ACICE
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Rise in Online Extremism and Violent Content Among Gaming Communities

INTRODUCTION

1.   Online gaming is widely popular, particularly among those from Generation Z. In more recent years, however, the number of online gamers has grown rapidly. *Exchangewire* reported that many people around the world turned to online gaming as a source of entertainment during COVID-19 lockdowns. Many online multiplayer or interactive games have a distinctly social element that allows people from different parts of the world to connect with each other and play together. Gamers interact with one another through online games like Fortnite[1] that provide chatroom functions, or through social media platforms that facilitate live-streaming of games and joining online gaming communities such as Discord[2] and Twitch[3].

2.   According to *TRT World Magazine*, threat actors have realised that gaming community platforms often lag behind bigger social media platforms in terms of content moderation. As such, they are increasingly leveraging on such gaming community platforms to advance their radical ideas to younger audiences who are highly active on these platforms. This poses a threat to society.

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[1] Fortnite is an online survival, battle royale video game where up to 100 players fight to be the last person standing.
[2] Discord is a social gaming platform that allows users to communicate via voice calls, text messaging through communities called 'servers'.
[3] Twitch provides video games live streaming services which allows users to interact with gaming community members as well as the streamers.

Examples of Online Extremism Translating to Real-time Incidents

3.   Hate speeches directed against minority populations are often shared by extremist groups on gaming platforms not only to instigate violence and public hatred towards the minorities, but also to attract potential recruits. According to *WBUR*, a cell of extremists would enter a Fortnite chat room or a Call of Duty[4] group, use racial slurs or other types of extremist content, and then monitor the responses to these messages. Those who appear receptive or respond positively would then be invited to another group chat to be further cultivated.

4.   As gaming community platforms are not as well regulated as compared to the bigger social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the efforts of extremists groups to exploit and propagate their radicalised views on gaming community platforms often go unnoticed until it is belatedly discovered, typically only after actual terror attacks have taken place in real life. For instance, according to *CNN,* a racially-motivated mass shooting took place on 14 May 2022 in a mostly Black enclave of Buffalo, New York, where the suspect publicly broadcasted his massacre of 10 people and wounding of three. A month prior to the attack, the suspect had created a private chat room on Discord while playing online video games and invited people to view his chat logs where he detailed his entire plan, and advocated fascist, white supremacist and anti-Semite theories. His posts were also shared more widely on the hate-filled 4chan online forum[5]. According to *BBC* and *New Straits Times,* prior to the massacre, the shooter had been exposed to extreme content online and was radicalised as a result.

5.   Similarly on 24 May 2022, *Indian Express News* reported that a mass shooting had occurred at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, that claimed the lives of 19 children and two teachers. According to *CNN,* weeks prior to the shooting, it was believed that the perpetrator was 'radicalised' as he started sharing posts of himself demeaning women, hurling dead cats at home and showing off the rifles he bought on both Yubo[6] and the Plato[7] gaming app.

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[4] Call of Duty is a first-person shooter (FPS) game.
[5] 4chan is an anonymous English-language image board website that hosts boards dedicated to a wide variety of topics such as anime, video games, cooking, weapons, politics and others.
[6] Yubo is a French social networking app designed to 'meet new people' and create a sense of community, allowing users to play games, chat, and create video livestreams with up to 10 friends.
[7] Plato is a gamming app with over 45 multiplayer in-app games and allows one another to chat in-app too.

ASSESSMENT

6.   Advocates of radical ideas can be very influential and dangerous in the online space but face no real-life consequences for propagating their views on the various platforms, including among the gaming community. Apart from the platforms' own efforts at content moderation based on their Terms of Service and Community Guidelines, there have been no comprehensive or sustained efforts to counter such extremist propaganda on gaming community platforms. Unlike social media platforms, messages or posts on Discord or Twitch still rely heavily on user reports of any suspected extremist content, particularly in private servers – that are invite-only – where content circulated is less visible externally.

7.   In addition, the platforms tend to focus on post-event mitigation, which has limited effectiveness. For instance, Twitch was able to remove the live-streamed violence from its platform within two minutes, but within that time frame, it was already shared elsewhere. Similarly, Discord could not access the perpetrator's Buffalo terror plan in the private server until the incident took place, where Discord then found out that the suspect had shared it with other private users. Discord could only implement measures such as banning the suspect's account after the terror event took place.

Countering the Spread on Gaming Platforms

8.   In countering the spread of extremist content, platforms face the challenges of scaling the measures to large user bases, respecting users' right to privacy, detecting nuances in messaging and avoiding curbing users' freedom of expression. To this end, some solutions proposed include the possible use of AI moderation or publication of Transparency Reports that detail the changes to Community Guidelines and their considerations.

9.   On 27 May 2022, Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern called on technology companies like Twitch, and other online providers to take tougher measures to prevent the spread of extremism online – especially in gaming communities. Similarly, according to the *Post Millennial News,* other researchers have also called for video game companies to undertake efforts to root out extremism just like what the big social media platforms have been trying to do. The involvement of government and academic elements are welcome insofar as they raise awareness on the urgency of the issue that needs to be tackled.

10.   Besides government interventions, schools could also undertake a stronger stance against extremism by organising relevant cyber-wellness talks and events to ensure that children practice the right online habits and to call out or report online behaviour that is threatening and dangerous. As most children tend to spend a lot of their time in schools, teachers or relevant authorities could also help to identify possible radicalised behaviours portrayed by the children and alert the authorities as soon as possible.

CONTACT DETAILS

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