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Book Review: Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds Edited by Linda Schlegel and Rachel Kowert

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Abstract
This article reviews Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds (2024), edited by Linda Schlegel and Rachel Kowert. Gaming and Extremism (2024) presents the current state of the literature on the nexus between videogames, gaming spaces, and extremism.

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Review

Gaming and Extremism, edited by Linda Schlegel and Rachel Kowert (2024), provides an introduction to the current research on the intersections between videogames and extremism that is accessible to a wide audience. In 2024, the total number of video game users globally reached 2.58 billion people (Statista, 2024). For many of these players, gaming offers prosocial benefits (Lamphere-Englund 2024, p. 32). Furthermore, in 2020, the American Psychological Association found that there was "insufficient scientific evidence to support a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior" (American Psychological Association, 2020 found in Amarasingam and Kelley, 2024 p. 112). Schlegel and Kowert (2024, p. 203) also emphasize that "[i]t is of the utmost importance to remember that gaming in and of itself is neither the sole cause nor the driver of radicalization." Bearing these caveats in mind, this book organizes and consolidates the previously disparate literature on how

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extremists abuse gaming and gaming spaces to facilitate propaganda development and dissemination, gamification, radicalization, and mobilization; and how these activities vary by extremist ideology. Key events and attacks analyzed by various chapters include: the 2017 Unite the Right Rally (Davey, 2024, p. 96); the 2019 attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, Poway, USA, El Paso, USA, Bærum, Norway, and Halle, Germany; the 2020 attack in Hanau, Germany (Lamphere-Englund, 2024, p. 47); the 2021 U.S. Capitol riot and insurrection (Lamphere-Englund, 2024, p. 38; Davey, 2024, p. 97); the 2022 attacks in Buffalo, USA and Bratislava, Slovakia (Lamphere-Englund, 2024, p. 47); and the 2023 arrests of two youths in Singapore for planning attacks (Steinkuehler and Squire, 2024, p. 9). The authors also discuss efforts to counter the abuse of games and gaming spaces and present directions for future research (Schlegel and Kowert, 2024). The overarching argument of the book is that there is an emerging body of knowledge on extremism and gaming, which can help inform policy responses. However, more empirical and rigorous work is needed in this area and further countermeasures and preventative efforts are necessary. This review first describes the progression of extremist use of Internet technologies as presented in *Gaming and Extremism*, then precedes through the chapters sequentially, and concludes with a discussion of the contribution of the book to existing literatures and a critique regarding the limited attention paid to what is currently going well in gaming spaces.

Extremists tend to be on the forefront of adopting new technologies, creating challenges for existing policy. In Chapter 4, Alex Newhouse and Rachel Kowert discuss a history of extremist online networks starting in 1984 with the Aryan Nations Liberty Net (Lowe, 1985) and progressing through the early use of the Internet in the 1990s by jihadist movements to recruit and spread propaganda. They also discuss an early instance of individuals coordinating to disrupt others' game play by collectively forming a swastika shape with their online characters in 2006 (Newhouse and Kowert, 2024, p. 74). In Chapter 8, Suraj Lakhani highlights emerging issues in potential extremist use of the metaverse and the decentralization of Web 3.0 (Lakhani, 2024, p. 159). Technology adoption and adaptation by extremists presents complex policy challenges. These are discussed in Chapter 9 by Erin

Saltman and Nagham El Karhili and in Chapter 10 by Linda Schlegel. Saltman and Karhili (2024, p. 175) also discuss how existing laws might further complicate countermeasures, such as some data-sharing and privacy regulations hindering cross-platform strategic network disruption.

Chapter 1 by Constance Steinkuehler and Kurt Squire and Chapter 2 by Galen Lamphere-Englund present a theoretical foundation for analyzing the relationships between extremism and gaming. Steinkuehler and Squire (2024, p. 11) borrow from Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 11) to define a game as a "system in which players engage in an artificial conflict defined by rules that results in a quantifiable outcome." They present gaming-adjacent platforms as an ecosystem (Steinkuehler and Squire, 2024, p. 22). This ecosystem conceptualization is shared by Lamphere-Englund (2024, p. 32), who defines gaming-adjacent platforms to include "[g]ame distribution and purchase platforms," "[l]ivestreaming sites," "[g]aming forums," and "video content" (Lamphere-Englund, 2024, p. 38). Lamphere-Englund (2024, p. 35) also draws on the work of Deterding et al. (2011) to define gamification as referring "to using elements from games repurposed in nongame settings."

In Chapter 2, Lamphere-Englund (2024, p. 40) conceptualizes violent extremism as referring "to a belief system (whether political, religious, or otherwise ideological in nature) that justifies the use of violence, especially against civilians, to achieve its aims and elevate its followers above others." To define radicalization, they use the definition provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights:

> "The notion of 'radicalization' is generally used [by some States] to convey the idea of a process through which an individual adopts an increasingly extremist set of beliefs and aspirations. This may include, but is not defined by, the willingness to condone, support, facilitate or use violence to further political, ideological, religious or other goals" (General Assembly, Human Rights Council report A/HRC/33/29, para. 19 found in Lamphere-Englund, 2024, p. 41)

Lamphere-Englund (2024, p. 42) highlights the Attitudes-Behaviors-Corrective model developed by Khalil et al. (2019) and the two-pyramids model developed by McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) as particularly useful in the context of "virtual or tech-based spaces." In discussing the use of games and gaming spaces by extremists, they distinguish between strategic and organic uses. Strategic use refers to the "deliberate exploitation of gaming surfaces" (Lamphere-Englund, 2024, p. 45–46). In contrast, organic use refers to using gaming spaces to socialize and find community. When engaging with these communities, some individuals experience identity fusion, "a deep, visceral sense of alignment with an abstracting such as a group, cause, or other people" (Kowert et al., 2022, p. 1), which may contribute to radicalization.

Most chapter authors also offer definitions of key terms used in their analysis, allowing each chapter to stand alone. Some of these definitions differ from the theories presented in Chapters 1 and 2. For example, Newhouse and Kowert (2024), in Chapter 4, use the definition of extremism provided by Berger (2018, p. 38) as "[t]he belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group." In Chapter 8, Suraj Lakhani (2024, p. 152) provides further nuance to the concept of gamification by delineating between top-down strategic gamification by extremist organizations and bottom-up organic gamification by individuals or small groups.

Chapter 3 by Mick Prinz (2024) examines the weaponization of gaming culture. They discuss both extremist modifications of existing games, and bespoke games created by extremists. Despite efforts to reach a more general audience, engagement with these games is typically limited to those already engaged with extremist ideologies. The lightly moderated gaming-adjacent ecosystem, however, offers opportunities for networking, mobilization, and influencing broader politics by spreading extremist ideologies. Prinz (2024) encourages those inside gaming communities to challenge such extremist content and those outside, often including parents, teachers, and social workers, to take advantage of the opportunities offered by gaming to promote positive effects while accounting for the pitfalls.

In Chapter 4, by Alex Newhouse and Rachel Kowert, and Chapter 5, by Jacob Davey, the authors analyze cases of extremist use of videogames and gaming adjacent platforms. Newhouse and Kowert (2024) conduct case studies of the *Roblox* and *Steam* platforms using qualitative analysis and social network analysis; as well as of the videogame *Hearts of Iron IV* using discourse analysis. Jacob Davey (2024) similarly analyzes *Steam* groups and *Discord* servers using a digital ethnographic approach relying on qualitative analysis and, in the case of *Steam*, network analysis. These analyses revealed how "far-right extremists are using games to spread hate, find like-minded individuals, plan harassment campaigns, and radicalize others" (Newhouse and Kowert, 2024, p. 91) as well as using gaming adjacent spaces "as a bridge between more popular platforms, and more explicit and egregious closed spaces" (Davey, 2024, p. 106). Based on their findings, Davey (2024, p. 106) promotes further in-game analysis using ethical methods and Newhouse and Kowert (2024) advocate for countermeasures that focus on actor-based analysis, positive interventions, and "network mapping and disruption" (Newhouse and Kowert, 2024, p. 89).

Amarnath Amarasingam and Daniel Kelley present the results from surveys by the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOTC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of the gaming community in Chapter 6. The UNOTC survey results show that while gaming has many positive aspects, hate and toxic behaviors are significant issues as is extremist content, particularly in more private spaces, and many gamers support further moderation efforts but hold that cultural change needs to be led by the gaming community (Amarasingam and Kelley, 2024, pp. 116–118). The ADL survey found that in 2022, "20% of adults had been exposed to white supremacist ideologies in online multiplayer games" (Amarasingam and Kelley, 2024, p. 121). Furthermore, 86% of adults reported experiencing harassment in online multiplayer games (Amarasingam and Kelley, 2024, p. 118). Players' experience of being targeted by hate also varied by demographic and game: women were most often targeted by hate although this amount has been decreasing over time, while Asian Americans have experienced the most significant increase in hate since 2019; players also experienced the most harassment in *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* and the least in

Minecraft (Amarasingam and Kelley, 2024, p. 119). These experiences have led many players to quit a game and some to take measures to increase their physical safety. In 2022, 11% of players reported contacting the police due to in-game harassment (Amarasingam and Kelley, 2024, p. 119). The authors conclude their chapter with calls for gaming companies to increase transparency and data sharing and accessibility.

In Chapter 7, Ashton Kingdon analyzes the creation of custom games, the modification of existing games, and the use of video game aesthetics by extremists. They argue that "videogame propaganda cannot be understood without considering the role played by aesthetics, as gaming aesthetics revoke the modern boundaries between modes of cognition, experience, and expression" (Kingdon, 2024, pp. 132–133). Using evidence from extremist propaganda that integrates gaming elements and visuals, they show the important role that visuals play in bridging linguistic and geographic divides to promote and shape perceptions of extremist narratives. Based on their findings, they encourage further research on propaganda's subcultural and aesthetic characteristics, particularly in the case of videogame aesthetics in internet memes (Kingdon, 2024).

Chapter 8 by Suraj Lakhani explores the gamification of violent extremism using the perspectives of top-down strategic and bottom-up organic gamification. One illustrative example they provide of strategic gamification is the development of mobile and desktop applications by extremist groups to teach and reinforce ideologies (Lakhani, 2024, p. 153). Instances of organic gamification include the use of language associated with games, such as points, to describe abusive acts, and live streaming attacks in the format of first-person shooter games. Lakhani (2024) also highlights how gaming-related cultural scripts have been emulated by other attacks and reinforced in online communities of support. One example of this community behavior is the posting of "leaderboards" on *4Chan*, showing the relative levels of violence carried out by different mass shooters. In explaining the nature of this violence, Lakhani (2024) cites work by Macklin (2022) describing these attacks as gaining "a cumulative momentum from this online milieu, which actively encouraged and glorified each successive act of violence in the hope of generating more terror" (Macklin, 2022, p. 216).

Lakhani (2024) argues that this area remains under researched and advocates for further work shedding light on strategic and organic uses of gamification in violent extremism.

In Chapters 9 and 10, Erin Saltman, Nagham El Karhili, and Linda Schlegel present potential countermeasures to extremism in gaming spaces. Saltman and El Karhili (2024) discuss the potential for positive interventions and the development of platform policy, including cross-platform approaches. They focus on providing actionable recommendations to platforms such as the implementation of hash-sharing, the use of logo detection and natural language processing techniques, and the development of redirection and intervention strategies (Saltman and El Karhili, 2024, p. 179). Schlegel (2024) focuses on potential preventative measures that take advantage of gaming's positive effects and integrate subcultural knowledge and collaboration with gaming communities.

Gaming and Extremism contributes to the literature by organizing prior work applying existing theories and methodologies to gaming spaces and by identifying gaps for further research. Chapters 1 (Steinkuehler and Squire, 2024) and 2 (Lamphere-Englund, 2024) extend theories on radicalization and how people actively engage with media to gaming spaces. They also further develop the conceptualization of these spaces as an ecosystem. Chapter 8 (Lakhani, 2024) also integrates the theory of "techniques of neutralization" from criminology into their discussion of gamification. Chapters 4 (Newhouse and Kowert, 2024) and 5 (Davey, 2024) illustrate how methodologies such as digital ethnography and social network analysis can be used to study gaming spaces. These innovative approaches reveal that extremist behaviors are both individual and part of a broader collective and subculture (Lakhani, 2024), with the characteristics of how the individual relates to the collective or various groups differing based on age demographics (Davey, 2024). Davey (2024, p. 106) found that younger demographics organizing on Discord tended to engage with multiple channels pertaining to a loose ideology, while older demographics organizing on Steam maintained "closely networked communities." This work helps contextualize the findings presented by Koehler et al. (2023, p. 431), that youths were radicalized on Discord despite the lack of an "organizational and strategic recruitment campaign." In the conclusion, Rachel Kowert and

Linda Schlegel (2024) identify areas for further research. These include the prevalence and behaviors of extremists adhering to various ideologies, closed groups and real time communication, the role of gaming spaces in the digital extremist ecosystem, the early stages of radicalization and the interaction of contextual factors with gaming, positive countermeasures, and the transition from in-game radicalization to "out-of-game mobilization of terroristic and violent activity" (Kowert and Schlegel, 2024, p. 205).

In addition to the literature on terrorism and extremism, *Gaming and Extremism* is also relevant to the international relations (IR) literature on popular culture (Robinson, 2015; see also Qiao-Franco and Franco, 2024; Renic and Kaempf, 2022). One line of prior work in this subfield has considered the political nature of play (Hirst, 2019) and how videogames can be politically important tools of strategic communication (Schulzke, 2017). Another line of research has examined how historical video games shape understandings of global politics (de Zamaróczy, 2017) and have been used as tools of public diplomacy (Donald et al., 2023). The insights on metapolitics, weaponization of subcultures (Prinz, 2024), and video game propaganda (Kingdon, 2024) presented in this book are relevant to this subfield of IR.

While *Gaming and Extremism* discusses policies for preventing and countering violent extremism, the book might have benefitted from more discussion of what is going well. While Chapters 3 (Prinz, 2024), 9 (Saltman and El Karhili, 2024) and 10 (Schlegel, 2024) touch on the importance of gamers speaking out against extremism, they do not address existing examples of counterspeech in gaming spaces, such as those discovered by O'Connor (2021) on Twitch. Further discussion of initiatives to create safe online gaming communities could also have been useful. For example, a project by the Connected Learning Lab, Connected Camps Learning Together Online, functions similarly to a summer camp or after-school program, just online. Students work together in small groups, guided by an instructor, typically on Minecraft (How Our Online Programs Work, n.d.). Programs such as these could help prevent children from being exposed to extremist narratives in gaming spaces. Discussing existing initiatives could help identify areas where proposed policies could complement ongoing efforts.

Gaming and Extremism also does not address the Ethical Games initiative to draft a collective code of ethics and could have included more discussion of areas where beneficial policies have been implemented. The Ethical Games initiative was launched in 2020 by academics and industry professionals. It "aimed at collectively codifying and improving ethics in games" for both players and creators (Wawro, 2020). In 2024, Ethical Games held their first conference. As of this writing, they are actively seeking feedback from players, parents, scholars, and those in the game industry on a draft Code of Ethics for the Game Industry. At present the draft includes several sections that are relevant to preventing and countering violent extremism, including "Player Safety in Online Multiplayer Games" and "Protection of Minors" (Guidelines for the Benefit of Players and the Overall Game Community, n.d.). In Chapter 2, Lamphere-Englund (2024, p. 37) discusses how users can be drawn from "gaming spaces into private conversations in group-run chat servers (such as specific servers on Discord), semi-encrypted chatrooms (Telegram groups, for example), or onto websites controlled by the organization." A discussion of how one video game platform, Innersloth LLC, has "banned third-party links in-game" as a child protection measure (Trahan 2023, p. 3) would have provided valuable context on how platforms are addressing this issue.

Gaming and Extremism is a valuable resource for researchers seeking to expand their understanding of the extremism and gaming nexus. While it does not serve as a 'how-to' manual for conducting research in gaming spaces, as only two of the chapters extensively discuss methodology, it does provide an excellent "starting point" (Schlegel and Kowert, 2024, p. 6) by presenting a "snapshot" (Kowert and Schlegel, 2024, p. 203) of this evolving literature that is accessible to those with limited prior knowledge.

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