
Positive Play: Can gamification support P/CVE measures?

By Linda Schlegel

Introduction

In the last years, the ‘gamification of extremism’ has gained an increasing amount of attention in both research and practice. From the development of original games and the modification of existing popular games such as *Call of Duty*, to the use of in-game chats and gaming adjacent platforms for communication and recruitment purposes, the appropriation of video game aesthetics and references, as well as the transfer of game elements such as points and rankings to contexts outside of games, extremists make increasing use of elements of ‘play’ in the online sphere.¹

Both right-wing extremist actors as well as Islamists seek to utilize the appeal of game elements for their ends, for instance by adding ranking systems to their forums and Discord servers or by appropriating the visual style of popular first-person shooter games in their propaganda videos and livestreamed attacks via helmet cameras.²

¹ For an overview, see Verdegal & Wouterse (2020) “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

² Schlegel (2020) “Jumanji Extremism? How games and gamification could facilitate radicalization processes”

Such gaming elements have multiple advantages, including generating attention, increasing the ‘coolness’ of propaganda by mimicking popular culture, but also by providing positive reinforcement as well as the opportunity for competition and social connection while ‘playing’.³

As game elements have large popular appeal and seem to play a role in extremist communication as well as, potentially, in digital radicalization processes, it is logical to ask whether game components could also support P/CVE measures. Both research and practical experiences of using gamification in efforts against digital extremism must currently be regarded as limited and severely underdeveloped. The following article briefly introduces gamification and then discusses preliminary ideas of possible avenues for the application of gamified elements in digital P/CVE approaches. It is based on the recently published RAN paper “The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE”⁴ and is meant as an invitation to discuss potential applications of gamification in prevention and intervention work rather than as an established recommendation.

What is gamification?

There is no universally accepted definition of gamification, but it is most often understood as the “use of game design elements within non-game contexts”.⁵ It refers to the transfer of game elements such as point, badges, leaderboards, quests, or guilds into contexts not traditionally regarded as spaces of play. Gamification is aimed at behavioral change, i.e. nudging users into engaging in a ‘desired action’, and can therefore be characterized as a motivational driver. For instance, competing with friends on a fitness app for badges may motivate users to go to the gym more often, whereas collecting points for taking one’s medicine on time may persuade patients to be more attentive to their medication schedule.⁶

Gamifying user experiences means making them more ‘fun’ and entertaining, adding external rewards and small positive reinforcement such as getting points for writing comments, as well as scoreboards to encourage friendly competition between users and motivating them to keep engaging in order to earn more points and move up the leaderboard. It may also entail encouraging socially-driven users to work in teams and guilds on collaborative tasks and taking part in quests in order to be eligible for a ‘level up’, i.e. a better ranking indicating their commitment to the group efforts. Overall, gamification may encourage users to log on more often and invest time into engaging with the gamified elements, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will carry out the ‘desired actions’.⁷

<https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/359>

³ Schlegel (2021) “Working Paper: The Role of Gamification in Radicalization Processes” <https://modus-zad.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/modus-working-paper-12021.pdf>

⁴ Schlegel (2021) „The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE” https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_ad-hoc_pap_gamification_20210215_en.pdf

⁵ Deterding et al. (2011) “From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining gamification”, p. 1 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230854710_From_Game_Design_Elements_to_Gamefulness_Defining_Gamification

⁶ Blohm & Leimeister (2013) “Gamification: Design of IT-based enhancing services for motivational support and behavioral change” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260988461_Gamification_Design_of_IT-Based_Enhancing_Services_for_Motivational_Support_and_Behavioral_Change

⁷ Schlegel (2021) “Working Paper: The Role of Gamification in Radicalization Processes” <https://modus-zad.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/modus-working-paper-12021.pdf>

The potential for gamification in P/CVE

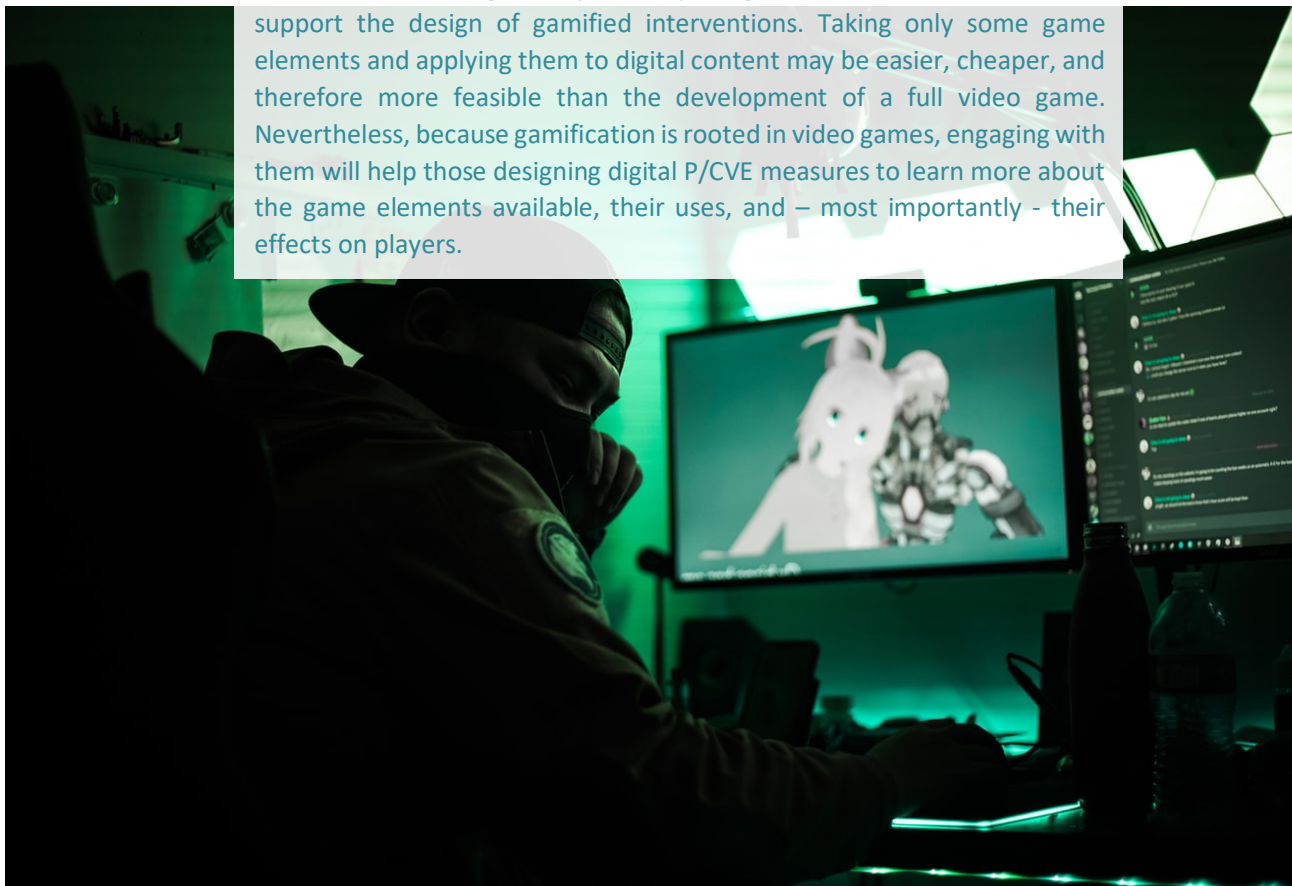
There is little theoretical underpinning and practical experience for the use of gamification in the context of digital P/CVE. The following discussion points are therefore based on knowledge derived from the study of gamification and its effects in other contexts as well as related research on video games and related topics.

Type of interventions

Due to the lack of empirical evidence, it is not possible to adequately judge where gamification might be applied most effectively. It is reasonable to assume, however, that primary prevention and PVE rather than CVE may be the most promising areas of application as users already on a pathway to radicalization are unlikely to be moved simply because they enjoy collecting points in a digital application. Gamification may be an effective tool to generate attention to the content produced by PVE actors but will not have any deradicalizing effects. However, at this stage, nothing should be excluded as unfeasible and gamified applications will have to follow a trial-and-error approach to test where gamification can support efforts against extremism most effectively.

Knowledge needed

Similar to other digital interventions, the application of gamification will benefit from a thorough knowledge on Internet culture and 'language, including memes, emojis, and other stylistic elements of digital communication. It will also profit from knowledge on games and gaming, as well as more technical knowledge such as game design or the psychology of human-computer interactions. In addition, an engagement with video games used to communicate positive narratives and the growing number of video games used for education, to counter issues such as disinformation, and games specifically designed for the P/CVE context, will support the design of gamified interventions. Taking only some game elements and applying them to digital content may be easier, cheaper, and therefore more feasible than the development of a full video game. Nevertheless, because gamification is rooted in video games, engaging with them will help those designing digital P/CVE measures to learn more about the game elements available, their uses, and – most importantly – their effects on players.



Generating attention

Theoretically, gamification can be applied with various goals in mind and various degrees of (technical) sophistication. At this early stage, it is, however, most likely that game elements will be applied first and foremost to generate attention for digital P/CVE campaigns. Because gamification can increase the entertainment appeal of content, it may be a tool to ‘cut through the noise’ online and draw users to campaigns and P/CVE social media channels because they offer ‘fun’ ways of engaging. Initially, technical sophistication of such gamified content will be low and operate with a trial-and-error approach. For instance, practitioners could choose to test 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 (leaderboard), and the winner gets a ‘shout out’ (symbolic reward). Or they could dare their followers to complete a challenge (quest) on Tik Tok and post a video of themselves completing it, while encouraging the community to comment (social relatedness).

Focus on emotions

Gamified P/CVE measures should be designed with purpose and could facilitate various goals. The golden question is “What do I want users to feel?” more than “What looks cool?”.⁸ Using game elements is not an end in itself but is meant to elicit emotional states in users to motivate them to take the ‘desired action’. For instance, loss avoidance (e.g. avoiding points being taken away) may drive motivation just like feeling empowered, socially connected, or inspired by an epic narrative may, but each makes the user feel different and will therefore motivate differently. Gamification should be driven by considerations of such emotional states and different reasons for motivation as to avoid eliciting negative emotions in users.

Potential for evaluation

Gamification often includes quantifiable measures such as the number of points or badges collected, the number of users that reached a certain level, or the amount of quests completed. Users that have collected more points and completed more quests, have probably engaged with the content more thoroughly than users with less points. Such active participation may also indicate a deeper engagement with the content presented than, for instance, merely clicking on a video. Therefore, gamified elements could also support the evaluation of P/CVE measures as they may provide an indication of how many people engaged with the content and how sustained and thorough that engagement was. Such information may provide valuable information to practitioners designing such interventions and could be used in evaluations that go beyond engagement metrics to determine the ‘success’ of P/CVE campaigns.

⁸ Chou (2014) *Actionable Gamification: Beyond Points, Badges, and Leaderboard*. Milipitas, CA: Octalysis Media

Conclusion

The gamification of radicalization and extremist communication is an emerging phenomenon, likely to increase further in importance in the coming years. While there is currently limited knowledge on the application of gamified elements in P/CVE, it is likely that the appeal of gamification will be beneficial to measures against extremism just as it seems to be beneficial for extremist actors. As argued above gamification is likely to be applied primarily in prevention efforts and must be grounded in expert knowledge on human-computer interaction, game psychology, game production, and pop cultural elements currently *en vogue* in the target audiences. It is likely to benefit from the growing application of video games in political education and P/CVE measures, but should be discussed in its own right and not as a mere extension of the discourse on gaming, platforms, and gamer subculture. Gamified elements may help P/CVE measures to generate attention in a digital world over-saturated with content and may ultimately help to motivate users to engage with P/CVE messages as they are more ‘fun’ than non-gamified content. Nevertheless, gamification will not be a silver bullet for prevention. As any other tool, it must be used with caution and only after careful considerations of how gamified elements make users feel and influence them. Merely adding game elements without purpose is likely to be perceived as gimmicky and fail to generate the benefits discussed.