

Recruited while gaming?

A study on extremist and terrorist recruitment processes on gaming (related) platforms

Summary in English

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Colophon

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Summary

Background and research questions

In recent years, the videogame industry has become one of the largest entertainment industries in the world. Children and young people in particular are active on gaming (related) platforms. In the Netherlands alone, it is estimated that two million children are active on the gaming platform Roblox. Aside from the positive aspects that gaming entails, such as entertainment and relaxation, the medium is increasingly associated with negative developments. One of which is recruitment for extremist and terrorist purposes. Attention is drawn to this by both Dutch media and government agencies. Also internationally awareness is growing that gaming (related) platforms are sometimes used for extremist and terrorist purposes, including the dissemination of extremist content and recruitment. To date, however, there is still little empirical research into this phenomenon.

Present research aims to gain insight into the mechanisms of recruitment for extremist and terrorist purposes on gaming (related) platforms, what role the gaming (related) platforms have, and which action perspectives can be used to prevent recruitment. In this research, we focus on the recruitment process specifically and not on any outcomes of that process (e.g., disseminating extremist propaganda or committing a terrorist attack). Therefore, we cannot make statements on the physical impact and safety implications recruitment for extremist and terrorist purposes might have. By recruitment we mean the process by which an individual, in this case online, is encouraged to join a group, organisation or movement. Gaming platforms are online environments where you can play games, such as Roblox and Minecraft. Related platforms, which are primarily focused on the gaming community, are considered gaming related platforms. These are used, for example, to communicate during gaming (Discord), to buy games (Steam and Epic Game Store) or to discuss games (4Chan and 8Chan). This research is based on models that describe the characteristics and functionalities of the online world, and social media in particular, and how these align with the users' world.

The study focused on the following overarching research questions:

1. In what ways does recruitment for extremist and terrorist purposes take place on gaming (related) platforms?
2. What role do gaming (related) platforms have in recruitment for extremist and terrorist purposes and how can these platforms prevent and/or stop this?
3. What are action perspectives for the government and other actors toward gaming (related) platforms and gamers as to prevent recruitment?

Methods

Five sub studies were conducted to answer the research questions. We started with an exploratory literature review. To this end, literature was collected on recruitment for extremism and terrorism on gaming (related) platforms and relevant related themes. Subsequently, based on initial insights from the literature, interviews were conducted with professionals who have insight into extremism and terrorism and/or the online environment as part of their occupation. A total of seventeen professionals participated, namely employees of the Public Prosecution Service, an intelligence service, the police, a supervisory body on online content, youth workers and other employees of youth work organisations, a representative of the video game industry and employees of gaming

(related) platforms. The semi-structured interviews were coded and analysed using the ATLAS-ti program.

In addition to the literature study and interviews, focus groups were organised on secondary schools with youngsters. Respondents were gathered through a convenience sample - an easily accessible sample. Five group conversations were held with a total of eighteen students. Discussions took place on the topic of extremism and terrorism on gaming (related) platforms and their experiences with recruitment via gaming (related) platforms. Afterwards, the conversations were transcribed and analysed using the ATLAS-ti program. As a fourth sub study, an exploratory qualitative content analysis was performed on the platforms Discord, TikTok (where links to Discord servers are shared) and Steam. Six servers were identified on Discord, of which three where users regularly shared extremist content and three where this happened sporadic. We also searched for invitations to join extremist (chat) groups on Steam. Finally, an expert meeting was organized with professionals and scientists to discuss our initial findings and refine our recommendations.

Results

Recruitment

First and foremost, it is important to mention that, based on the results of the focus groups and content analysis, we found no indication that recruitment on gaming (related) platforms is common. An important caveat is that we base this observation on exploratory research. Hence, we cannot make any firm statements about this. In addition, the question arises to what extent gamers, especially young gamers, recognize recruitment attempts and whether they dare to be honest about this in a group discussion.

Attractiveness of gaming environments: a unique online environment

In the sub studies, several features and mechanisms were identified that can be used to facilitate recruitment: accessibility and scope, anonymity in online contact, a lack of effective moderation, games as an educational tool, adaptability of games, games as a shared activity and the existence of toxic game cultures. Some of these features are inherent to gaming environments and cannot be changed. However, a reduction of the feeling of anonymity online, better moderation, a reduction of the adaptability of games and less toxic gaming cultures could contribute to a climate where gamers are less receptive to extremist messages and possible recruitment.

Overlap exists between these features and those from theoretical models concerning the online world in general. Functionalities such as anonymity and communication for example are prominent in these models as well as on gaming (related) platforms. The differences are that games can be used as an educational tool, that they are adaptable, that they entail a playful activity, and that toxic gaming cultures exist in gaming spaces. This makes the gaming environment unique. These unique features can make gaming (related) platforms enticing because they can facilitate recruitment. For example, by the use of humour, gamification or playful elements such as competition and reputation. This applies in particular to gaming platforms and to a lesser degree to gaming related platforms.

Mechanisms of recruitment: a step-by-step process

The recruitment process is complex and can take place in many different ways. A simplified version of the process, as emerged from the literature and interviews with professionals, consists of the

following steps: 1) making contact, 2) identifying if someone is susceptible, 3) switching to another platform and/or a private online environment, where people are freer in sharing extremist content and statements. It is important to note that gaming platforms can serve as a starting point in coming into contact with possible recruits. However, subsequent steps within the recruitment process usually do not take place on gaming platforms. The playful environment on gaming platforms provides a context where it is normal to meet strangers. Also, given the content or storyline of many games (for example, reenacting conflicts), they are more suited for bringing up certain extreme topics. Recruitment subsequently takes place in an environment where private groups can be created, or content moderation is lacking. This can be a gaming related platform, but also a social media platform. Switching between online platforms is an important part of the recruitment process.

Ways of recruitment: strategic and organic, own initiative or not

Our analysis shows that there are different ways that recruitment can take shape; the initiative can be with the recruiter or the recruit, and there may be intent or not. The latter point is based on the idea that recruitment can happen organically, without preconceived intent, or strategically, with preconceived intent. There is discussion in the literature about this distinction and based on our findings we can conclude that both ways occur, but that intentions are difficult to ascertain. Consequently, it remains unclear to what extent strategic recruitment takes place. The most probable scenario involves a combination of the two forms. Furthermore, based on our research, we see that the initiative can also be with the recruit who is actively looking for connections to an extremist group. This is an important nuance to the image around recruitment for extremist and terrorist purposes on gaming (related) platforms. Our research shows that gamers who find certain ideas interesting can find each other and can actively join extremist groups. This contrasts with the image in some media coverage that recruitment is initiated by members of an extremist group/organisation. Importantly, however, it remains unclear to what extent people who seek out these groups have been contacted and/or invited before to partake in an extremist group.

Gamification can play a role

Gamification, or the use of game-elements (such as game-jargon) for goals outside of a game-setting, can play a role in the recruitment process. Gamification can make extremist content more attractive and lower the threshold because a gamer is already familiar with parts of the material which makes the extremist part feel less intense or extreme. Both the literature and interviews show that extremist propaganda contains many references to games. An example of this is changing images of game characters on the cover of the game Grand Theft Auto V to images of known extremists or terrorists.

Vulnerability factors: loneliness and a lack of connection, among others

Vulnerability factors specific to recruitment on gaming (related) platforms have not yet been examined. Conversations with the interviewed professionals reveal that, in particular, loneliness, mental health problems and a difficult home environment can play a role. Moreover, gaming environments can be pleasant spaces for people who lack social connection in the offline world. In games, you are less likely to be judged on your social skills and more on game-specific skills and knowledge. In addition, the professionals emphasize that young people are a vulnerable demographic, because they can be influenced more easily, they find it more difficult to critically assess information and are easy to find online. From the literature and interviews, the picture emerges that recruiters mainly target youth and vulnerable persons, and that the latter are more likely to seek out extremist groups themselves. Overlap exists between these groups; young people who feel lonely or have mental health problems that turn out to be susceptible to recruitment by others or self-recruitment. More research is needed to find out if vulnerability factors specific to gaming (related) platforms exist.

Comparative research: similarities and differences with other contexts of recruitment

Many of the features and mechanisms we found are consistent with recruitment in the offline world and recruitment for various types of crime. In comparison to recruitment for sexual assault, the recruiter benefits for instance in both cases from social vulnerabilities of the individual and environments with a lack of supervision. Also, according to some interviewed professionals, the target group for other types of crime largely overlaps with the group that is being recruited for extremist and terrorist purposes. Furthermore, the recruitment process on gaming (related) platforms corresponds in broad terms with the process on social media and other online platforms. The professionals stress that recruitment for extremism and terrorism on these platforms is closely linked. A difference can be seen in the playful climate and the interactivity that exist on gaming (related) platforms, and in having other types of communication options (i.e., voice chat). Finally, our literature study shows that little comparative research has been conducted so far.

Action perspectives gaming (related) platforms

An active role for the gaming industry: measures and points for improvement

The exploratory literature study, interviews and focus groups show that gaming (related) platforms are already taking measures to prevent unwanted and harmful behaviour. Examples are (human) content moderation, warning and banning users, and handling reports. However, these measures are not yet sufficient in terms of effectiveness. The following possibilities for improvement emerge from our research: I) train gaming industry employees to recognise extremism and terrorism, II) apply safety-by-design by default, limiting possibilities for risk of harm and exploitation by making certain design-choices, III) more education, for instance on parental controls, IV) increase the resilience of gamers, V) improve content moderation, for example by following up on reports and by expanding monitoring efforts, and finally VI) more collaboration in combating unwanted behaviour, between companies as well as with other parties. As the present problem is cross-platform, an effective approach must be as well. Meaning, an effective approach forms through intensive collaboration between (gaming) companies and establishing boundaries against unwanted behaviour. This way, companies do not have to develop tools separately from each other. Moreover, you prevent the problem from moving from one platform to another platform without it being dealt with.

Given the lack of effective moderation, collaboration between companies, education for gamers and parents/guardians, and training for employees, the industry needs to take a more active role to improve these areas.

More research necessary for an effective approach

To formulate an effective approach, more knowledge on the effectiveness of measures such as (temporarily) banning users and the use of videogames as a prevention measure is required. Research into these topics seems positive regarding its possibilities but is still in its early stages.

Action perspectives government and other parties

Clarifying responsibility

The government and other semi-state actors have the task of clarifying which actor has what responsibility. From the interviews emerged that existing laws and regulations provide enough starting points for enforcement, but that enforcement is currently insufficiently effective. An effective approach can frustrate recruiters and make them move to less mainstream platforms. This does not mean that the problem is solved, but their reach is drastically reduced. An expulsion of these users to

non-mainstream platforms can be a first step. Subsequently, an extension of the measures to non-mainstream platforms can force recruiters to the darkweb, where they have even less reach.

Increase awareness and resilience

Furthermore, the government and other parties, such as parents, schools and youth workers, can focus on creating awareness and developing resilience among vulnerable target groups. When developing measures, it is useful to continue to look at developments in other areas, such as online recruitment for sexual assault and organised violence. Additions to the policy framework 'Versterkte Aanpak Online' (VAO) could be to improve communications between (semi-)state actors such as schools, municipalities and the government, and invest in resilience among youth. For example, by asking young people to give each other advice on online (gaming) environments.

An important finding is that it is impossible to eliminate extremist and terrorist content completely, making the approach to prevent recruitment particularly difficult. On the one hand this relates to a lack of capacity, within the gaming industry, as well as in civil society organisations and the government. On the other hand, borderline content – material that is legal yet harmful – complicates the implementation of policies that will not clash with the freedom of speech. Another important finding is that many gamers are young children and youths. This combination – the continued existence of extremist and terrorist content and that children are exposed to it – means that greater emphasis should be placed on awareness and resilience among these target groups.

Limitations

Based on our findings, we make recommendations for the government and other actors, for gaming (related) platforms, and for science. Before presenting these recommendations, we discuss the most important limitations of the research. Firstly, we spoke to professionals who have varying degrees of knowledge about, and insight into, the topic. Furthermore, we have not interviewed (former) recruiters and (former) recruited people. Secondly, the respondents for the focus groups were selected with a convenience sample, due to the short duration of the project. Our focus was limited to secondary school students, rather than also including pupils from primary schools and students from higher education. Furthermore, the content analysis was limited to gaming related platforms and only visual communication and communication via written chat were observed. The voice chat was not included. Moreover, in light of ethical concerns, we only observed communication in public groups. The choices that led to these limitations are largely linked to the fact that we adopted an exploratory approach. Therefore, the findings and conclusions should be regarded as first insights that require further exploration in future research.

Recommendations for government and other parties

It is essential to clarify and specify who has which responsibility in countering extremism and terrorism on gaming (related) platforms, including recruitment. Associated with this, more cooperation between various parties is needed to ensure effective policies, with public-private partnerships being of particular importance. A way to implement this, is by establishing a working group of diverse participants, such as youths, researchers, game developers and government agencies in order to better shape cooperation between the various parties and to make responsibilities concrete. Furthermore, it is necessary to enforce existing laws and regulations better. A practical

implementation is training professionals on enforcement possibilities in game environments and increasing the capacity of some authorities concerned with this task.

Additionally, more awareness about recruitment processes and, broader, radicalisation processes on gaming (related) platforms should be created among those involved, such as parents, schools, government agencies, and youth work organisations. During the interviews and expert meeting, suggestions and ideas were put forward. For instance, involving children and youths in awareness campaigns, exploring the deployment of young influencers, and giving parents/guardians more information on the online (gaming) environment. Communication between these parties, which form the network around young people, needs to improve. A concrete measure is to invest more in online youth work that focusses specifically on gaming (related) platforms. Moreover, what stood out in our research is the necessity of boosting children's resilience. Certain content and unwanted behaviour are impossible to eliminate completely, but how to deal with this content and behaviour yourself can be learned which increases resilience. According to the input from several respondents from the different sub studies, resilience training must match with the online world of young people. Youths can educate each other and give advice. The education needs to focus on online problems youths can encounter and not on how the online environment works exactly, as that environment is subject to change.

Recommendations for the gaming industry

Gaming (related) platforms have measures in place to ban extremist content and users. Based on our research, we conclude that there are opportunities for improvement, to more effectively stop or prevent recruitment, and more broadly radicalisation, processes. Central to this effort is focusing on a more effective moderation system. Concrete implementations can be to enforce community guidelines more strictly, handling reports better/quicker, more monitoring (for example by using dynamic hash-lists), frustrating extremist users and warding off recidivists. To achieve this, more investment is needed in capacity and regional/language-specific knowledge. Additionally, it is important to mitigate risks and possibilities of exploitation through the design of a gaming (related) platform. Options in this context could be to make it harder to switch between platforms, for example by removing the ability to send links. Also, it is recommended to apply safety-by-design when developing games and associated products and involve extremism experts in this process.

Further, according to professionals, it is useful to educate parents/guardians. For example, on PEGI – a video game content rating system – and on the possibilities for parental control on gaming (related) platforms. Lastly, more collaboration between companies and with law enforcement agencies is important. This could take the shape of sharing tools and resources to improve moderation. Affiliated to this, and of comparable importance, is training employees in the gaming industry in recognising extremism and terrorism on gaming platforms.

Recommendations for science

The current study started from the notion that this area of research is still in development. Recruitment on gaming (related) platforms has been little researched and most often unclearly defined. Our contribution is exploratory in nature and more research is desirable. For instance, by conducting interviews with (former) recruiters and (former) recruits, by carrying out more quantitative and comparison studies, by using innovative methods, and by focusing on young gamers.

Such research is necessary to better understand the topic, which can contribute to a more effective approach.

Finally

Nowadays, gaming is a normal way to pass the time and has many positive aspects. Gamers who play online multiplayer games encounter strangers. Thus, they are at risk of coming into contact with undesirable content and behaviour, including extremist content and possibly forms of recruitment. Our research shows that the latter, recruitment, occurs to a limited extent. However, it is unclear whether attempts are scarce or simply go unnoticed. By facilitating competition and playfulness, games and gaming environments are ideal spaces for sharing extremist content or making such statements without standing out. Therefore, determining whether certain content or statements are shared with the goal and intent to recruit is complex. However, it does appear to contribute to the normalisation of this type of content, making content increasingly more extreme. Especially for children and youths, who are still fully engaged in identity development, it would therefore be beneficial to learn more in a structured way about the positive and negative aspects of gaming environments and, more broadly, the online world.

Although children can learn more in this respect, our sub studies also reveal that some children and youths possess significant knowledge and skills regarding online resilience. These insights can be utilized in a better way by stimulating communication on this topic among peers. The immediate environment of children and youths also has a role to play by staying informed and maintaining an open dialogue with young people regarding their online activities. Furthermore, gaming (related) platforms will need to focus on better content moderation and a safe game design. Additionally, it is recommended that the involved parties gain more clarity regarding responsibilities, and that there should be a focus on raising awareness. Finally, combating recruitment on gaming (related) platforms requires closer collaboration between public and private parties, in which the use of multidisciplinary insights – especially those of young people – must play a central role.



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