Political Psychology

Political Psychology, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2023
doi: 10.1111/pops.12855

From Gaming to Hating: Extreme-Right Ideological Indoctrination and Mobilization for Violence of Children on Online Gaming Platforms

Daniel Koehler
Competence Center Against Extremism in Baden-Wuerttemberg

Verena Fiebig
Competence Center Against Extremism in Baden-Wuerttemberg

Irina Jugl
Competence Center Against Extremism in Baden-Wuerttemberg

As a consequence of numerous extreme-right terror attacks in which the perpetrators posted their manifestos and attack life streams on online platforms adjacent to the video gaming community, as well as radicalized within that environment to a significant degree (e.g., Christchurch, New Zealand; Halle, Germany), increasing scholarly and policymaker interest is focusing on far-right radicalization and recruitment within online video game environments. Yet little empirical insights exist about the specific engagement between right-wing extremists and their potential recruits on these platforms. This study presents findings from a qualitative exploration of German police-investigation files for two children who radicalized on gaming platforms to become involved in extreme-right criminal behavior, including the plotting of a terrorist attack. The study demonstrates the importance of online and offline factor interaction, especially regarding the role of familiar criminogenic factors, as well as the social–emotional bonding between potential recruits and extremist gamers created through shared gaming experiences that lead to high-intensity extremist radicalization aimed at offline behavioral changes. The study did not find evidence for strategic organizational far-right recruitment campaigns, but rather multidirectional social-networking processes which were also initiated by the potential recruits.

KEY WORDS: far right, radicalization, recruitment, children, video gaming platforms

According to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, terrorist attacks perpetrated by right-wing extremists have increased over 250% since 2014, with over 35 far-right terrorist incidents that have occurred in the West every year between 2015 and 2020 (IEP, 2020, p. 3). Within this development, EUROPOL noted two concerning trends in its European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) for 2020: the increasingly young age of arrested far-right terrorists

Published by Wiley Periodicals, LLC., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, and PO Box 378 Carlton South, 3053 Victoria, Australia

(EUROPOL, 2021, p. 18) and the spread of transnational digital far-right terrorist subcultures especially on online video gaming platforms (EUROPOL, 2021, pp. 90–91). Indeed, some countries have reported a significant increase of children and adolescents who have become involved in far-right terrorist activities. For example, 21 under-18-year-olds arrested in the year prior to April 2021 in the United Kingdom were linked to extreme right-wing terrorism, making up for three-quarters of all arrested children in that period. Generally, a stark increase of children involved in terrorism was observed (13% compared to 5% in the previous year), with the majority of those belonging to the far-right category (Dearden, 2021).

The increase of children and adolescents involved in far-right terrorism might be connected to the use of target-group-specific recruitment and propaganda techniques by far-right groups and actors to facilitate radicalization and mobilization for action (including violence). For example, the founder and administrator of one of the most infamous English language neo-Nazi commentary and messaging boards ("The Daily Stormer"), Andrew Anglin, openly admitted on a White supremacist radio show that he designed the webpage to target children as young as 11 years old, explaining his goal to "give this [ideology] to teenagers and even before teenagers" (as cited in Edison-Hayden, 2018). Other youth-specific recruitment and radicalization attempts include fashion (Miller-Idriss, 2018), music (Hamm, 1993), graphic novels (Forchtner, 2021), and the initially mentioned use of online video gaming. The latter was highlighted by numerous institutions as a potential new threat of strategic far-right recruitment. In 2020, the European Union Counterterrorism Coordinator warned that the digital gaming scene might become a key supporting hub for terrorist activities and recruitment (CT-Coordinator, 2020). The European Union Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) issued several topical papers, for example, calling online gaming platforms such as "Steam" or "Twitch" hotbeds for radicalization (RAN, 2020b, p. 4), summarizing various different far-right strategies for the use of gaming contexts (RAN, 2020a) or assessing the specific forms of far-right grooming in these environments (RAN, 2021).

Despite these warnings, empirically driven analyses of actual far-right (violent) extremist radicalization cases connected to online gaming contexts are exceptionally rare, and there is a "pressing need for further research on how would-be extremists, terrorists, and their sympathizers engage with one another in more general mainstream game spaces" (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021, p. 18). The present article directly addresses this important gap by combining two main contributions to the literature: (1) an in-depth qualitative exploration of two cases of far-right radicalization in Germany that happened within online gaming environments and (2) focusing on the experiences of children who became radicalized in these environments. This twofold exploration is based on unique access to police investigation files.

Key Terms

Even though no generally accepted definition of "gaming" exists, the present study assumes that the term usually describes the activity of playing an (online) video game (i.e., an electronic game based on player interaction with a user interface or input device to generate visual feedback). It is also assumed that the modern use of the term "gaming" involves a distinct social component of interaction with other "gamers" or the self-proclaimed membership in a "gaming community." This article is not concerned with the connected phenomenon of "gamification" (i.e., the use of game design elements in a nongame context).

Generally, at least six different types of gaming use by extremist actors have been suggested in the literature: the design and production of one's own video games, the modification

of existing nonextremist video games (the so-called "modding"), the use of chat functions during the game for communication, the use of gaming-adjacent platforms, and the use of gaming references or gamification within extremist propaganda (RAN, 2020a; Schlegel, 2021b). Nevertheless, research focusing on the potential link between gaming (in the widest sense) and extremist radicalization is still in its infancy and is described as being characterized through the large number of unknown factors (Davey, 2021; Robinson & Whittaker, 2021).

For this study, the extreme right or the far right are understood to be an overlapping web of movements and ideologies sharing the conviction of an invariable inequality between human groups defined by their race, ethnicity, culture, or other collective identities and the support for violence as a political strategy. Regarding the terms "extreme" or "extremist," this study employs Berger's (2018) definition of the terms as the result of a collective and individual identity that is inseparably linked to a hostility towards an outgroup. Radicalization is understood to be "the process of the development of attitudes and beliefs that could lead to radical behaviors, including terrorism," while acknowledging that the majority of individuals holding radical or even extremist beliefs and attitudes do not engage in violent acts (Wolfowicz et al., 2020, p. 408).

Research on Gaming, Violence, and Extremist Radicalization

Research on the connection between the use of violent video games and violent behavior was accelerated by a wave of school shootings in the late 1990s. In the following years, studies have looked, for example, at the link to aggressiveness (e.g., Beck et al., 2012; Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2001), youth delinquency (DeLisi et al., 2013), societal levels of violence (Ferguson, 2015), and school shootings (e.g., Plener & Fegert, 2010). Overall, however, the empirical evidence is still inconclusive and debated (Ferguson & Wang, 2019; Gunter & Daly, 2012). Summarizing the state of the knowledge in this field, the American Psychological Association (APA) did not find enough empirical evidence to support a causal link between gaming and violent behavior (APA, 2020). Still, some indications for effects of excessive gaming (involving highly violent video games), for example, on the perception of violence or tendencies towards physical and verbal aggression should not be dismissed (Greitemeyer, 2014; Lin, 2013).

Connected to the main research focus of this present study, research has established that key ideological fragments such as racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, or toxic masculinity are widely present within the gaming community. A prime example is the so called "Gamergate" 2014 online harassment campaign directed against a female gamer and video game designer, which later turned into a breeding ground for the modern alt-right movement in the United States due to the strongly present extreme-right language and various overlapping ideological sentiments (Nagle, 2017). In the following, Gamergate was used as a token cultural conflict between left and right by the alt-right (Peckford, 2020). Follow-up studies have shown that the gaming environment is vulnerable, for example, for cyberbullying, bigotry, and stereotypical biases (Ballard & Welch, 2015), as well as racism, misogyny, and homophobia (Todd, 2015). These findings have been supported by a 2019 survey among U.S. gamers by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL, 2019). Almost one-quarter (23%) of the 1,045 respondents reported exposure to discussions about White supremacist ideology in online multiplayer games (ADL, 2019, p. 7). A large majority of respondents (73%) also stated that their gaming experience was shaped by harassment (ADL, 2019, p. 7). In short, it can be hypothesized that the spread of certain ideological fragments shared with

the extreme right (e.g., racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny), as well as the vulnerability for toxic and aggressive demeanor in the form of harassment guided by stereotypes could provide an effective breeding ground for extreme-right recruitment and radicalization within gaming environments.

Research on Gaming and Extremism or Terrorism

Because of the wave of video games produced by extremist and terrorist organizations in the early 2000s, a solid body of literature describing their contents, background, and ideological affiliation has developed. Prime examples of such video games are the "Special Forces" series by Hezbollah, which is in fact part of a broader tradition of video gaming used by jihadist terror organizations (Lakomy, 2017), and "Ethnic Cleansing" (2002), "ZOG's Nightmare," (2006) or "ZOG's Nightmare 2" (2007) within the extreme-right environment. However, the focus of most of the research in this field clearly and almost exclusively lies on descriptive formats, and little research assessing, for example, the effects of those games on the target groups has been done (Al-Rawi, 2018; Bolin & Blandy, 2003; Dauber et al., 2019; King & Leonard, 2014; Weimann, 2015). Furthermore, the goal to recruit and radicalize new members is usually assumed in most studies, which has been pointed out by Robinson and Whittaker (2021) as doubtful at least. Ideological contents in those video games are oftentimes not explained, gameplay is usually of low quality, and the overall entertainment value for complete outsiders appears to be minimal at best (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021; Selepak, 2010). In short, most recent research looking at the role of video games in extremist environments concludes that these are more likely used to strengthen social bonds between already radicalized members to create virtual communities (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021).

Beyond the infusion of ideological content into video games, a so-far understudied aspect is the social aspect of interaction, communication, and shared gameplay among extremists, terrorists, and outsiders as a potential main factor in recruitment and radicalization within video gaming contexts (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021). Furthermore, it has also been pointed out by Robinson and Whittaker (2021) that gamers of all types should be seen as rational actors who are aware of the fact that they willingly engage in a virtual and artificially created environment with one another. It is therefore inaccurate to assume that a certain extremist video game, gameplay narrative, or the interaction with extremist gamers has a somewhat automatic effect on potential recruits without their at least partial willingness to continue the engagement (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021, p. 18).

If and how much extremist and terrorist organizations use these potential mechanisms for recruitment within gaming contexts is debated among scholars. For example, Schlegel (2021b, p. 10) lists several strategic uses of gaming for extremist and terrorist organizations (e.g., create publicity, backup for contents, private and safe spaces for communication, spread of propaganda, recruitment). This is also assumed to be the case by some of the initially referenced works (CT-Coordinator, 2020; RAN, 2020a, 2020b; 2021). In stark contrast, recent empirical studies focusing on the scope and behavior of extreme-right groups on four gaming platforms (Steam, Discord, D-Live, Twitch) conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found little evidence for such strategic use: "[G]aming is predominantly used by extremists as a means of bonding with their peers over a shared hobby. That is to say extremists use games in much the same way as any of the millions of other gamers globally do—as a means of having fun, socialising and strengthening community" (Davey, 2021, p. 4). From the platforms that were assessed by ISD, Steam had the most

active and established far-right user community. However, the study could only identify 45 far-right groups of which only two had explicit links to violent or even terrorist far-right environments (Vaux et al., 2021). For those extreme-right groups identified in the report, historical-strategic war simulation games were highly popular, as well as joint activities such as online "raids" in which players join forces to act against other gamers or fundraising campaigns. On Discord, ISD's study series identified 24 English language servers with extreme-right contents and focus (Gallagher et al., 2021). According to the authors, Discord is also primarily used as a virtual venue for social interaction and community building within a comparatively safe and private space. Discord users who were active in the extreme-right groups were generally very young (average age of 15). In those groups, discussing ideologically framed online social activities such as in-game raids against perceived enemies was one of the most common themes. Furthermore, 13 of the 24 far-right Discord servers used forms of ideological vetting to assure only those with some level of ideology-specific knowledge and already present degree of radicalization entered. This shows that according to this ISD report, Discord as well does not appear to be used strategically by extreme-right groups beyond the building of a virtual community for insiders: "Their actions and conversations appear to be inward facing, that is, towards their existing communities and there appears to be little interest in actively trying to expand or grow their network via gaming platforms, content or communities. Their primary motive appeared to be trolling unsuspecting gamers with offensive content, rather than bringing new gamers into their communities" (Gallagher et al., 2021, pp. 6–7). It must be pointed out, that Schlegel (2021b, p. 5) referred to a significantly higher number of extreme-right Discord servers listed by an online watchdog organization (222). This stark discrepancy might be due to increased moderation and deplatforming attempts by Discord itself or differing definitions that were used to collect and assess the number of far-right groups on this platform. Looking at the third platform, the far right's use of D-Live was described as ambivalent in the ISD study series (Thomas, 2021). Assessing the contents of 100 extreme-right accounts on this streaming platform found that only seven of those posted videos of gaming activities, and only three included some form of extreme-right ideological references. Again, according to the authors, no strategic attempts at recruitment were identified. Finally, extreme-right activities on the streaming platform Twitch were also found to have little strategic coordination, even though far-right accounts and contents are widely present and easily identifiable (O'Connor, 2021).

Research on Radicalization Processes

The available knowledge about mechanisms and processes of violent extremist radicalization has increased significantly over the recent decades, leading to strong empirical evidence for normal psychological mechanisms, such as motivational processes, the impact of negative life experiences, sense of fundamental uncertainty, small group dynamics, or the role of "sacred values" (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018, p. 94). It also appears that the strongest effects on vulnerability to radicalization come from the familiar criminogenic risk factors, such as education, family, or leisure activities (Wolfowicz et al., 2020). With a focus on Germany, recent research has also established the importance of social networks, persuasive narratives, and need for personal significance in far-right radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2019). It must also be pointed out that modern terrorism and radicalization research has highlighted the social and emotional aspects of extremist ideologies and their transmission (Holbrook & Horgan, 2019; Khalil et al., 2019).

Summing up the state of the art on strategic use of gaming contexts by extremist and terrorist actors, its extent and specific characteristics appear to be debated among scholars. Beyond theoretically plausible or partially observed strategic uses, other studies found little empirical evidence for large-scale organizational attempts by extreme-right actors to influence outsiders and radicalize them into this environment. Instead, it was suggested, gaming contexts are rather used for online community building and social bonding among already radicalized and indoctrinated gamers. However, in contrast to the organizational-strategic level of gaming exploitation by extremist actors, the organic or individual level use might be much more relevant for explaining extremist (far-right) recruitment and radicalization in these environments.

Research on Organic Use of Gaming Contexts by Far-Right Actors

According to Schlegel (2021b, p. 11), radicalized individuals and members of extremist environments might also use gaming platforms and play video games for their (nonpolitical) entertainment or (maybe even simultaneously) because they perceive certain values and attitudes in gaming environments (e.g., racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny) to be hospitable to their own beliefs and preferences. Described by Schlegel (2021b, p. 11) as "organic" or in other words nonstrategic use of gaming contexts by extremists and terrorists could be a much more relevant aspect of radicalization processes in these environments, since radicalized and nonradicalized individuals meet each other in a casual context with shared interests (e.g., playing a certain video game) without the potentially off-putting effect of an organization trying to advertise its ideology. This creates fluid and dynamically changing social networks with the potential to facilitate deeper friendships or relationships beyond the boundaries of specific groups or organizations. Such involvement in fluid environments in gaming environments that were nevertheless dominated by extremist attitudes were, for example, an important aspect in the radicalization processes of the Christchurch and Halle attackers, seen through the fact that they posted their manifestos and live streams on gaming platforms and used video game references in their statements (Koehler, 2019; Macklin, 2019; Schlegel, 2020). It appears that many violent far-right actors increasingly come from such fluid environments, in which no formal membership to an extreme-right organization or group in the strict sense was part of the radicalization process. This development, described as "hive terrorism," is most clearly visible in Germany (Koehler, 2018) and the United States, where in the group of the January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill rioters over half the people charged were not connected to extremist groups or to one another (Williams, 2021). It is hypothesized that a combination of mobilization opportunities (e.g., a refugee crisis, the U.S. election, the COVID-10 pandemic), the consumption of extremist subcultural products (e.g., music, texts, videos) and social interaction (online or offline) with radicalized individuals or in communities dominated by relevant ideological components (e.g., anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories, racism, misogyny) could facilitate the evolution of "hive terrorism" (Koehler, 2018). The development of beliefs and convictions related to ideological fragments such as misogyny or conspiracy theories might be connected to an increasing support for extremist violence and might trigger cognitive opening for further radicalization (Rottweiler et al., 2021; Rottweiler & Gill, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2022).

A key development in the recent research literature is the critical perspective on the separation between online and offline realities. Social media activities often include a dynamic and hybrid mixture of both worlds, since persons oftentimes do engage with each other on those

platforms about their offline experiences (e.g., bullying, social isolation, mental health issues, but also positive experiences). On the other hand, online engagements can and do change offline behaviors as well. Hence, it was suggested to speak of "Onlife" relationships and realities instead (Valentini et al., 2020).

Summing up the state of the art on research regarding gaming contexts and extremist radicalization or recruitment, as well as violent behavior, the literature appears to be underdeveloped, especially in regard to the specific mechanisms of interactions between radicalized and nonradicalized gamers (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021). Despite a stark increase in scholarly interest in this field in recent years and the creation of a dedicated research network focused on this issue in October 2021 (the Extremism and Gaming Research Network hosted by the Royal United Services Institute—RUSI), the available literature remains mostly theoretical due to the difficulty of accessing relevant data and observing such interactions online. To address this pressing gap, this study continues to explore unique data of far-right radicalization of minors in gaming environments.

Method and Sources

The empirical basis for this study consists of police-investigation files for two cases of children who radicalized into the far right on the context of online gaming platforms. Both children came to the authorities' attention through far-right behavior (e.g., the use of Nazi symbols, shouting the Hitler salute, or writing a manifesto for a terrorist attack). In both cases, fully anonymized case file material was provided for the analysis by the State Office for Criminal Investigation (Landeskriminalamt—LKA) of the German state Baden-Wuerttemberg. Since both cases involve minors who are not criminally liable under the German criminal code (younger than age 14), the authorities did not investigate the two children but unknown third parties for the potential incitement to crimes or the use of illegal extremist codes and symbols. In order to fully protect the identity of the two children, further steps to avoid any possibility of identifying the cases (e.g., through media reporting) have been undertaken, and the sociodemographic information given in the analysis is kept deliberately vague compared to similar case-study approaches. Details for the two cases and the assessed material will be provided below. If not stated otherwise, all direct quotes from the material are provided in our translation to English from German.

The material was independently assessed by the three authors using qualitative content analysis methodology (Mayring, 2000). Separately, each author read the case-file documents and explored the available data with the lead task of providing potential answers to the following guiding questions:

- What radicalization pathways can be identified in the present case studies?
- Where and how are gaming platforms involved in these pathways?
- Which role are gaming platforms playing in the radicalization processes of the two cases as far as can be determined?
- Which push-and-pull factors driving the radicalization pathways can be identified?

Afterwards, all three qualitative assessments were consolidated and merged into the discussion section. Contradictory assessments were resolved through discussing the empirical evidence and reaching a consensus among the authors. This approach clearly shows the explorative and qualitative nature of the present study. In no way do we claim generalizable findings, and

we are fully aware of the limitations due to the small and highly selective number of cases. Nevertheless, since essentially no detailed insights into the specific nature and mechanisms of radicalization processes within the online gaming environment exist, we are confident that our analyses provide unique and highly valuable empirical evidence for at least a certain type of process that can be found in these online communities.

Case Studies

Both cases involve male children under the age of 14 during the time the German authorities learned about the potential crimes or violent acts. The material that was provided for qualitative assessment includes background information for each case as far as the investigating officers were able to determine through their own collection of evidence, results of digital forensics such as relevant data found on the children's cell phones and computers, as well as transcripts of the children's questioning by police officers. Both cases became known to the German authorities between 2016 and 2021.

Case "A"

"A" first attracted attention in school when his change of behavior was noticed by fellow students. This involved the spreading of National Socialist propaganda and anti-Semitic paroles, as well as the showing of violent videos on his cell phone to other children. Further, "A" changed his profile picture on the school's cloud server to Nazi symbolism. According to his own statements during the questioning by police, "A" experienced bullying in school and suffered from severe conflicts with one paternal part of his family. "A" also claimed to have not really thought about any of those concerning behaviors noted within the schooling context. Resulting from the digital forensics work by police investigators, numerous pictures and videos were secured from "A"'s cell phone. Most of those depict scenes (screenshots) from video games that he played himself. "A" also collected videos about video game programming and design. At least one video secured by the authorities appears to have far-right contents as it glorifies the German Wehrmacht and trivializes the Second World War. The radicalization pathway of "A" was described by himself during the questioning and by the police officers as following: "A" established what he called a "friendship" to a person presumably aged 16 ("A-1") living in another German state through shared interest in playing a historic strategy-simulation game focusing on the Second World War on the gaming platform "Roblox." In the following, "A" invited "A-1" into his own gaming group on Roblox. The friendship between the two was intensified on the platform "Discord," where "A-1" in turn invited "A" into a chat group (called "server"), which was clearly recognizable as far-right motived through the open use of Nazi symbolism, for example, in the group's description and avatar. The group's name was "NSDAP" (the abbreviation for the German Nazi party: Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei); its avatar on the Discord server displayed a swastika and the NSDAP logo. Since "A-1" also used clearly recognizable far-right codes and symbols on Roblox as well, there was no surprise for "A" to be invited into a far-right Discord server. "A" was given the status of "recruit" in the far-right Discord server. While playing the mutually enjoyed video game on Roblox, politics and ideology did not play any role whatsoever. Instead, the entertainment and enjoyment derived from the gameplay dominated the friendship for "A" up until the point where he was invited into the far-right Discord server. There in turn politics and ideology, especially anti-Semitism, constituted the

sole purpose and contents. This nonpublic group contained about 10 to 20 members, who widely glorified National Socialism. The goal of the group, according to "A," was to "liberate the country of all Jews and fags." The originally shared interest in playing a specific video game was irrelevant in this group, which was structured in an attempt to mimic a political party with clear hierarchies (e.g., leader and deputy leader), as well as subgroups with names such as "SS" or "SA" in reference to the Nazi stormtroopers (Sturmabteilung—SA) and protection squad (Schutzstaffel—SS). Specific rules were put in place within the group, for example, to ban Jews and homosexuals from becoming members. In order to gain access to more information or status in the group, an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler and the German Reich had to be given. These rules were created and implemented by the leader of the group ("A-2"), to which "A" never had any direct personal contact. However, the nickname and avatar of "A-2" also clearly indicate an extreme-right ideological position. In the following, it was mainly "A-1" who, according to statements by "A," attempted to involve him in discussions about politics and ideology and thereby to radicalize him, as well as to bring him to offline behavioral changes or certain actions. Specifically, for example, "A-1" told "A" to shout the Hitler salute in school or at home, which he did, and which thereby caused suspicion about a potential radicalization among his teachers. According to his own statements, "A" never gave any thought to these actions but simply followed the instructions of "A-1" because "he was the deputy leader of the group." "A-1" was not a "role model as such" but had authority over "A" through his position in the hierarchy of the group. It is noteworthy, that "A" states he had tried dissociating himself from the far-right Discord group several times but failed to do so for unspecified reasons.

Case "B"

"B" initially became known to the German authorities by information from an anonymous American person who self-identified as "Nazi" and warned about a potential rampage shooting attack against a German school. This informant was in possession of a manifesto that indicated the attack plot and named schools or synagogues as potential targets. The manifesto was passed on to the authorities and assessed by investigators, eventually leading to the identification of "B." The manifesto contains clear and widespread anti-Semitism, racism, far-right conspiracy theories (e.g., the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory), and it refers to previous far-right terror attacks (e.g., Christchurch, New Zealand, or Halle, Germany). According to the manifesto, "life can only make sense through an attack." During the police investigation, it became known that "B" also displayed concerning behavior at school going back at least a year. For example, he voiced positive attitudes and the glorification of the Ku Klux Klan and terrorist attacks, shared videos of school shootings with fellow students, and explained to them options for acquiring weapons or the functionality of the so-called "Darknet." According to the police reports and "B's" statements, he had three main contacts or influencers during his radicalization process: "B-1" (a Swede, ca. 15 years old), "B-2" (a contact from another German state), and "B-3" (a U.S. American, ca. 15 years old). These three contacts are presented in the material by "B" himself as having exerted significant pressure on "B" to write this manifesto and execute the attack, as well as having taught him "everything about National Socialism." "B" received large amounts of far-right propaganda material from them via the platform "Bitchute." He also regularly received links to webpages explaining how to build weapons such as those used in the Halle attack in Germany. The process of radicalization and pressure into behavioral changes lasted at least 1 year. Besides his cell phone, "B" had no other hobbies, and the material includes indications for parental neglect. The report by the officers in charge of the

investigation concludes that "B" was highly impressionable through his gaming contacts and that he did possess detailed but highly one-sided knowledge about the Third Reich. According to the report, "B" also attempted to "flee from reality" into a far-right "illusory world" online. Neither in school nor in his family did "B" receive any education about the historical contexts of the Second World War, the Third Reich, or National Socialism up until the point he met extreme-right peers online. Through the chats that were saved by investigators, it becomes visible that "B" was also very much fascinated by pseudo-military uniforms and equipment of far-right terrorists such as the Halle attacker. He also attempted to collect rare pictures of those terrorists and displayed pride in possessing them. As for his motives and his own perception of the events leading to his questioning by the police, "B" stated that he feels he had been "somehow drawn into" everything. He first used the gaming platform Roblox and then started to engage with his later extreme-right contacts via Discord. Shortly afterwards, he began to display the previously mentioned concerning behavior in school. These extreme-right contacts quickly began sending "B" "propaganda videos from fascists," which according to his statements initially did not interest him much. He watched the videos because "you simply do it like that." The three "friends" explained and taught him everything about the "true meaning of fascism," and he also received videos from the U.S. right-wing terrorist group "Atomwaffen Division" (AWD), as well as speeches by Adolf Hitler and other videos via Bitchute. "B" and "B-3" both expressed their willingness to commit an attack regularly. The goal was to beat the "high score" from New Zealand (Christchurch attack). Initially, "B" states that he was not interested in this, but he then received increasingly direct instructions from the others to conduct an attack and write the manifesto.

"B" states that he did not plan to execute the attack described in the manifesto in all sincerity. He was "afraid to feel like a total loser" if he would have refused to write the document. Also, "B" feared to leave the group for potential repression and acts of revenge from the other members (e.g., through the use of so-called IP-grabber programs identifying him and connecting him to extreme-right postings). "B" himself states that he found his "friends too crass and radical" but that he felt incapable of disengaging from the situation. To the investigating officers, he voiced his concerns that "one can radicalize very quickly [on those platforms] and get in touch with such people." Even though far-right gamers such as his contacts are repeatedly deplatformed due to their extreme postings, they always quickly regained access with new accounts. Asked specifically about the motives for writing the manifesto, "B" replied that he "simply wanted to be cool" and be part of the conversation, as well as "gain respect" because he was younger than most of the other group members. He wanted to "make an impression" and felt that it would have "looked stupid" if he would not have claimed to have the intention to conduct an attack. To some degree, his statements therefore display contradictions, especially regarding the intention and original idea for the potential attack plot, which sometimes are stated to have come from the "friends" with direct pressure on the one hand and from himself due to a quest for significance on the other. According to "B," posting hate speech and extreme-right propaganda (e.g., a swastika) ensures one quickly gains attention in chat groups. Asked about his hatred of Jews and non-Europeans, "B" replied that his "friends" explained to him that these people would be "subhumans and inferior races." "B" simply accepted this explanation and began "reading a lot about this." Further, he was told that it would be the highest goal "to die for the white race" instead of "being the subject of an inferior race."

Resulting from the digital forensics work by police investigators, over 600 pictures and numerous videos with extreme-right, anti-Semitic, conspiracy theoretical, and historically revisionist contents were secured. Especially noteworthy are those memes displaying an ideological mixture of extreme-right and jihadist contents based on shared anti-Semitism, such as the glorification of the Islamist terror organization Hamas while using the Nazi SS

bolts. "B" also collected numerous PDF files focused on "expedient homemade firearms" on his cell phone. Furthermore, "B" was involved in several chat groups or servers on Discord with a clearly visible far-right focus displayed through the prominent use of extreme-right codes and symbols as the groups' avatars or logos. "B" himself regularly used far-right slang in his own chat messages and produced selfie pictures and memes of himself using the aesthetic and ideological references from the so-called "terrorgram" subculture around groups like AWD (Johnson & Feldman, 2021). For example, he used the slogan "rather total war than total replacement" (in English) in combination with a picture of himself and the SS death's head. The secured material also contains an ideological questionnaire filled out by "B." The exact purpose and origin are unclear, but "B" posted his answers to his extreme-right "friends" into the chat group with them on Discord. The questionnaire has a total of 10 questions, among others focusing on race, ideology, historical knowledge, and the reason for wanting to become a member. In his replies, "B" states his ideology as "National Socialist" and explains this thought system to be a "radical anti-Semitic ideology with similar characteristics as Fascism, only more radical." As for the motivation to join the group, "B" states in the questionnaire that he was looking for a group and wanted to "meet people." His most important skill and strength according to "B's" replies is his knowledge about "anthropology." Consequently, most of the chats secured by the investigators evolved around biological racism. It is also noteworthy that "B" displayed a strong intrinsic motivation to become integrated into this specific group. In many documented chats, it was "B" who initiated the conversation, pushed it further to extreme contents, or posted certain memes and material without being prompted to do so by the others. In some cases, this was even ignored by the other group members, causing "B" to voice frustration and repeat his postings. This increases the impression that "B" was at least in some part strongly driven by the quest for recognition and integration into this social environment.

Discussion and Findings

Revisiting the guiding research questions for the exploration of the case-study material, both children's radicalization pathways became publicly visible through concerning behavioral changes within the school environment. Both children got into contact with far-right gamers via the gaming platforms Roblox and Discord. This contact, according to the available data, led to swift and significant influence upon both children with the aim to radicalize them and cause offline behavioral changes, such as, for example, shouting the Hitler salute, distributing extreme-right propaganda, or announcing violent acts. Even though various ideological enemy groups were presented to the children, the significantly more salient role of anti-Semitic hatred (oftentimes in close connection with the glorification of National Socialism) must be pointed out. The present data seems to validate Valentini et al.'s (2020) concept of "Onlife" hybrid connections between online and offline realities. Fluid interactions between both sides in both cases were clearly visible throughout the radicalization pathways. The radicalization was based on social and emotional ties, which despite a lack of personal contacts was established through joint nonpolitical leisure activities: playing video games. This in turn strongly supports the previously mentioned recent focus on emotional and social components as carriers or amplifiers of extremist ideologies (Holbrook & Horgan, 2019). It appears that sharing the experience of playing video games can be an effective source for building trust, social rapport, and respect, which provides the social–emotional "glue" that binds potential recruits to extremist actors in the absence of other direct personal connections (e.g., going

on extremist concerts or rallies together). Interestingly, this connection created a form of emotional dependency upon the extreme-right actors and groups, described by both children as "friendships" or "belonging," which they were afraid to jeopardize, for example, through leaving the group or not obeying instructions. It seems that the far-right Discord groups effectively suppressed the option to join any other of the countless alternative groups on gaming platforms that might have provided social rapport, recognition, or significance, which also strongly supports previous works on German far-right radicalization and the importance of social networks, persuasive narratives, and personal significance (Kruglanski et al., 2019).

The specific influence on the two children was enforced through a virtually constructed social hierarchy. Instructions or calls for certain acts were obeyed by both because they came from leaders or deputy leaders in the relevant Discord groups. These virtual hierarchies were infused with meaning and efficacy through the connection to specific benefits, such as access to certain information or rights within the group. Further, being part of the hierarchy and a member of the group was given the aura of elitism and exclusivity through initial access barriers such as pledging an oath or answering a questionnaire. These methods might have increase feelings of pride or recognition among the children and further decreased the perception of alternative options.

What, then, was the role of gaming platforms in the radicalization pathways of the two cases assessed here, and how was gaming as a social activity involved? The findings seem to validate the main conclusions from the ISD study series (Davey, 2021) at least in part. Video games were not used as strategic recruitment tools by far-right groups and organizations. However, it must be pointed out that the data does not contain information about who initiated the first contact and with what specific intentions to "A" and "B." It might be possible that more subtle forms of extremist recruitment and radicalization were at play here, since the far-right contacts who were instrumental for the following radicalization did not mask their ideological position but in contrast openly used codes and symbols associated with the extreme right while engaging with other gamers. This alone might have been done to generate initial interest by some users to reach out and establish a first contact. In both cases, the children were fully aware about the ideology of their "friends" and the groups and at no point expressed any surprise when they were confronted more intensively with radicalization attempts. This does suggest a certain provoked interest on the side of the recruited children through the open use of ideological codes and symbols. What nevertheless was clearly visible through the data is the effectiveness of gaming environments as a social space for meeting and exchanging ideas with other people (including extremists). This process of social interaction based on mutually shared interest and hobbies (i.e., playing a certain video game) was not solely driven by the far-right gamers. On the contrary, it became clear through the data exploration that both children actively sought such contacts as well, for various reasons. The mechanism that in the end resulted in the two becoming radicalized by right-wing extremists can more fittingly be described as a highly dynamic process of "finding each other." In further support of the ISD reports' conclusions, playing video games had virtually no importance within the far-right Discord groups. Gaming as a social activity provided the sphere in which social contacts and networks were initiated, which then led to closed groups with the sole purpose of radicalization.

Finally, the question for identifiable push-and-pull factors for far-right radicalization and recruitment pathways in gaming environments revealed yet again the dynamic interaction between online and offline elements. Both cases display (partially very strong) indications of parental neglect and conflicts with the children, as well as biographical breaks and lack of social integration or leisure activities outside of the gaming community. There is evidence of bullying experiences, a lack

of self-esteem, and the strong desire for recognition and social status (i.e., quest for significance). Based on the childrens' own statements, it appears that those offline factors significantly impacted their desire to integrate into a (perceived) exclusive or elite online social community in their search for belonging and status, as well as a reluctance to leave these groups, which aligns well with research that has highlighted these familiar criminogenic factors (Wolfowicz et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The explorative analysis of the two case studies presented in this article provides a more detailed look at far-right recruitment and radicalization processes within online gaming environments based on unique empirical data. Despite the limitations of the small case-study sample and the highly selective case material, we are still confident that the following main findings provide valuable insights for an emerging research field.

A key finding from our assessment is that online gaming environments indeed function as a social network that provides a space for interaction based on mutually shared interests. Playing video games together appears to be an effective source for social bonding, trust, and respect even when no other personal contact exists. Far-right extremists do operate in these environments, either because they look to spread their ideology and recruit new members to their cause, or simply because they too enjoy this activity. Their sole presence in these environments with openly visible ideological convictions was enough in our case studies to initiate a first interest in the core themes of this ideology.

Furthermore, far-right networks on gaming platforms in our sample operated by providing virtually created social status and hierarchies to enforce their radicalization processes that were directed at creating offline behavioral changes. Since no organizational and strategic recruitment campaign was visible in our sample, it was nevertheless possible to provide insights into how recruitment and radicalization might work despite the lack of such strategic use. For the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) within the gaming environment, our findings point to the importance of raising more (offline) awareness about the mechanisms of online grooming by extremists in gaming environments in connection with potential real-life push factors such as bullying, lack of social integration, and parental neglect. Furthermore, basic knowledge about the gaming environment, its language, platforms, norms, and values need to be much more present among educators and other relevant professions who might be tasked with the safeguarding of children. Regarding P/CVE activities within the gaming environment, our study suggests focusing at least in part on the visibility and perceivability of alternative sources for social rapport, status, recognition, and hierarchy in order to provide attractive alternatives for those potential recruits described here.

Finally, we note the importance of more empirical data exploration for future research. Especially pressing appears the connection between certain gamer types (Schlegel, 2021a) and vulnerability to specific recruitment and radicalization mechanisms employed by far-right or other extremists in the gaming community. Our study provides a first and very narrow look into the engagement between "would-be extremists, terrorists, and their sympathizers" (Robinson & Whittaker, 2021, p. 18). Clearly, much more exploration of all facets of this engagement is still necessary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Daniel Koehler, State Office of Criminal Investigation Baden-Wuerttemberg, Taubenheimstraße 85, 70372 Stuttgart, Germany. E-mail: daniel.koehler@konex.bwl.de

REFERENCES

ADL. (2019). *Free to play? Hate, harassment and positive social experiences in online games*. Online Report: Anti-Defamation League.

Al-Rawi, A. (2018). Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0. *Terrorism and Political Violence, 30*(4), 740–760. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1207633

APA. (2020). *APA resolution on violent video games*. https://www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-violent-video-games.pdf

Ballard, M. E., & Welch, K. M. (2015). Virtual warfare: Cyberbullying and cyber-victimization in MMOG play. *Games and Culture, 12*(5), 466–491.

Beck, V. S., Boys, S., Rose, C., & Beck, E. (2012). Violence against women in video games: A prequel or sequel to rape myth acceptance? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 27*(15), 3016–3031.

Bensley, L., & Van Eenwyk, J. (2001). Video games and real-life aggression: Review of the literature. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 29*(4), 244–257.

Berger, J. M. (2018). *Extremism*. The MIT Press.

Bolin, P. E., & Blandy, D. (2003). Beyond visual culture: Seven statements of support for material culture studies in art education. *Studies in Art Education, 44*(3), 246–263.

CT-Coordinator. (2020). *Online gaming in the context of the fight against terrorism* (9066/20). Council of the European Union.

Dauber, C. E., Robinson, M. D., Baslious, 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.

Davey, J. (2021). *Gamers who hate: An introduction to ISD's gaming and extremism series*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

Dearden, L. (2021, July 6). Three-quarters of children arrested on suspicion of terror offences are far-right extremists. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/child-terrorists-uk-far-right-b1878535.html

DeLisi, M., Vaughn, M. G., Gentile, D. A., Anderson, C. A., & Shook, J. J. (2013). Violent video games, delinquency, and youth violence: New evidence. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 11*(2), 132–142.

Edison-Hayden, M. (2018, January 16). Neo-Nazi website daily stormer is 'designed to target children' as young as 11 for radicalization, editor claims. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/website-daily-stormer-designed-target-children-editor-claims-782401

EUROPOL. (2021). *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2020*. European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation.

Ferguson, C. J. (2015). Does movie or video game violence predict societal violence? It depends on what you look at and when. *Journal of Communication, 65*(1), 193–212.

Ferguson, C. J., & Wang, J. C. (2019). Aggressive video games are not a risk factor for future aggression in youth: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 48*(8), 1439–1451.

Forchtner, B. (2021, June 24). The far-right is now using comic books to spread their ideology. *Rantt Media*. https://rantt.com/the-far-right-is-now-using-comic-books-to-spread-their-ideology

Gallagher, A., O'Connor, C., Vaux, P., Thomas, E., & Davey, J. (2021). *The extreme right on discord*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

Gøtzsche-Astrup, O. (2018). The time for causal designs: Review and evaluation of empirical support for mechanisms of political radicalisation. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 39,* 90–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.02.003

Greitemeyer, T. (2014). Intense acts of violence during video game play make daily life aggression appear innocuous: A new mechanism why violent video games increase aggression. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 50,* 52–56.

Gunter, W. D., & Daly, K. (2012). Causal or spurious: Using propensity score matching to detangle the relationship between violent video games and violent behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior, 28*(4), 1348–1355.

Hamm, M. (1993). *American skinheads: the criminology and control of hate crime*. Praeger.

Holbrook, D., & Horgan, J. (2019). Terrorism and ideology: Cracking the nut. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 13*(6), 2–15.

IEP. (2020). *Global Terrorism Index 2020. Measuring the impact of terrorism*. Institute for Economics and Peace.

Johnson, B., & Feldman, M. (2021). *Siege culture after siege: Anatomy of a Neo-Nazi terrorist doctrine*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague (ICCT).

Khalil, J., Horgan, J., & Zeuthen, M. (2019). The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) model of violent extremism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1699793

King, C. R., & Leonard, D. J. (2014). *Beyond hate: White power and popular culture*. Routledge.

Koehler, D. (2018). Recent trends in German right-wing violence and terrorism: What are the contextual factors behind 'Hive Terrorism'? *Perspectives on Terrorism, 12*(6), 72–88.

Koehler, D. (2019). The Halle, Germany, synagogue attack and the evolution of the far-right terror threat. *CTC Sentinel, 12*(11), 14–20.

Kruglanski, A. W., Webber, D., & Koehler, D. (2019). *The Radical's journey: How German Neo-Nazis voyaged to the edge and back*. Oxford University Press.

Lakomy, M. (2017). 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

Lin, J.-H. (2013). Identification matters: A moderated mediation model of media interactivity, character identification, and video game violence on aggression. *Journal of Communication, 63*(4), 682–702.

Macklin, G. (2019). The Christchurch attacks: Livestream terror in the viral video age. *CTC Sentinel, 12*(6), 18–29.

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1*(2), 1–10 http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089/2385

Miller-Idriss, C. (2018). *The extreme gone mainstream: Commercialization and far right youth cuture in Germany*. Princeton University Press.

Nagle, A. (2017). *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. John Hunt Publishing.

O'Connor, C. (2021). *The extreme right on twitch*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

Peckford, A. (2020). Right wing extremism in a video game community? A qualitative content analysis exploring the discourse of the reddit gamergate community r/KotakuInAction. In *A closer look in unusual times: Criminological perspectives from crim 862* (pp. 65–81). Simon Fraser University.

Plener, P., & Fegert, J. M. (2010). What's going on here? Video games and school shootings. *Nervenheilkunde, 29*(7–8), 446–450.

RAN. (2020a, November 9). *Extremists' Use of Video Gaming—Strategies and Narratives*. Paper presented at the RAN C&N meeting—Extremists' use of video gaming—Strategies and narratives. 15 and 17 September 2020 Digital meeting.

RAN. (2020b, December 23). *The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation*. Paper presented at the Conclusion Paper: RAN small-scale expert session 'The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation' Online, 25 November 2020.

RAN. (2021). *Digital Grooming Tactics on Video Gaming & Video Gaming Adjacent Platforms: Threats and Opportunities*. Paper presented at the Conclusion Paper: RAN C&N—Digital grooming tactics on video gaming (adjacent) platforms, 15–16 March 2021, Online event.

Robinson, N., & Whittaker, J. (2021). Playing for hate? Extremism, terrorism, and videogames. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866740

Rottweiler, B., Clemmow, C., & Gill, P. (2021). Misogyny, violent extremism and interpersonal violence: Examining the mediating and contingent effects of revenge motivation, hypermasculinity, collective narcissism and group threats. *Preprint*. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/sy84m

Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2020). Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The contingent effects of self-efficacy, self-control and law-related morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288

Schlegel, L. (2020). Jumanji extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes. *Journal for Deradicalization, 2020*(23), 1–44.

Schlegel, L. (2021a). Connecting, competing, and trolling: "User types" in digital gamified radicalization processes. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *XV*(4), 54–64.

Schlegel, L. (2021b). *Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms. Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures*. Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN).

Selepak, A. (2010). Skinhead Super Mario Brothers: An examination of racist and violent games on white supremacist web sites. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 17*(1), 1–47.

Thomas, E. (2021). *The extreme right on DLive*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

Todd, C. (2015). Commentary: GamerGate and resistance to the diversification of gaming culture. *Women's Studies Journal, 29*(1), 66–67.

Valentini, D., Lorusso, A. M., & Stephan, A. (2020, March). Onlife extremism: Dynamic integration of digital and physical spaces in radicalization. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11,* 1–15.

Vaux, P., Gallagher, A., & Davey, J. (2021). *The extreme right on steam*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2022). Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica, 52,* 18–32. https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.17

Weimann, G. (2015). *Terrorism in cyberspace*. Columbia University Press.

Williams, P. (2021, March 2). Most charged in Capitol riot had no connection to extremist groups or one another, report finds. *NBC News*.

Wolfowicz, M., Litmanovitz, Y., Weisburd, D., & Hasisi, B. (2020). A field-wide systematic review and meta-analysis of putative risk and protective factors for radicalization outcomes. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 36*(3), 407–447. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-019-09439-4