: So I would agree that for games per se, it's very difficult to establish a causal relationship between the violent content and the violent action. I do think that as Nick said, for gamification it might be a different issue not causally but saying how far it can be utilized by extremist organizations. I mean writing about music Pieslack writes, “when attempting to draw people to radical ideology, do not lead with the ideology if you can
find a more attractive garment in which to dress the message”. And I think gamification provides this sort of government because in this psychological process of sort of keeping people engaged by “Oh, just one more point” or “Oh I feel I feel better about myself because I reached this level” or “It's super interesting, it's more fun” et cetera. So I think in terms of transferring ideology or presenting themselves extremist organizations are probably going to find out that gamification is a very effective way to do it. And probably have already found out as we have discussed. So I think that as Nick said, watch this space. I'm fairly certain that in terms of gamification, we will hear more about that in terms of radicalization and extremist organizations.

Maygane: Thank you very much, that was Linda Schlegel and Nick Robinson discussing how terrorists and violent extremists are exploiting the gaming culture to serve their own purposes. We'll be back soon with another episode. In the meantime, find us on Twitter at @techvsterrorism.

Flora: You can hear a previous podcasts at techagainstterrorism.fm and read more about our work on our website at www.techagainstterrorism.org where you can also find out how you can sign up to our newsletter. See you next time.

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