



The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE

Authored by **Linda Schlegel**, RAN External Expert

Radicalisation Awareness Network
RAN 

The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission however it reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission is not liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse of this publication. More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://www.europa.eu>).

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

© European Union, 2021



The reuse policy of European Commission documents is implemented by the Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39). Except otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY 4.0) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is allowed provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the European Union, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective rightholders.

Introduction

Since the livestreamed terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, and various subsequent attacks following a similar modus operandi in Pittsburgh, El Paso and Halle, discussions on the ‘gamification’ of violent right-wing extremism have risen to prominence ⁽¹⁾. The perpetrators livestreamed their attacks on Facebook or Twitch, mirroring “Let’s Play” videos popular in the gaming community, sought to copy the stylistic elements of first-person shooter games, provided live commentary on their actions through gamified language, and are believed to have been embedded in specific online communities, in which gamification and game references are part of the subcultural practice. The use of game elements, however, is not limited to right-wing extremist individuals and organisations but is evident in the propaganda and recruitment efforts of jihadist organisations too ⁽²⁾. Prominently, Daesh launched an app aimed at ‘playfully’ transmitting ideology to children via gaming elements ⁽³⁾ and has both utilised footage from video games such as Call of Duty as well as imitated the aesthetics and viewpoint of first-person shooter games in their propaganda videos filmed with helmet cameras ⁽⁴⁾.

As game elements seem to become increasingly prominent in contemporary extremist milieus, those involved in the implementation of prevention and countermeasures need to be aware of this trend, understand its mechanisms and implications, and, ultimately, consider potential applications of gamification components in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts. After providing a brief introduction to gamification as such, this paper provides an overview of the use of gamification within extremist communities and the mechanisms by which it makes propaganda more attractive. Then, the potential for gamification in the P/CVE context is considered.

Background

What is gamification?

There is no agreed upon definition of gamification, but most often the concept refers to the “use of game design elements within non-game contexts” ⁽⁵⁾. It entails the transfer of game elements such as points, leader boards, badges or avatars into contexts not traditionally regarded as spaces of play with the aim of facilitating behavioural change in users ⁽⁶⁾. For instance, companies have been adding game elements such as points, badges and scoreboards to their fitness applications or employee experiences to motivate individuals to compete with others and improve their performances in the process ⁽⁷⁾. When users compete with their friends on a fitness app and are motivated to collect more badges than their peers, gamification has nudged them into a certain behaviour — i.e. working out more. Gamification is also used in non-commercial settings including education, health, the military and the public sector with the aim of keeping users engaged and nudging them into desired behaviour ⁽⁸⁾.

Gamifying user experiences often means adding external and ‘fun’ incentives for prolonged engagement, providing measures of friendly competition, and motivating users to take certain actions in order to receive rewards such as badges. While gamification is certainly not a silver bullet causing users to magically behave in ways desired by the designer of the gamified application, it has been shown to be a factor not only in sustaining user engagement but in making such engagement more pleasurable. In addition, considering there are more than 2.4 billion gamers in the world ⁽⁹⁾, game elements and gaming contexts are familiar points of reference for one third of the world’s population, increasing the chance that individual users are not

⁽¹⁾ Mackintosh & Mezzofiore, How the extreme right gamified terror.

⁽²⁾ Dauber et al., Call of Duty: Jihad – How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State; Lakomy, Let’s Play a Video Game.

⁽³⁾ Hunt, Islamic State releases children’s mobile app ‘to teach Arabic’.

⁽⁴⁾ Scaife, Social Networks as the New Frontier of Terrorism: #Terror, p. 54.

⁽⁵⁾ Deterding et al., From game design elements to gamefulness, p. 1.

⁽⁶⁾ Robson et al., Is it all a game?

⁽⁷⁾ Hamari & Koivisto, “Working out for likes”; Chou, Actionable Gamification.

⁽⁸⁾ Blohm & Leimeister, Gamification; van Roy & Zaman, Unravelling the ambivalent motivational power; Robson et al., Game On; Gonzalez et al., Learning healthy lifestyles.

⁽⁹⁾ Cyber Athletiks, How many gamers are there in the world?

only familiar with such designs and know how to use them but will associate gaming with positive emotions and pleasure. The potential target audience for gamified applications is therefore very large.

Theoretically, gamification can be applied in any non-gaming context. However, the term is most widely used to describe the use of game elements in the digital realm, and the present paper is solely focused on the online sphere. Although actual video games such as the newly released Heimatdefender by the Identitarian Movement ⁽¹⁰⁾, modifications of popular existing video games ⁽¹¹⁾, and the use of gaming servers such as Discord to organise collective action ⁽¹²⁾ are part of a larger trend towards gaming in extremist subcultures, they are excluded from the present paper. Only use of game design elements within non-game digital contexts is the subject of consideration.

Background on Gamification

1. Gamification is “the use of game elements in non-game contexts” online.
2. It is not the use of video games or gaming servers.
3. Gamification most often means introducing points, badges, leader boards and other gaming elements into other settings.
4. 2.4 billion people are gaming; game elements are familiar to a large audience.

Evidence for gamification in extremist subcultures

Extremists are early adopters of technological advancements ⁽¹³⁾ and gamification is no exception in this regard. While gamification has only recently become part of the extremist ‘toolbox’ and research into the phenomenon is still in its infancy, preliminary, anecdotal evidence for gamification in extremist subcultural milieus exists. Based on the existing evidence, a general distinction may be drawn between top-down and bottom-up gamification ⁽¹⁴⁾.

	Top-down gamification	Bottom-up gamification
Who	Extremist organisations, recruiters, strategists	Individuals, small groups, online communities
What	Strategic use of rankings, badges, points, leader boards	Livestreaming, gamified language, virtual scoreboards, personal ‘quests’
Why	Facilitate engagement with content and peers, visibility of commitment, motivate users to participate, appeal to young audience	Appeal to online community/subcultural milieu, look cool, make sense of reality via gaming content
Examples	Rankings, badges, etc. in forums; apps such as Patriot Peer	Attacks in Christchurch and Halle; small-group WhatsApp radicalisation; discussions on social media — e.g. desire to “beat his score” ⁽¹⁵⁾

⁽¹⁰⁾ Schlegel, No Child’s Play.

⁽¹¹⁾ Ebner, Going Dark.

⁽¹²⁾ Guhl et al., The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right, p. 22.

⁽¹³⁾ Bartlett, Why 2019 Will Be the Year of the Online Extremist, and What to Do About It.

⁽¹⁴⁾ For a full discussion, see Schlegel, Jumanji extremism?

⁽¹⁵⁾ Evans, The El Paso shooting and the gamification of terror.

Top-down gamification

Top-down gamification is the strategic use of game elements by extremist organisations or recruiters to facilitate engagement with propagandistic content, their forums and platforms. Through sustained positive engagement, the likelihood of accepting the extremist narrative and perception of reality and therefore the susceptibility to radicalisation and recruitment efforts is potentially increased in some users. Both jihadist and right-wing extremist forums often include gaming elements to increase engagement, such as points for posting comments, reputation or radicalisation meters⁽¹⁶⁾ indicating personal 'progress' towards extremism, virtual badges, and the right to change avatars and signatures after reaching a certain level within the forum. Sometimes, long-standing forum members who obtain a high ranking and contribute many comments signalling sustained engagement can earn invitations into 'secret' groups and therefore rise in the in-group hierarchy.

Outside of forums, the clearest illustrative case of top-down gamification is the app Patriot Peer, which was planned but never launched by the German-speaking Identitarian Movement (IB). Users were supposed to be able to collect points for various activities, such as attending IB events or visiting designated cultural places, and compete with each other for the lead positions on the virtual scoreboard. In a Pokémon-Go-like fashion, users would have been able to find like-minded individuals through a "Patriot Radar", adding a social dimension to the gamified application⁽¹⁷⁾.

Bottom-up gamification

Bottom-up gamification is the organic emergence of gamified language and practices in individuals, small groups and online subcultures without direction from extremist organisations. Individuals and communities may use gamified language such as "get the high score"⁽¹⁸⁾, keep virtual scoreboards of 'body counts' of various attackers, livestream attacks in the style of Let's Play videos, or come up with 'quests' or 'raids' to complete mirroring the actions of 'guilds' in popular online games such as World of Warcraft⁽¹⁹⁾. Such bottom-up gamification may be evident in dedicated forums, but also on more open social media platforms such as Gab and reddit, on Discord groups, and in private chatrooms or applications such as WhatsApp. Bottom-up gamification indicates that gaming culture has penetrated online communication and some individuals may apply the experiences they have had while playing video games to make sense of real-life events.

What is the appeal of gamification?

Empirical evidence on the mechanisms and implications of gamification in extremist milieus or its potential role in radicalisation and recruitment practices is almost non-existent. It is therefore difficult to determine exactly how effective the practice is. However, findings from other applications point to various psychological mechanisms that gamification activates⁽²⁰⁾. There are different types of users with different preferences for digital applications⁽²¹⁾, who are motivated by appealing to different psychological needs⁽²²⁾. Amongst the multitude of ways to distinguish between different types of users or players in games, a basic distinction can be made between users high/low in competitiveness and users high/low in social relatedness⁽²³⁾. From this, two broad routes of influence may be distinguished: a competitive route and a social route.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Hsu, Terrorists use online games to recruit future jihadis.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Schlegel, Jumanji Extremism?, p. 17.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Ayyadi, The "Gamification" of Terror.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Schlegel, Jumanji Extremism?, p. 17.

⁽²⁰⁾ Chou, Actionable Gamification.

⁽²¹⁾ For example, Marczewski, User Types; Bartle, Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades.

⁽²²⁾ Chou, Actionable Gamification.

⁽²³⁾ Robson, Game On, p. 31.

Competitive route	Social route
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users high in competitiveness, high in social relatedness • Motivated by competition, enjoy comparing themselves to others • Seek status, recognition and 'winning' • Find points, badges, rankings appealing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users low in competitiveness, high in social relatedness • Motivated by cooperation, enjoy collaborating and social interaction • Seek belonging and interaction • Find collaborative tasks, helping others, community engagement appealing

Competitive users are motivated to lead the scoreboard. They enjoy competition and comparison with a peer group and want to 'win' in order to feel good about themselves and reap social rewards such as admiration or increased status within the group. Because gamification often entails the introduction of visible measures of success such as points, badges, rankings and scoreboards, competitive users may be motivated to engage longer and more thoroughly with the content in the forum or app, thereby increasing their exposure to extremist ideas and potentially increasing susceptibility to radicalisation. 'Winning' and status are often subtle and difficult to grasp in digital settings, but gamification can help to create a visible hierarchy and motivate status-seeking individuals to improve their ranking on the scoreboard. Users provided with clear directions may then be more inclined to complete the actions required to gain more points, such as attending events or 'trolling' under Facebook posts. Once small-scale actions have been taken to gain more points, the door may be open for more demanding requests and tasks, essentially providing a slippery slope into more thorough engagement with the extremist milieu, its narrative and actions required to rise even higher on the scoreboard.

Research on online games has shown that some users are not motivated by quantifiable rewards or the recognition that comes with a high status but by social experiences and the social relatedness felt in guilds or other communities⁽²⁴⁾. Users high in social relatedness enjoy cooperative elements of gamified applications and may be susceptible to the social cues gamified elements make visible. Individuals may be more likely to engage in certain actions if such behaviour is visibly displayed by others⁽²⁵⁾. Gamified elements provide such visibility online by showing what other users are doing. On a broader level, similar to movie references (e.g. red-pilling) or humorous memes⁽²⁶⁾, gamified language has become a subcultural identification marker and mechanism of inclusion in or exclusion from the in-group. Those who 'belong' understand gamified styles of interaction, abbreviations from gaming culture or memes related to video games, thereby signalling their belonging to the in-group. In such subcultural milieus, gamification may therefore also act as a measure to increase feelings of in-group social belonging.

Gamification in P/CVE

Gamification is here to stay and will become even more widespread and prominent in the coming years. It would therefore be fruitless to attempt to fight the gamification of digital communication as such. Rather, it is necessary to engage with the psychological mechanisms underlying its success and the question of how to, potentially, make use of these mechanisms for P/CVE. Gamification in the context of violent extremism and radicalisation only began to attract attention after the Christchurch attack in early 2019. Consequently, we do not know enough about the mechanisms by which gamification influences violent extremism. We know even less about the possibilities gamification might have to offer to P/CVE practitioners and their countermeasures to violent extremism. There is little to no evidence of the use of gamified elements in digital P/CVE practices, making recommendations difficult and a discussion of 'good practices' impossible. The

⁽²⁴⁾ Rapp, Designing Interactive Systems through a Game Lens, p. 461.

⁽²⁵⁾ Hamari, Do badges increase user activity?.

⁽²⁶⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), It's not funny anymore; Nagle, Kill All Normies.

following part of this paper will therefore pose important questions to think about when practitioners consider the opportunities gamification might have to offer and the potential of gamification to shape digital P/CVE practices in the future. The tentative answers provided here are derived from knowledge on gamification from other fields as well as the challenges uncovered by previous attempts to incorporate extremists' strategies in digital countermeasures. These answers should be read as an invitation to consider gamification and its merits rather than a guideline on how to apply gamified elements in P/CVE.

What can we build on for the gamification of P/CVE?

Although online interventions are sometimes still considered less advanced and well established than offline P/CVE work, much progress has been made in the last decade. Most recently, for instance, video games against extremism⁽²⁷⁾ and disinformation⁽²⁸⁾ have emerged. Although much remains unknown and untested, counter-extremism efforts are beginning to delineate both possibilities and challenges that video games and gaming platforms pose to their work⁽²⁹⁾. Both governmental actors and NGOs seem to be increasingly aware of the appeal of video games to cut through the noise in the attention economy online and efforts are being made to help P/CVE practitioners to develop social games or games against violent extremism⁽³⁰⁾. By sparking curiosity and presenting information in an interactive and engaging manner, games provide a chance for P/CVE or counter-disinformation messages to reach target audiences already saturated with videos and text-based engagement. Gamified elements are, as discussed, elements featuring prominently in video games. Taking inspiration from such P/CVE video games is therefore a logical first building block for gamifying other P/CVE measures. Including only some game elements rather than developing a full game may be easier, cheaper and therefore more attainable for practitioners facing budget constraints. Nevertheless, knowledge of game design and technical skills remain paramount. Gamification is not a magic bullet. It is unlikely that merely adding a scoreboard and coming up with some tool to collect points will in itself increase the appeal of digital P/CVE measures or facilitate engagement. Gamified elements need to be used with care and purpose and be integrated well into the intervention. Gamification that is not well done quickly runs the risk of appearing gimmicky.

Another beneficial starting point for an exploration of the possibilities of gamification may be digital youth work and online street work⁽³¹⁾. Not only P/CVE as such but youth and street work more generally are increasingly taking place in the digital sphere and some initiatives have started to experiment with games or gamified elements such as badges⁽³²⁾. From these experiences it is known that "build it and they will come" may not hold true in an online environment with an abundance of choices and that offers to engage must be placed on the platforms already frequented by young audiences⁽³³⁾. The same holds true for gamified interventions. Practitioners may generally take two routes. They can advertise gamified applications hosted on their website through social media platforms frequented by their target audience such as TikTok and YouTube and hope to motivate audiences to jump from social media to the website — i.e. a multi-channel approach. Or, practitioners could seek to gamify the engagement with the target audiences on social media directly. In any case, interventions with gaming elements must adhere to the same principle as other measures such as knowing your target audiences, using the elements they like to communicate the message and having credible messengers⁽³⁴⁾. As gamification is especially appealing to younger audiences, it may also be useful to use existing avenues for communicating with young people through youth work to test and implement gamified elements⁽³⁵⁾.

⁽²⁷⁾ For example, <http://game.extremismus.info/> or <https://leon.nrw.de/> [in German].

⁽²⁸⁾ Plaum, Fighting the infodemic, one game at a time.

⁽²⁹⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives.

⁽³⁰⁾ For example, <http://gamechangereu.org/camp/>

⁽³¹⁾ For example, <https://www.digitalyouthwork.eu/> and <http://www.streetwork.online/en.html>

⁽³²⁾ European Commission, Developing digital youth work.

⁽³³⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context.

⁽³⁴⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Effective narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model.

⁽³⁵⁾ Koivisto & Hamari, Demographic differences in perceived benefits from gamification.

What type of knowledge is needed to build effective gamified interventions?

Similar to other digital interventions, gamified P/CVE interventions will benefit from a thorough knowledge of internet culture and the memes, emojis, stylistic elements and topics target audiences find appealing. It will also benefit from knowledge on gaming: not only which games are currently well liked or which game elements are especially appealing to users, but also of gaming culture more generally⁽³⁶⁾. This may include phrases taken from video games and placed in non-game contexts (i.e. the gamification of language) and visual references made to popular video games. On a psychological level, if one wants to effectively transfer game elements into a non-game context, one needs to understand which elements cause the player to feel what emotions, how these emotions motivate, and how those emotions can be transferred to non-gaming settings. For instance, players of Farmville, an agriculture simulation game, may be motivated by loss avoidance — i.e. they may log back in to harvest their crop, because they know it will disappear after a while. Players may also be motivated by positive feedback and accomplishments or by immaterial rewards such as social connectedness or the feeling that they contribute to something greater than themselves. Understanding which game element is connected to which motivational drivers will help design meaningful gamified interventions.

To this end, drawing on knowledge from and cooperating with businesses that use gamification to sell their products⁽³⁷⁾, tech and social media firms that may be able to advise on how to implement gamified elements on their platforms and game designers who can draw on hundreds of years of experience with the psychological mechanisms underlying the motivation to play, must be considered crucial⁽³⁸⁾. While a learning-by-doing approach to gaming design may be possible for simple elements such as points and leader boards, more holistic and sophisticated game elements likely require not only specialised knowledge but specialised skills to implement in the online sphere.

For which type of P/CVE intervention is gamification most useful?

With little practical experiences in the P/CVE field so far, it is not possible to adequately judge where gamification may be applied most effectively. It is likely, however, that simple gamified tools will be most useful in primary prevention. Those on the pathway of radicalisation or those already part of extremist groups are unlikely to change course simply because they enjoy collecting points in a digital intervention. Gamification can draw users' attention and increase the chances that users will engage with the narratives provided or facilitate dialogue, but it will not have a deradicalising effect. As with many other tools in P/CVE, gamification needs to be embedded in larger, more holistic approaches to be effective rather than being treated as a stand-alone mechanism. As the engagement with the possibilities afforded by gamification has only just begun, actors involved in P/CVE will likely benefit from a trial-and-error approach. It is not possible to determine which audiences will react to which gaming elements in what way, and target audiences may differ tremendously. At the current state of knowledge, no application of gamification at any level of prevention should be excluded before it is tested.

Is gamification only a tool to generate attention?

It is unlikely that gamification will be a silver bullet that solves all the problems of engagement P/CVE actors face in the digital sphere, but it may be a tool to facilitate engagement. Gamification can be applied with various goals in mind and with various degrees of sophistication. To test the waters, practitioners may choose a low degree of both technical and design sophistication and start a caption contest on a platform such as Instagram, where the comment with the most likes wins (collection of points, competition), the best five are presented in a new post (leader board) and the winner gets a 'shout out' (symbolic reward). Or, they could dare their followers on TikTok to complete a challenge (quest) and post a video of themselves completing it and encourage the community to comment (social engagement). Such measures provide entry points, but

⁽³⁶⁾ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives.

⁽³⁷⁾ Chou, Gamification to improve our world; TEDx Talks, The future of creativity and innovation is gamification.

⁽³⁸⁾ McGonigal, Reality is Broken; McGonigal, Gaming can make a better world.

keeping users interested for longer than a couple of minutes requires a higher degree of technical and design sophistication. More sophisticated interventions in the future will need to engage more deeply with goals beyond generating attention.

As discussed above, there are different types of users, whose motivation for engagement may vary or even contradict those of others. The differentiation between competitive and social users is only one of many potential classifications of users and designing more sophisticated game elements may require deeper engagement with different types of players in order to set realistic goals for the intervention that go beyond creating attention. Additionally, Chou is very clear in his book *Actionable Gamification* that gaming elements are designed with various emotional states in mind. For sophisticated applications of gamification, we need to ask: What do I want the user to feel? Do I want them to feel accomplished or empowered? Do I want to stress social influence or do I want to create a feeling of ownership? Or everything at once? ⁽³⁹⁾. To utilise the full potential of gamified applications, engagement with game design and its implications for users need to go deeper than creating a system to keep score and a virtual leader board.

One of the often-used techniques that is potentially very applicable to the P/CVE context is sparking users to feel 'epic meaning' by providing them with a narrative that frames the gaming tasks such as collecting points. For instance, the smartphone app *Zombies, Run!* provides a framing narrative for joggers. They are still jogging as they would without the app but are now running to escape from zombies and defend their home base against them. The app provides an introduction to the story setting and then motivates the joggers continuously throughout their workout, for instance by zombie noises sent through the headphones ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Users are still doing their regular workout but are more engaged and motivated through the narrative setting. Similarly, providing a storyline and narrative that frames digital interactions may be beneficial for gamified P/CVE measures. This could take various forms. For instance, primary prevention could utilise narratives of 'defenders of democracy' fighting against trolling and hate speech to motivate users to engage in counter-speech. Similarly, narratives currently employed for games such as *Adventures of Literatus*, in which Literatus has to save the kingdom Informia from the evil Manipulus and disinformation, could be employed in non-gaming contexts to frame calls for action against disinformation ⁽⁴¹⁾. This presents a clear opportunity to combine the knowledge gained from counter-narrative and alternative narrative campaigns in other settings with gamification.

Can we use gamification for evaluations?

Gamification, if done well, may increase the chances that users pay attention to content — i.e. that in the constant competition for attention online, users may stick around just long enough to get hooked and view/play the whole content. It may also facilitate user engagement by providing extrinsic rewards such as points and badges or social rewards such as likes and, as discussed, afford the opportunity to communicate narratives 'in fashionable clothes' ⁽⁴²⁾. Furthermore, gamification may offer additional engagement metrics that go beyond clicks and views. Users who have completed quests, collected points or earned a couple of badges have probably engaged more thoroughly with the content presented than someone who simply clicked on a video. Number of points earned or number of badges received may not directly indicate the success of the P/CVE measure but may be used as an indicator of how sustained user engagement was and which quests or tasks seemed most appealing to which user type. How users 'play' the content, how long they are engaged, and how many points they earn or comments they post may be valuable information for practitioners designing such interventions and may be useable for evaluations that go beyond the number of impressions, shares and likes. Practitioners may also be able to use information of users who stop engaging at a certain point and potentially redesign the intervention in such a way as to keep motivation and engagement high. A more thorough analysis of user types of gamified applications may also feed into non-gamified applications as users on social media generally differ in their motivations for engagement and what they consider appealing. It would also be fruitful to compare gamified interventions with non-gamified interventions to understand in which contexts one may be more useful than the other.

⁽³⁹⁾ Chou, *Actionable Gamification*.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ See: <https://apps.apple.com/de/app/zombies-run/id503519713>

⁽⁴¹⁾ Plaum, *Fighting the infodemic, one game at a time*.

⁽⁴²⁾ Pieslak, *A Musicological Perspective on Jihadi anashid*, p. 75.

Key Lessons

1. Use and build on existing knowledge from digital youth work and P/CVE video games.
2. Seek guidance from and collaborate with tech firms, experts in human–computer interaction and game designers.
3. Think about ways to use existing tools — e.g. use existing (counter-) narratives as storylines for gamified applications or existing social media channels to ‘test the waters’ with gamified applications.
4. Consider potential uses of gamification beyond gaining attention — e.g. to evaluate digital engagement.

Key recommendations to use game elements

Game elements can be a great tool for primary prevention but should be used with caution and purpose. Done incorrectly, they may decrease engagement and hurt PVE measures.

Recommendations

1. **“Don’t make me think”** ⁽⁴³⁾: No matter how sophisticated the design is, gamified elements should be self-explanatory. Users should immediately understand what they need to do in order to ‘play’ without much introduction or explanation, otherwise they will quickly lose interest and move on.
2. **Do not demand too much**: Users want to be challenged but not too much. Beginning the gamified experience by requesting a major, time-consuming action from the user will likely lead them to not even begin the engagement. This may be especially true online, where users do not want to dedicate a lot of time to participate in, for instance, a quest. Offer a fairly brief, reasonably easy way to ‘play’.
3. Relatedly, offer **positive feedback** early. If users have to collect 50 points before earning the first badge, they may decide it is too much effort. Offering a badge for 3 points, 10 points, 20 points and so on may ease users into engaging longer and keeping motivation high.
4. Add game elements only when they have a **purpose**: It is not necessary to use every single game element in every single gamified application. On the contrary, the elements should fit together and create a holistic experience, which means that depending on the intended effect, less may be more. In addition, not every intervention measure may lend itself to being gamified; it may not make sense for a specific P/CVE measure.
5. What do I want the user to feel? Use game elements not as an end in itself but as tools to nudge users into certain behaviours and **emotional states**. Loss avoidance may drive motivation just like empowerment, accomplishment or a narrative that provides epic meaning, but each makes the user feel differently ⁽⁴⁴⁾.
6. **Think beyond points**: It is tempting to view adding points and a leader board as an ‘easy fix’ to gamify digital content. It may not always be the best choice and the best game elements to use. Think about all the elements that make games engaging, not only those to keep score.
7. **Know your audience**: While many people like to play, not everyone may like the same game elements. Be conscious about which types of users (e.g. competitive vs socially-driven) a given game element may appeal to.

⁽⁴³⁾ Krug, Don’t Make Me Think.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ For a more thorough discussion, see Chou, Actionable Gamification.

Further reading & listening

The available research on gamification in radicalisation processes or P/CVE measures is very limited, although an uptick in interest in both the role of video games and gaming cultures as well as gamification is noticeable. The following resources provide an introduction to gamification as such and early research on gaming and gamification pertaining to (counter-) extremism.

1. Chou, Y.-K. (2014). [Gamification to improve our world](#) [Video]. TEDxLausanne.
2. Chou, Y.-K. (2015). Actionable gamification: Beyond points, badges, and leaderboards. Milpitas, CA: Octalysis Media.
3. Cooley, A., & Cooley, S. (2020). [Child's play: Cooperative gaming as a tool of deradicalization](#). Journal for Deradicalization, 23, 96-133.
4. Janin, M., & Deverell, F. (Hosts). (2020, May 13). [How are terrorists and violent extremists using gamification?](#) [Audio podcast episode]. In the tech against terrorism podcast. Right Angles.
5. Lakomy, M. (2019). Let's play a video game: Jihadi propaganda in the world of electronic entertainment. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 42(4), 383-406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903>
6. Schlegel, L. (2020). [Jumanji extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes](#). Journal for Deradicalization, 23, 1-44.

Bibliography

- Ayyadi, K. (2019). The "gamification" of terror – When hate becomes a game. Belltower.News, October 11. <https://www.belltower.news/anti-semitic-attack-in-halle-the-gamification-of-terror-when-hate-becomes-a-game-92439/>
- Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247190693_Hearts_clubs_diamonds_spades_Players_who_suit_MUDs
- Bartlett, J. (2019). Why 2019 will be the year of the online extremist, and what to do about it. In B. Hoffman (Ed.), 2019: Challenges in counter-extremism (pp. 40-45). London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. https://institute.global/sites/default/files/inline-files/2019_challenges_in_counter_extremism.pdf
- Blohm, I., & Leimeister, J. (2013). Gamification - Design of IT-based enhancing services for motivational support and behavioral change. Business & Information Systems Engineering, 5(4), 275-278. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/bise/vol5/iss4/6>
- Chou, Y.-K. (2014). Gamification to improve our world [Video]. TEDxLausanne. <https://www.tedxlausanne.com/talks/yu-kai-chou/>
- Chou, Y.-K. (2015). Actionable gamification: Beyond points, badges, and leaderboards. Milpitas, CA: Octalysis Media.
- Cyber Athletiks. (n.d.). How many gamers are there in the world? <https://cyberathletiks.com/how-many-gamers-are-there-in-the-world/#:~:text=So%2C%20how%20many%20gamers%20are,of%20the%20world's%20entire%20population!>

- Dauber, C. E., Robinson, M. D., Baslios, J. J., & Blair, A. G. (2019). Call of Duty: Jihad – How the video game motif has migrated downstream from Islamic State propaganda videos. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13(3), 17-31.
- Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011). From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining “gamification”. In A. Lugmayr, Franssila, H., Safran, C., & Hammouda, I. (Eds), *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments* (pp. 9-15). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2181037.2181040>
- Ebner, J. (2019). *Going dark: The secret lives of extremists*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- European Commission. (2017). *Developing digital youth work: Policy recommendations, training needs and good practice examples*. https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1744/NC0218021ENN.en.pdf
- Evans, R. (2019). The El Paso shooting and the gamification of terror. Bellingcat, August 4. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/08/04/the-el-paso-shooting-and-the-gamification-of-terror/>
- Gonzalez, C., Gomez, N., Navarro, V., Cairos, M., Quirce, C., Toledo, P., & Marreo-Gordillo, N. (2016). Learning healthy lifestyles through active videogames, motor games and the gamification of educational activities. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55(Part A), 529-551. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.08.052>
- Guhl, J., Ebner, J., & Rau, J. (2020). The online ecosystem of the German far-right. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/2020-02/ISD-The%20Online%20Ecosystem%20of%20the%20German%20Far-Right.pdf>
- Hamari, J. (2017). Do badges increase user activity? A field experiment on the effects of gamification. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 71, 469-478. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.036>
- Hamari, J., & Koivisto, J. (2015). “Working out for likes”: An empirical study on social influence in exercise gamification. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 50, 333-347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.04.018>
- Hsu, J. (2011). Terrorists use online games to recruit future jihadis. NBC News, September 16. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44551906/ns/technology_and_science-innovation/t/terrorists-use-online-games-recruit-future-jihadis/#.Xf-ydUdKq2w
- Hunt, E. (2016). Islamic State releases children’s mobile app ‘to teach Arabic’. *The Guardian*, May 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/islamic-state-children-app-mobile-teach-arabic>
- Koivisto, J., & Hamari, J. (2014). Demographic differences in perceived benefits from gamification. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 35, 179-188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.03.007>
- Krug, S. (2014). *Don't make me think, revisited: A common sense approach to web usability* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: New Riders.
- Lakomy, M. (2019). Let’s play a video game: Jihadi propaganda in the world of electronic entertainment. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(4), 383-406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903>
- Mackintosh, E., & Mezzofiore, G. (2019). How the extreme-right gamified terror. CNN, October 10. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/10/europe/germany-synagogue-attack-extremism-gamified-grm-intl/index.html>
- Marczewski, A. (2015). User types. In A. Marczewski (Ed.). *Even ninja monkeys like to play: Gamification, game thinking and motivational design* (pp. 65-80). <https://www.gamified.uk/user-types/>
- McGonigal, J. (2010, February). Gaming can make a better world [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world?language=en
- McGonigal, J. (2012). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. London: Vintage.
- Nagle, A. (2017). *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.
- Pieslak, J. (2017). A musicological perspective on jihadi anashid. In T. Hegghammer (Ed.). *Jihadi culture: The art and social practices of militant Islamists* (pp. 63-81). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Plaum, A. (2020). Fighting the infodemic, one game at a time. DW Innovation, October 27. <https://innovation.dw.com/fighting-the-infodemic-one-game-at-a-time/>
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2019). Ex Post Paper. Effective narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_cn_academy_creating_implementing_effective_campaigns_brussels_14-15112019_en.pdf
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2020). Conclusion Paper. How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_yfc_cn_dna_digital_youth_work_en.pdf
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2020). Conclusion Paper. Extremists' use of video gaming – Strategies and narratives. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_cn_conclusion_paper_videogames_15-17092020_en.pdf
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2021). It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_ad-hoc_pap_fre_humor_20210215_en.pdf
- Rapp, A. (2017). Designing interactive systems though a game lens: An ethnographic approach. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 71, 455-468. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.02.048>
- Robson, K., Plangger, K., Kietzmann, J., McCarthy, I., & Pitt, L. (2015). Is it all a game? Understanding the principles of gamification. *Business Horizons*, 58(4), 411-420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2015.03.006>
- Robson, K., Plangger, K., Kietzmann, J., McCarthy, I., & Pitt, L. (2016). Game on: Engaging customers and employees through gamification. *Business Horizons*, 59(1), 29-36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2015.08.002>
- Scaife, L. (2017). *Social networks as the new frontier of terrorism: #Terror*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Schlegel, L. (2020). Jumanji extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 23. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/359/223>
- Schlegel, L. (2020). No child's play: The Identitarian Movement's 'Patriotic' video game. *GNET Insights*, September 17. <https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/17/no-childs-play-the-identitarian-movements-patriotic-video-game/>
- TEDx Talks. (2014, February 25). The future of creativity and innovation is gamification: Gabe Zichermann at TEDxVilnius [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZvRw71Slew>
- van Roy, R., & Zaman, B. (2019). Unravelling the ambivalent motivational power of gamification: A basic psychological needs perspective. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 127, 38-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2018.04.009>

About the author:

Linda Schlegel is a PhD student at the Goethe University in Frankfurt and an Associated Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). She is an Associate Fellow at the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) and modus | Centre for Applied Research on Deradicalisation (modus | zad).

FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications from: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publications>. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.

Radicalisation Awareness Network



Publications Office
of the European Union