

BEYOND THE GAME:

Understanding the Risks of Extremism in the Gaming Ecosystem

LEVEL UP YOUR AWARENESS





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GEMS Infoguide

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Any errors or omissions remain the sole responsibility of the authors.



PREFACE

This Guide is intended for those less familiar with the online gaming ecosystem and seek to better understand how it functions. It provides foundational knowledge alongside a broader perspective of the environment in which this ecosystem functions and the many nexuses it intersects with. It presents a multilayered framework explaining how risks may emerge under specific conditions and concludes by focusing on strengthening resilience through literacy, proportionate governance, shared responsibility, and practical reflection tools.

The Guide begins with the broader picture: the multilayered ecosystem of vulnerability within which young people live and gaming operates. It explores how online gaming has evolved into a social space of identity formation and how, under certain conditions, extremist actors may attempt to exploit this environment. Gaming is approached not as an isolated domain, but as a microcosm of society, reflecting its tensions, inequalities, polarisation, and technological transformations.



PART A

Part A outlines how the issue of radicalisation and extremism in the online gaming ecosystem is already being institutionally addressed by Law Enforcement Agencies, alliances between industry and civil society, technological partners, and regulatory initiatives such as the Digital Services Act. Broader European Union initiatives aimed at strengthening youth protection, advancing privacy-preserving age-verification mechanisms, promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills, and supporting the mental health and overall well-being of young people would mutually reinforce and operationalise these efforts.¹ In addition, Part A provides the working definitions of radicalisation and extremism used across the GEMS project, introduces the emergence of “com” or “comm” networks, and offers a conceptual overview of the digital gaming ecosystem. While digital gaming has become a shared cultural reference point across generations, understanding its structural, cultural, and sociotechnical particularities requires deeper analysis. This broader framing supports balanced and proportionate discussions of risk, avoiding both alarmism and dismissal.

PART B

Part B presents the analytical framework of the Guide. It explains how escalation, when it occurs, emerges through the interaction of content, behavioural reinforcement, structural features, and cross-platform pathways. It maps recurring narrative and behavioural clusters without treating them as inevitable or widespread. The emphasis is on clarity: risks are layered and conditional, and most users do not radicalise.

PART C

Part C shifts from explanation to action. It emphasises literacy, proportionate governance, and shared responsibility across platforms, educators, families, civil society, and young users themselves. Resilience is framed not as restriction or surveillance, but as strengthening critical thinking, civic grounding, and healthy community norms.

PART D

Part D provides practical reflection tools. These structured prompts help parents, educators, and young gamers distinguish between normal gaming culture and signs of layered risk convergence. Their purpose is early awareness without alarmism.

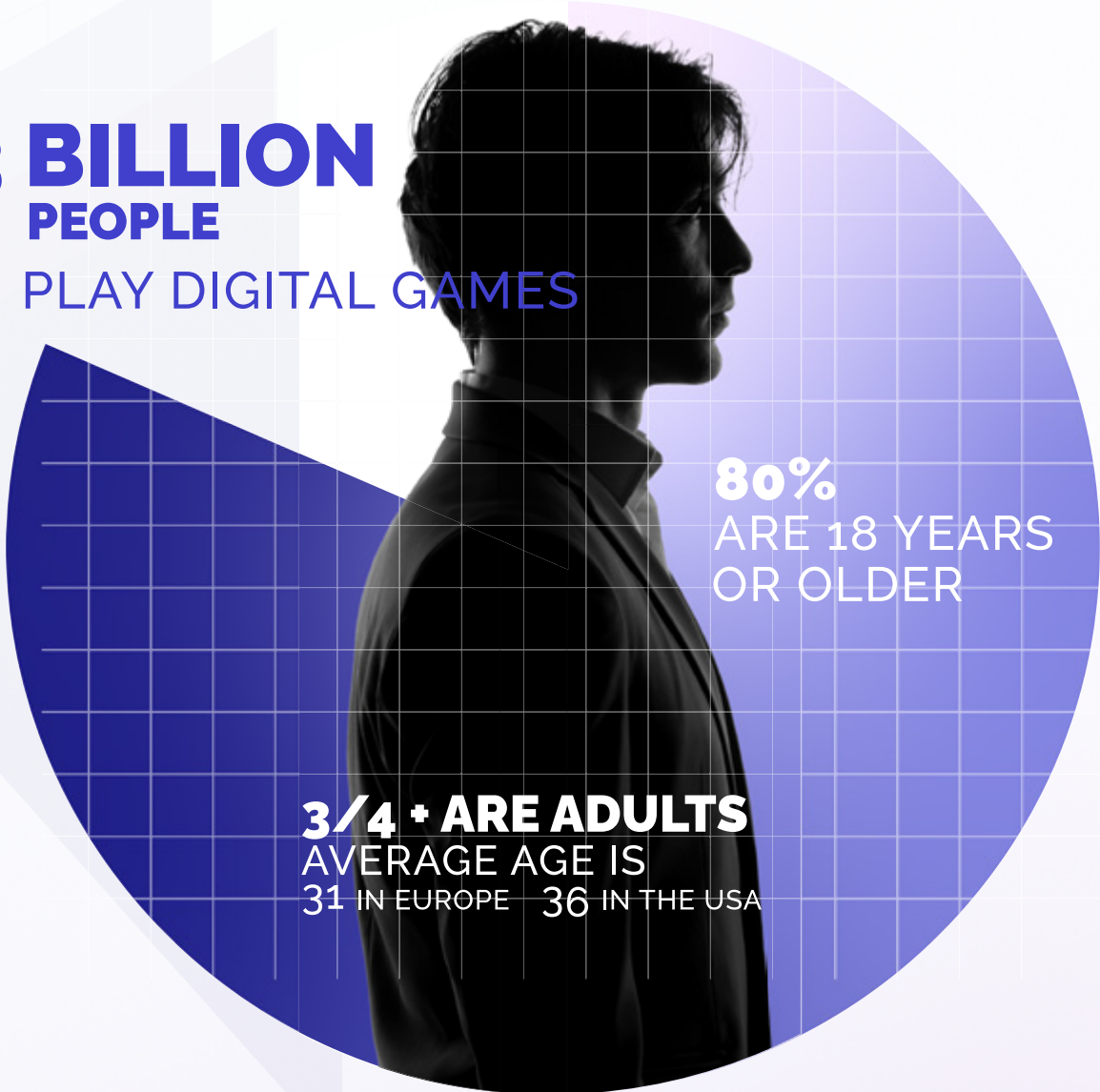
Across all four Parts, the central message remains consistent: gaming does not create extremism. Under specific layered conditions, it may be exploited. The objective of this Guide is informed awareness, calibrated response, and the preservation of the overwhelmingly positive social and developmental value of gaming.

What This Guide Is About

As mentioned before, this Guide does not argue that gaming causes extremism, nor does it portray gamers as inherently vulnerable or suspect. It starts from the evidence-based position developed within the GEMS project: gaming is a complex social ecosystem, overwhelmingly positive and meaningful for most participants, yet not immune to misuse by extremist actors who adapt to digital youth cultures.

The purpose of this Guide is therefore not restriction, alarmism, or blame. Rather, it seeks to provide clarity, proportion, and practical understanding. Specifically, it aims to:

- Explain how risks may emerge in layered digital ecosystems, where games, communication tools, streaming platforms, and gaming-adjacent spaces interact.
- Show how escalation can occur under specific conditions, without assuming linear or inevitable radicalisation pathways.
- Increase awareness without promoting moral panic, grounding discussion in evidence rather than sensational cases.
- Avoid blaming users or communities, recognising that the vast majority of players reject violence and extremism.
- Support resilience through literacy and proportionate response, strengthening critical thinking, community norms, and informed intervention rather than advocating blanket restriction.



3.3 BILLION
PEOPLE
PLAY DIGITAL GAMES

80%
ARE 18 YEARS
OR OLDER

3/4 + ARE ADULTS
AVERAGE AGE IS
31 IN EUROPE 36 IN THE USA

UNDERSTANDING THE DEMOGRAPHICS REALITY OF THE GAMING SPACES

A key takeaway for parents and educators is that online gaming is no longer a predominantly child-centred environment. Globally, approximately 3.3 billion people play digital games. Around 80% of them are 18 years or older. In Europe, roughly three-quarters of players are adults, with an average age of approximately 31. In the United States, the average gamer is 36 years old, and more than three-quarters are adults.²

In other words, unless a game is explicitly designed and maintained as a youth-only environment, most gaming spaces function primarily as mixed-age or adult-dominated environments.

This demographic reality matters. **It means that young people entering online gaming spaces are often interacting within environments shaped largely by adult norms, humour, discourse styles, and sometimes adult-level political or ideological discussions. Age-verification and age-assurance mechanisms do exist across platforms, but their implementation and effectiveness vary significantly.**

The overwhelming majority of gaming experiences are creative, social, and constructive. The aim of this Guide is not to constrain those spaces, but to understand them well enough to protect them.

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INTRODUCTION

Online gaming is no longer a niche leisure activity, confined to a small subculture, as mentioned above. According to the Video Games Europe – 2024 Key Facts Report, 54% of Europeans aged 6–64 play video games, generating €26.8 billion in revenues in 2023. Player communities are vast and diverse: Germany counts 35.9 million players, France 30.8 million, Spain 22.1 million, the United Kingdom 25.5 million, and Italy 14 million. Europe’s gaming population has grown from 118.3 million in 2020 to 128.3 million in 2024. The average player age is 31, and 45% of players are women.³

This scale and demographic breadth demonstrate that gaming is not a marginal youth hobby but a mainstream, cross-generational social infrastructure embedded in everyday European life. It is a global social ecosystem where millions of children and adolescents interact daily: where they play, socialise, meet friends, chat with known or unknown persons, are exposed to new and unfamiliar narratives, move instantly between platforms and channels, and connect across different parts of the world, all from the comfort of their room, in front of a screen.

**A bedroom door closes, a screen lights up, a headset goes on.
From the outside, someone appears to be “just playing a game”.**

Inside this networked environment, however, players are navigating a dense architecture of interaction, absorbing narratives, participating in cultures, that those outside the ecosystem may neither see nor easily understand.



This is particularly important for young people who may not recognise when interaction shifts from ordinary play to more subtle forms of grooming, manipulation or ideological influence. Understanding this shift requires stepping back.

For most users, gaming experience is positive. Gaming does foster creativity, teamwork, strategic thinking, resilience and belonging. However, because gaming today operates within a broader digital environment characterised by algorithmic amplification, fragmented publics, polarised discourse and rapid information flows, it also reflects and sometimes magnifies societal tensions. Understanding the risks associated with online gaming therefore requires first understanding the ecosystem in which it functions and the broader macro-level conditions that shape youth identity, uncertainty, and digital interaction. Second it requires an understanding of how risks can emerge and evolve within them (Part B), and what practical, balanced actions parents, educators and communities can take to support young people (Part C).



PRESS START

PART a

Understanding the Online Gaming Ecosystem



The Broader Picture: A Multilayered Ecosystem of Vulnerability

Across the globe, children and young people are navigating an era of profound uncertainty. Analyses by international organisations consistently demonstrate how inequalities, learning disruption, fragile transitions into employment, mental health strain and geopolitical instability shape the experience of growing up.⁴

There is a paradox at the heart of this generation's experience: Young people report being connected, yet unsupported, informed, yet uncertain, surrounded by opportunity, yet unsure how to access it.

Superimposed on these pressures is a digital reality that has become inseparable from everyday life. Socialisation, entertainment, identity exploration and civic expression are now mediated by networked technologies whose architectures influence visibility, belonging and recognition.

Recent OECD evidence shows that adolescents' susceptibility to online harms is shaped not only by their online experiences but also by broader developmental, social and emotional factors. Vulnerabilities emerge through the interaction of family, school, community and digital environments and differ between girls and boys. While girls report significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, body image concerns and exposure to online harms, boys are more likely to experience academic disengagement, externalising behaviours, aggression and risk-taking, while also being less likely to seek help because of restrictive masculinity norms. Recognising these different developmental pathways is essential for understanding how some young people may become more susceptible to manipulation, harmful communities and extremist exploitation within digital ecosystems.⁵

Opportunities for creativity and learning coexist with exposure to harassment, manipulation, misinformation and harmful communities. Risks rarely appear in isolation. They accumulate and interact across:

- 
- **Personal vulnerabilities**
 - **Peer group dynamics**
 - **Platform architectures**
 - **Cultural narratives**
 - **Algorithmic amplification systems**

This accumulation forms what can be described as a multilayered ecosystem of vulnerability and online gaming operates within this environment, not outside it.

THE ONLINE GAMING ECOSYSTEM

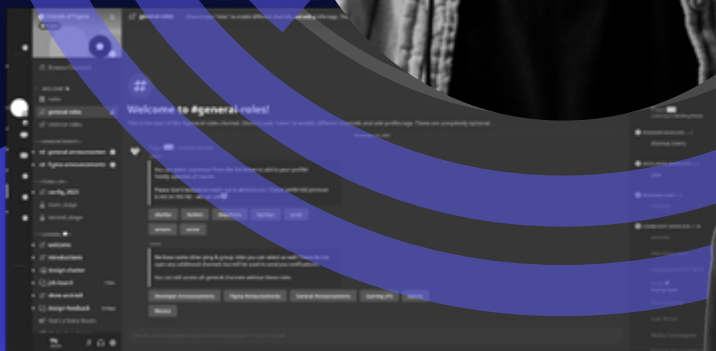
DEVICES



SOCIAL MEDIA



COMPUTER



**SERVERS & PRIVATE
GROUP CHATS**



**GAMING
DEVICES**



1.1. Gaming as Social Space and Identity Formation Arena

Digital games have become central social environments for young people. They are not merely spaces of entertainment.

They are spaces where friendships are formed, identities are explored, hierarchies are negotiated, and communities are built. ⁶

Multiplayer infrastructures, voice and text chats, live streaming cultures and cross-platform migration routes create dense social networks where trust can be built quickly and influence can travel rapidly.

For the overwhelming majority of young people, these spaces are positive, creative and meaningful.

However, the same features that foster community can also be exploited by actors who seek to:

- Normalise hate
- Cultivate grievance narratives
- Embed exclusionary humour
- Reward transgression
- Gradually guide susceptible users toward more extreme milieux

Radicalisation in such contexts is rarely abrupt. It often unfolds through incremental exposure, humour, irony, shared symbols, competitive dynamics and the promise of belonging or recognition. It is interpretative rather than mechanical.

Gaming does not “cause” extremism. Research on radicalisation cautions against linear or single-cause explanations. What is required instead is a more refined analytical perspective that recognises gaming environments as social, cultural, and relational spaces.

The GEMS project contributes to the development of such a perspective. The emerging sociology of gaming, developed in GEMS project, examines identity formation, community dynamics, platform affordances, and digital youth cultures within these ecosystems.



Digital games have become central social environments for young people.

Evidence indicates that extremist actors have demonstrated the capacity to adapt to digital youth cultures, borrowing gaming aesthetics and embedding narratives within mainstream conversations.

Evidence also showed that toxicity is not equivalent to extremism, but it can function as an ecosystem condition that reduces friction for extremist signaling. Toxicity does not automatically transform users into extremists, nor does it equate to ideological commitment. However, when dehumanising language, misogynistic tropes, racist slurs or exclusionary humour become routine and socially tolerated, they can gradually recalibrate what is perceived as acceptable discourse within a community.

In this sense, gaming functions as a microcosm of society. It reflects broader political polarisation, identity struggles and digital subcultures.

Recommendation systems, engagement metrics and cross-platform migration between games and third-party communication tools can unintentionally amplify divisive or extremist content.

1.2. Evidence from the GEMS Project

The GEMS project drew upon three complementary strands of evidence: a large-scale survey of 1,500 multiplayer gamers, research identifying four key “gaming points” where vulnerabilities and radicalisation risks may concentrate, and a quantitative analysis of extremist content across five major gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms covering more than 63 million posts.⁷ Together, these findings point to a consistent conclusion. While hate speech, discriminatory language, and toxic interactions are encountered by many players across online gaming environments, gamers overwhelmingly reject political violence and extremist ideologies. The evidence further suggests that risks are not primarily located within games themselves, but may emerge across the wider gaming ecosystem, including third-party communication platforms, gaming-adjacent spaces, physical gaming venues, and environments where harmful behaviours become normalised and resistance to more extreme narratives may be reduced.

The findings provide important insights into how vulnerabilities may emerge, become normalised, and, under specific conditions, be exploited across parts of the wider gaming ecosystem. In particular, the evidence suggests that:

- Extremist discourse across gaming-related platforms frequently manifests not as overt propaganda, but through discriminatory language embedded in everyday interaction. Rather than appearing immediately as explicit ideological messaging, extremist framing often circulates in fragmentary, ironic, or informal forms within ordinary community exchanges.
- Anti-LGBTQ+, racist and misogynistic language dominated extremist discourse datasets. In addition to anti-Black racism and antisemitic narratives, the dataset also included ethnonational hostility

directed at specific developer communities, including collective blame framing and geopolitical resentment expressed through gaming discourse.

- Violent misogynistic content was particularly visible within incel-aligned spaces, alongside exclusionary rhetoric advocating the removal of women or minorities from gaming environments. In isolated cases, real-world attackers were referenced or aestheticised in gamified ways. For example, criticism of perceived “woke gaming culture” often evolved into antisemitic conspiracy narratives. Importantly, hate speech can become routine within certain communities.

- This process of routine normalisation constitutes a decisive community-level vulnerability. When discriminatory language is repeatedly trivialised as humour, banter, exaggeration, or background “toxicity,” thresholds of acceptability gradually shift. What once provoked discomfort becomes background noise. What was initially ironic becomes habitual. Over time, the moral baseline of the community adjusts. This normalisation process does not mean that most participants adopt extremist ideology, the evidence clearly shows they do not. However, it reshapes the cultural environment in subtle but consequential ways, making it more permissive to ideological escalation and lowering resistance to more explicit framing when it appears.

- Extremist actors rarely establish “extremist gaming communities” from scratch. Instead, they primarily congregate within pre-existing gaming fora, capitalising on shared interests, humour cultures, grievance narratives, and identity bonds.

They do not replace gaming culture, they embed within it. This distinction is critical. The vulnerability does not arise because gaming communities are inherently extremist, but because pre-existing cultural normalisation, including the routinisation of discriminatory language and uneven moderation, can lower resistance, for some users, to more explicit ideological framing once it is introduced.

Gender as a Cross-Cutting Theme in Gaming Ecosystems

Gender emerged as one of the strongest cross-cutting themes across the GEMS evidence base.⁸ Questions relating to gender, identity, representation, belonging, and inclusion appeared repeatedly across discussions of gaming cultures, online interactions, community dynamics, harassment, and, in some cases, pathways associated with radicalisation and extremism.

Misogyny, Grievance Narratives and Extremist Ecosystems

Across some extremist and extremist-adjacent gaming-related spaces, misogyny appeared as a recurring theme. Examples included:

- harassment and objectification of women;
- violent misogynistic narratives and fantasies;
- discussions of sexual violence in gaming-related contexts;
- incel-related narratives portraying women as responsible for male disadvantage or exclusion;
- hostility towards women, minorities, and increasing diversity within gaming environments.

In some cases, debates surrounding so-called “woke gaming” evolved beyond discussions about games themselves and became intertwined with broader misogynistic, anti-LGBTQ+, antisemitic, or conspiratorial narratives. Anti-women discourse, hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities, opposition to diversity initiatives, and exclusionary interpretations of gaming culture also appeared among the recurring patterns observed within some extremist ecosystems.

Gender, Identity and Gaming Culture

Questions of gender have long been part of wider discussions about gaming culture. Attention has been given to topics such as:

- the Gamergate⁹ controversy and its significance for understanding the intersection of gaming, online harassment, and anti-feminist mobilisation;
- gaming masculinities, toxic masculinity, and the role of gender identities within some gaming communities;
- sexism in gaming culture, including stereotypes surrounding women and the representation of female characters;
- gender stereotypes and the hypersexualisation of women in games;
- gender discrimination within parts of the gaming industry and wider gaming ecosystem.

At the same time, evidence suggests that these issues are often more complex than public debates imply.

The evidence also suggests that environments characterised by persistent misogyny, hostility towards minorities, normalised harassment, and exclusionary humour may become more permissive to extremist actors seeking receptive audiences.

Gendered Experiences in Gaming Communities

Survey findings from 1,500 multiplayer gamers provide additional insight into how gaming environments are experienced by different groups of players.¹⁰

58.3%

of respondents identified
as male;

41.1%

identified as female;

31%

of female players (approximately)
reported having been personally
targeted by harassment;

compared with approximately

21%

of male players.

While the reasons behind these differences require further investigation, the findings suggest that women may experience certain forms of online hostility more frequently than men. Misogyny was also among the most frequently witnessed forms of hateful behaviour reported by participants.

Diversity and Inclusion

The evidence also challenges the persistent stereotype that gaming is primarily a male activity. Across multiple studies, gaming participation was found to be close to gender parity, with women representing approximately 46–48% of gamers in some datasets. These findings highlight the increasing diversity of contemporary gaming communities and suggest that traditional perceptions of gaming as a predominantly male space are increasingly outdated.

Alongside these trends, a growing number of initiatives seek to promote inclusion, participation, and safer gaming environments, including organisations dedicated to supporting women¹¹ and other underrepresented groups within gaming communities and the gaming industry.

1.3. Gaming Through the Eyes of Gamers

INSIGHTS FROM THE GEMS SURVEY OF 1,500 MULTIPLAYER GAMERS¹²

The Benefits Gamers Describe

When asked why they play, gamers consistently pointed to enjoyment, connection, and a sense of relief from everyday pressures.

1. FUN AND ENJOYMENT

At its heart, gaming is about having fun. More than half of respondents (57.6%) identified fun and entertainment as a key reason for playing, making it the most common motivation across all age groups and genders. For many players, gaming provides enjoyment, excitement, achievement, and a welcome break from daily routines and stresses.



“I like playing video games because they are fun and relaxing. They help me forget stress, and I enjoy exploring new worlds, solving challenges, and playing with friends online.”

(Non-binary, 18, Europe)



Many described gaming as something that simply makes life better.

“t makes me be me.”

(Male, 18–24, Europe)

2. SOCIAL CONNECTION AND FRIENDSHIP

Nearly one-third of respondents (31.4%) identified social connection as a primary reason for gaming, rising to 42% among group players. For many young people, gaming is an important way to build and maintain friendships, especially across distances or when in-person socialising is limited.

“Because I like to watch movies, but being part of them is better. Moreover, with online games I can spend time with my friends, even if they’re miles away from me.”

(Male, 26, Europe)

“To chat with other likeminded people who understand and share the same passion. It creates a sense of belonging.”

(Female, 30, Europe, With Others)

“It’s a way to escape and connect with like minded people. Two things I need.”

(Male, 49, Europe, Alone)



For some young people, particularly those who are neurodivergent, socially anxious, or living in rural areas, that is, gaming provides social opportunities that offline life does not easily offer.

“I feel they can get people through really hard times, and also help people with social anxiety meet new people.”

(Male, 28, North America)

3. RELAXATION, STRESS RELIEF AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Another 31.4% of respondents reported playing for relaxation and stress relief. For many, gaming provides a way to unwind, recharge, and take a break from everyday pressures. Whether after school, work, or a difficult day, gaming can serve as a form of emotional regulation and a healthy outlet for relaxation.

“The escapism is therapeutic.”

(Other/Complex, 31, Europe)

“Just to ease up some nerves after work.”

(Female, 25, North America)

“Time flies when I’m gaming. It’s the only time I truly stop worrying.”

(Female, 31, Europe, With Others)



“I’m too ill to do sports so this is my thing.”

(Female, 40, Europe)

4. CHALLENGE, GROWTH & COGNITIVE BENEFITS

More than a quarter of respondents (27.3%) play for challenge and mastery, while 23.1% cite cognitive benefits. Far from being passive, many games require problem-solving, strategic thinking, quick decision-making, and persistence.

“Playing video games requires you to think about what you’re doing which means that it strengthens your mind.”

(Male, 29, Europe)

“I like immersing myself in a different world. It’s similar to reading but as someone with ADHD it’s easier for me.”

(Male, 30, Europe)



5. FAMILY CONNECTION AND INTERGENERATIONAL BONDING

Gaming can also bring generations together. When parents and children play together, watch each other play, or simply talk about games, gaming can become a shared experience that strengthens relationships, creates opportunities for conversation, and fosters mutual understanding.

“I like to play games because it brings me so much joy and connection with my child. I wanna understand the things she play and if it’s safe.”

(Female, 37, North America)

The Other Side of the Story: Challenges Worth Understanding

The same spaces that offer connection, creativity, learning and fun can also present challenges. Understanding these realities helps us support and protect young people without unfairly portraying gaming as a problem.

1. TOXICITY AND THE NORMALIZATION PROBLEM

44.3% of gamers in the study said their main response to toxicity is to do nothing, they have learned that reporting rarely leads to visible consequences. This is not because they don't care; it is learned helplessness.

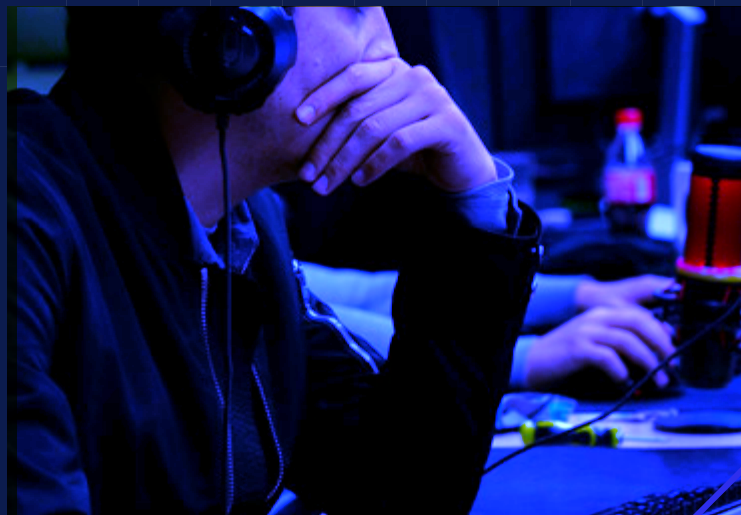
“There’s almost nothing that can be done. We’re mature folks and I cherish peace in any environment I’m in. So we just ignore it.”

(Female, 23, Targeted)

“Toxic behaviour often goes unchecked because players feel reporting doesn’t lead to meaningful action.”

(Male, 30, Targeted)

This normalisation is especially concerning because it can make harmful behaviour feel like “just how gaming is.”



2. GENDERED EXPERIENCES & THE AVOIDANCE TAX

(The term “avoidance tax” does not refer to a financial cost, but to the social, emotional, and practical burden of adapting one’s behaviour to reduce exposure to harmful experiences.)

Girls and women often experience gaming differently from boys and men. While motivations are similar, some female players report that voice chat can become a source of unwanted attention, harassment, or discriminatory comments once a female voice is recognised.

“It’s easy to play if you remain silent or neutral, non speaker, otherwise being perceived as a woman changes the dynamics, specially with very young players, in a very bully way.”

(Female, Targeted)

“Being called wh* words... targeted as being useless and not belonging.”** (Female, targeted)



As a result, many girls and women mute themselves, play solo, or stick to trusted friends. In doing so, they pay an “avoidance tax” that can reduce the social connections and sense of community that gaming is meant to provide.

3. RADICALIZATION RISKS & OFF-PLATFORM PATHWAYS

A less common but serious concern is the exploitation of gaming spaces by harmful actors. In the GEMS survey, 5.7% of respondents reported receiving hateful invitations. The most common pathway is in-game contact moving to third-party platforms, where private communication can facilitate grooming, ideological influence, or recruitment attempts.

A graphic of a target with concentric circles and crosshairs, positioned to the right of the quote.

“It can be quite a cesspool of dangerous ideas. Most people use it as an avenue to test the popularity of their bad ideas or seek validation of it.”

(Male, 40, North America, Online multiplayer, Received suspicious invitation)

A graphic of a target with concentric circles and crosshairs, positioned to the left of the quote.

“As is said, there is a disturbing amount of predators that are not regulated AT ALL. Someone needs to bring attention to this. Especially on Discord.”

(Female, 40, Europe, Online multiplayer)

A decorative blue line that starts as a horizontal line and then turns 90 degrees downward.

Important context: Most players never encounter these experiences. However, the risk exists, and the same social features that create friendship and community can also be exploited. The GEMS survey found that players who believe platforms should take responsibility for tackling harmful behaviour show lower support for violent action, suggesting that **trust in institutions can be a protective factor.**

4. THE “NOTHING” RESPONSE & GENERATIONAL NORMALISATION

34.5% of gamers reported that they disliked “nothing” about gaming. This may simply reflect high levels of enjoyment and satisfaction. At the same time, researchers suggest that in some cases repeated exposure to toxic behaviours can lead to desensitisation, making certain forms of harmful conduct seem normal or unremarkable.

“It’s difficult to police a live environment. People are going to have horrible opinions, I don’t think that can be stopped.”

(Male, 28, Europe, Online multiplayer)

Hope & Resilience: What the Data Also Shows

The study did not only document challenges. It also revealed strong signs of resilience and identified several factors that may help protect players from harmful influences and support positive gaming experiences.

“Despite the toxicity as a whole I still enjoy video games deeply because I have made lots of friendships with it.”

(Female, 25–34, Europe, Targeted)

Players who had personally experienced harassment were more likely to value social connection and support stronger platform governance. Rather than disengaging, many adapted and continued participating in the communities they valued—a pattern researchers termed the **“Targeted Resilience Paradox.”**

The study also found that players who advocated for inclusive gaming communities showed the lowest willingness to support violent political action, suggesting that inclusive norms may serve as an important protective factor.

1.4. The Patterns, at a Glance



Racist and Ethnonational Narratives

- Anti-Black Racist Slur Usage
- Anti-LGBTQ+ Slur Normalisation
- Antisemitic Conspiracy Narratives
- Ethnonational Hostility Toward Developer Communities (including anti-Chinese / anti-Asian geopolitical resentment framed through gaming discourse)
- Collective Ethnic Blame Narratives in Gaming Discourse (attribution of cultural decline or “ruining gaming” to specific national or ethnic groups)
- Demographic Anxiety and Replacement Narratives (where present in ERW discourse)

Misogyny and Incel-Aligned Narratives

- Generalised Misogynistic Dehumanisation
- Violent Misogyny and Endorsement of Gender-Based Harm
- Incel Grievance Escalation Framing
- Exclusionary and Expulsion-Oriented Framing (including removal of women or minorities from gaming spaces)
- Gender Hierarchy and Inferiority Framing

“Woke Gaming” and Cultural Grievance Frames

- Anti “Woke” Gaming Culture Narratives
- Anti-Diversity Representation Framing
- LGBTQ+ Visibility as Conspiracy Framing
- Cultural Decay and Gaming Corruption Narratives

VIOLENCE-RELATED
AND GAMIFIED
ESCALATION
PATTERNS

NORMALISATION
AND DISCURSIVE
MECHANISMS

PLATFORM
BEHAVIOURAL
AND GOVERNANCE
DYNAMICS

EVENT-DRIVEN
ESCALATION
DYNAMICS

Violence-Related and Gamified Escalation Patterns

- Gamified Violent Role-Play in Sandbox Environments
- Re-enactment or Simulation of Real-World Attacks
- Aestheticisation of Mass Violence
- Gamified Glorification of Real-World Attackers
- Threat Amplification Around Gaming Events

Normalisation and Discursive Mechanisms

- Slur Usage as Default Mode of Address
- Humour-Based Dehumanisation
- Irony-Embedded Extremist Framing
- Meme-Based Narrative Diffusion
- Fragmentary Ideological Signalling
- Discursive Familiarisation with Dehumanising Language

Platform Behavioural and Governance Dynamics

- Prolific User Amplification Patterns
- Cross-Platform Narrative Migration
- Mainstream Exposure Risk in Mixed Gaming Communities
- Ideological Reinforcement Through Platform Moderation Dynamics
- Uneven Moderation Enforcement
- Suppression or Deletion of Dissenting Posts

Event-Driven Escalation Dynamics

- Extremist Narrative Surges Around Game Releases
- Narrative Peaks Around Gaming Awards or Industry Events
- Grievance Amplification Triggered by Trailers or Announcements

1.5 Institutional Recognition and Response: Gamers Are Targets of Extremist Trolling and Recruitment

The issue of radicalisation within the online gaming ecosystem is **institutionally recognised**, and **concrete actions are already underway**. Across Europe and internationally, governments, public institutions, law enforcement agencies, industry alliances and technology companies are responding to the exploitation of gaming environments by extremist actors.

This response reflects an important shift: gaming is no longer viewed merely as entertainment, but as part of a broader digital ecosystem that intersects with security, youth protection and online governance.

European Law Enforcement Attention

European police authorities increasingly recognise that gaming platforms may intersect with extremist networks, particularly where integrated communication tools and cross-platform ecosystems are involved.

In November 2025, Europol supported eight European countries in a coordinated operational action targeting extremist content shared on gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms.¹² During this referral action day, experts identified and referred thousands of links connected to terrorist, racist and xenophobic material.

- The content included jihadist propaganda, violent right-wing extremist material and racist and xenophobic messaging.
- In some cases, extremist actors recorded gameplay scenes, reenacted violent attacks in virtual environments, edited the footage with extremist chants, slogans or symbols, and subsequently redistributed this material across mainstream social media platforms in order to expand its reach.

These patterns demonstrate what this Guide describes as the layered ecosystem dynamic. Dissemination chains did not remain confined to one game or one platform. Instead, they moved fluidly across gaming platforms, streaming services, community fora and social networks.

The misuse was therefore not limited to a single technological environment or content type. It reflected a broader pattern of cross-platform adaptation, where extremist actors strategically exploit the interoperability of digital ecosystems.





International Alliances

Responses are not limited to law enforcement. The **Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)** is an industry-led initiative originally formed by major technology companies to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms. Through shared hash databases and coordinated response mechanisms, the initiative facilitates the early detection and removal of terrorist propaganda before large-scale dissemination. ENgaGe, a Pan-European network bringing together European Police Authorities (EPAs), the gaming industry, gamers, civil society, researchers, and academics. Together, they aim to combat extremism in the online gaming community.¹³

Within the gaming sector specifically, initiatives such as Fair Play, now called Thriving in Gaming Group alliances aim to promote healthier online environments, reduce toxicity and prevent the exploitation of gaming communities by harmful actors.¹⁴

These industry collaborations reflect an important acknowledgement: safeguarding is not only a regulatory obligation but also a practical necessity for maintaining trust, user safety and platform sustainability.

Industry and Technology Partnerships

Beyond alliances, major gaming and technology companies have invested significantly in internal and external risk management mechanisms. These include the expansion of trust and safety teams, the deployment of AI-based content detection tools, behavioural analysis systems capable of identifying coordinated harmful activity, and cross-platform intelligence sharing mechanisms.

In addition, companies increasingly engage in external auditing and red-teaming exercises. In such exercises, independent experts are tasked with stress-testing platforms in order to identify potential vulnerabilities. Red teams simulate how extremist actors might exploit communication systems, moderation gaps or specific game mechanics.

These collaborations between technological companies, researchers and law enforcement agencies represent proactive risk management rather than reactive crisis response.

1.6 Regulatory Context

A large, dark blue European Union flag with twelve gold stars arranged in a circle, flying from a flagpole on the left side of the page.

At the regulatory level, the European Union has developed an integrated, multilevel and multistakeholder approach to preventing online radicalisation. Central to these efforts is the Digital Services Act, which applies to large online platforms, including those relevant to gaming ecosystems. The DSA requires major platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including the dissemination of illegal hate speech and extremist content.¹⁵

It introduces strengthened transparency obligations, clearer notice-and-action procedures, independent oversight mechanisms and safeguards for fundamental rights. Importantly, it reinforces “safety by design” principles, particularly significant for platforms hosting large numbers of users under the age of 18. The DSA therefore forms part of a broader EU framework that integrates regulation, enforcement, platform responsibility and youth protection into a coherent governance architecture.

2 What Do We Mean by Extremism? What Is Radicalisation?

The following definitions below are drawn from the GEMS Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts and are reproduced here for conceptual clarity and terminological consistency.¹⁶

EXTREMISM

"Extremism, an umbrella term for numerous ideological movements fundamentally in opposition to a society's mainstream political and/or ethical values. At its most basic it is characterized by the creation of a distinct in-group in opposition to an out-group, adherence to anti-pluralist ideologies, and often, though not always, the promotion of violence, typically by non-state, irregular actors (see Violent Extremism)."

VIOLENT EXTREMISM

"Violent Extremism, a type of extremism which advocates for or condones the use of force and violence towards fulfilling the movement's goals."

EXTREMIST DISCOURSE

"Extremist Discourse, the use of language held by people when expressing their extremist views. Relative to regular samples, extremist discourse is marked, among other aspects, by the higher use of first and third person plural pronouns, a more negative tone, and overall increase usage of words related to negative topics. In addition, there is a tendency to use discursive resources such as hate speech, otherness, and war narrative to convey actions and ideas toward others."

7 DEFINITIONS TO GET FAMILIAR WITH

EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

"Violent Radicalization, a type of radicalization defined by the EU as 'the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.'"

RADICALIZATION

"Radicalization, a complex process metaphorically described as 'what goes on before the bomb goes off.' Radicalization encompasses a series of psychological, social, and ideological developments by which individuals or groups adopt extremist views, which may not always involve violence. This process involves multi-dimensional changes, including shifts in belief systems, attitudes, and behaviours, that deviate significantly from dominant societal norms. Moreover, each process appear as distinct, reflecting the unique circumstances and influences of those involved. Within academic circles, it is also a contested term, with the central issue being whether radicalization denotes a process towards extreme ideas, or extreme behaviour."

VIOLENT RADICALIZATION

"Violent Radicalization, a type of radicalization defined by the EU as 'the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.'"

RECRUITMENT

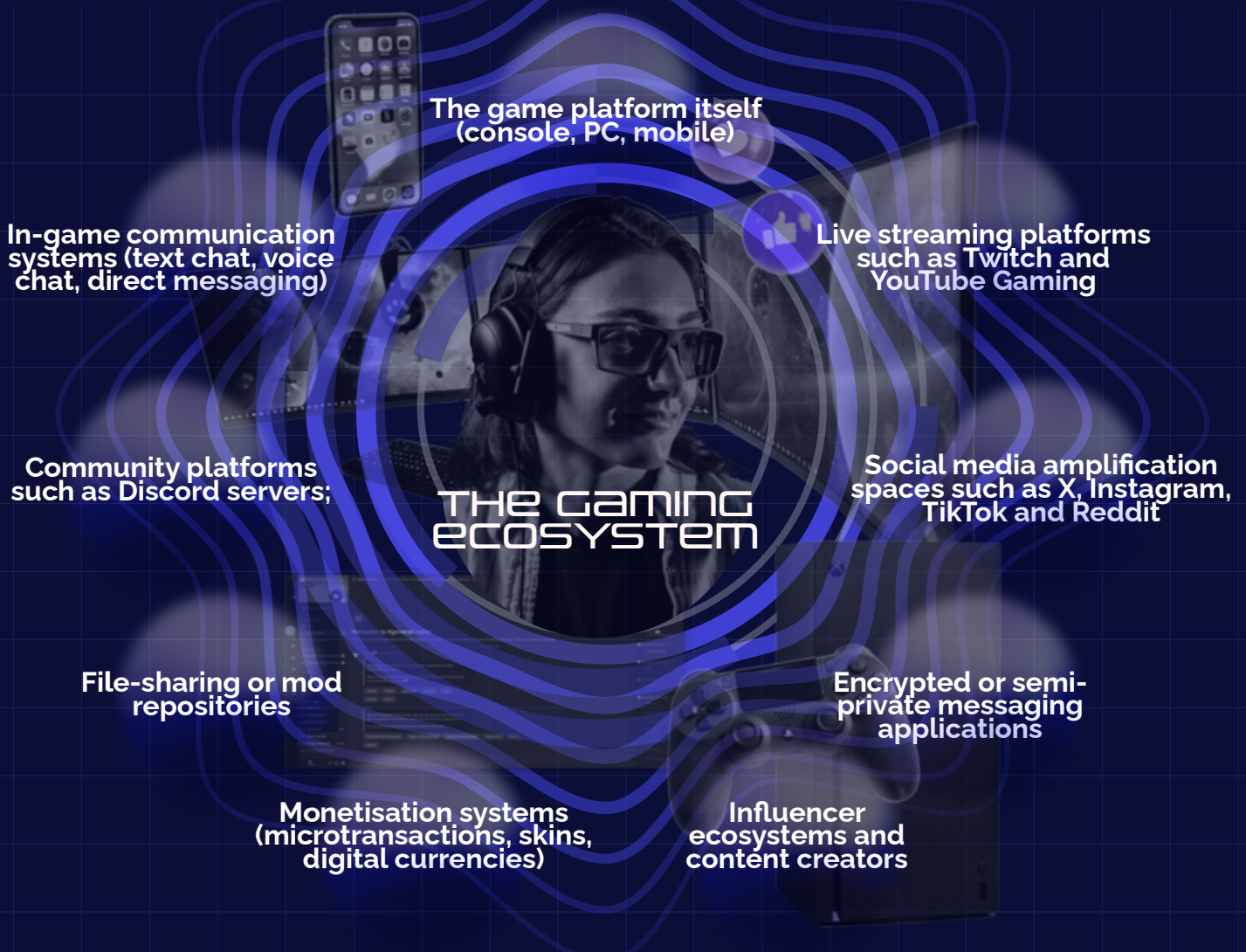
"Recruitment, generally refers to the process of incorporating individuals into a group. Specifically, in the realms of terrorism and extremist studies, it is defined as the process by which individuals are integrated into extremist groups or terrorist organizations. This process is highly specialized, often involving the identification and targeting of individuals who are susceptible to influence. It includes a tailored approach of influencing, persuading, or manipulating them to adopt extremist ideologies and, in some instances, to participate in terrorist activities. Crucially, the success of recruitment within violent extremist organizations depends on the effective attraction and selection of organizational members."

The Digital Gaming Ecosystem

The “digital gaming ecosystem,” as defined in the GEMS, serves as an umbrella term for a wide range of interconnected activities (both online and offline) broadly associated with what is commonly referred to as “gaming culture.” This ecosystem encompasses games (whether computer, mobile, console, or hybrid), in-game communication platforms, streaming services (e.g., Twitch, Discord), social media, gaming-related news outlets, and cultural events (such as conventions and tournaments). While these are sometimes classified as gaming or gaming-adjacent spaces.¹⁷

A typical gaming interaction may begin inside a multiplayer match and quickly extend beyond it into a voice chat, a Discord server, a Twitch stream, a Reddit thread, a Telegram group, or private messaging channels.

The ecosystem typically includes:



These elements are not isolated. They are interconnected layers of a single ecosystem.



A joke made during a live match may be clipped on Twitch, shared on TikTok, debated in a Discord server and reframed in a Reddit thread.

A modification created for a mainstream game may circulate through file repositories and then be promoted across social media platforms.

Content, influence and relationships move fluidly across these layers. As a result, the gaming ecosystem blurs traditional boundaries:

- Between play and social networking.
- Between entertainment and performance.
- Between public and private interaction.
- Between local exchange and global reach.

Gaming environments therefore function simultaneously as social spaces, identity laboratories, performance arenas, cultural production hubs and economic marketplaces. Understanding this layered architecture is essential for understanding both opportunity and risk.

The Journey Beyond the Game

Many gaming experiences do not end when players leave a match. Conversations often continue through platforms such as Discord, social media, streaming channels, fora or messaging applications. Researchers sometimes refer to this movement from a game to external digital spaces as “off-ramping” or “platform-hopping.”

Most of these transitions are entirely harmless and support community building, teamwork, friendships and shared interests. In fact, many players use external platforms simply to coordinate gameplay, share content, stay in touch with friends or participate in fan communities.

However, moving discussions outside the game may also mean entering environments with different rules, moderation practices and levels of protection. Some spaces may be well moderated and community-focused, while others may operate with little oversight. Being aware of where a conversation is moving and what safeguards exist in that space is an important part of digital literacy in today’s gaming ecosystem whether interactions take place online or eventually extend into offline gaming communities.



2.1 Special Attention: Gaming Cafes as Hybrid Nodes-Offline – Online Convergence

While much attention focuses on digital platforms, parts of the gaming ecosystem remain physically grounded. Gaming cafés and LAN venues — particularly in urban areas, function as hybrid social environments where online play, peer interaction, and offline community dynamics intersect.

These spaces are not inherently problematic. For many young people, they offer:

- affordable access to high-performance gaming
- structured social environments
- peer belonging outside the home

However, their structural features differ from home-based gaming in several important ways.



Structural Characteristics Relevant to Risk

- **Reduced Adult Oversight:** Unlike home environments, supervision varies significantly across venues. Staff are often technically focused rather than trained in safeguarding.

- **Peer-Dominated Norm Formation:** Social norms are reinforced face-to-face. If toxic language, exclusionary humour, or grievance narratives become normalised within a peer group, they may gain additional legitimacy through offline bonding.

- **Account and Device Sharing:** Shared machines, shared logins, and informal device switching can complicate accountability and age verification.

- **Blurring of Public and Private Spaces:** Conversations may begin in public view but quickly migrate to encrypted messaging apps, private Discord servers, or closed online groups.

- **Localised Micro-Communities:** Repeated physical co-presence can intensify in-group identity more rapidly than purely online interaction.

These dynamics, in combination with the layered risk factors, identified in this Guide — narrative exposure, behavioural reinforcement, structural affordances, and cross-platform migration, may accelerate social bonding around harmful frames.

2.2. Special Attention: “Com” or “Comm” Networks

Within this ecosystem, informal and fluid youth-driven networks sometimes referred to as “com” or “comm” formations may develop. These are rarely structured organisations. They are dynamic, youth-driven clusters that can function as convergence zones, spaces where multiple harmful practices overlap, including:

- harassment,
- humiliation rituals,
- sexual exploitation,
- competitive status-seeking and
- the circulation of extremist aesthetics.

Participants often interact primarily with other young people. Harm may therefore occur between minors, complicating traditional distinctions between victim and offender.

The Europol working definition is as follows on a specific group: “This research investigates [...] group, a decentralized criminal network primarily involved in child exploitation, cyber extortion, and acts of terrorism. Initially formed online, the group has evolved into a global network operating across multiple digital platforms.”¹⁸



PART B

Understanding Escalation in Online Gaming Ecosystems



A Multilayered Analytical Framework

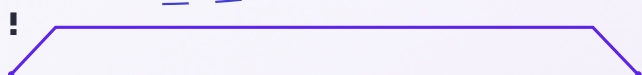
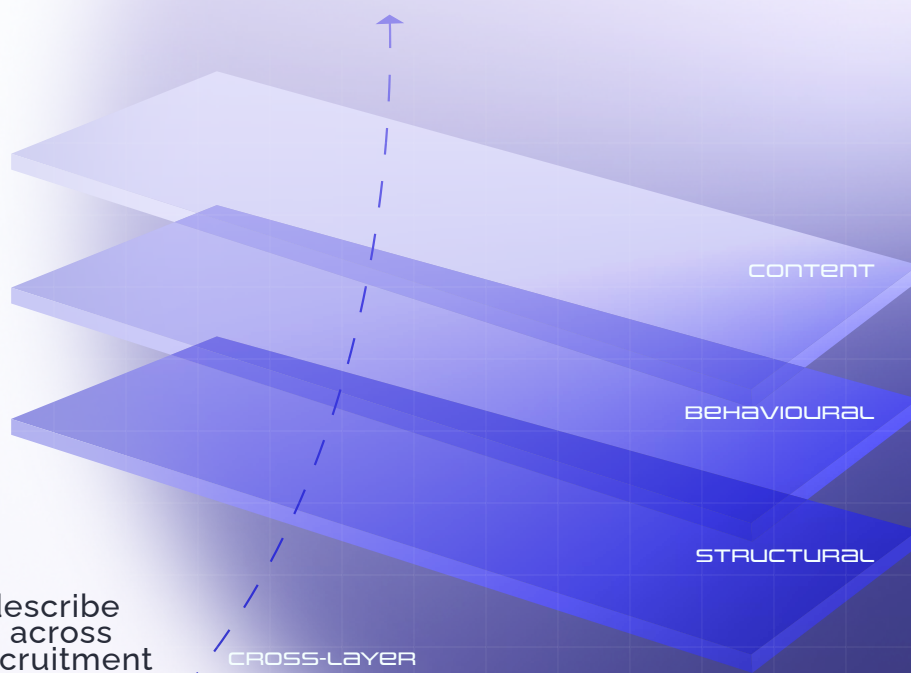
Online gaming ecosystems are not inherently radicalising environments. For millions of users, they are spaces of play, creativity, friendship, and learning. However, like all complex digital ecosystems, gaming environments can contain layered vulnerabilities. Escalation, when it happens, is rarely sudden and rarely confined to a single platform. It emerges through the interaction of four dimensions.

The **content layer** concerns what circulates: narratives, symbols, memes, frames, and stylised representations.

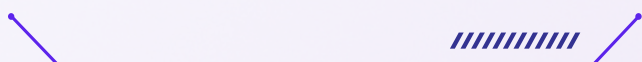
The **behavioural layer** concerns how people respond together: conformity, escalation, bonding, targeting, and withdrawal.

The **structural layer** concerns what the environment enables: visibility systems, moderation architecture, anonymity, and ecosystem fragmentation.

Finally, **cross-layer dynamics** describe escalation pathways that move across all layers, such as grooming, recruitment migration, and youth developmental sensitivity.



Most users do not radicalise and this framework does not imply inevitability. It explains how vulnerabilities may interact under specific conditions, and why resilience-focused responses are more effective than moral panic or simplistic restriction.



How to Read the Layers Together

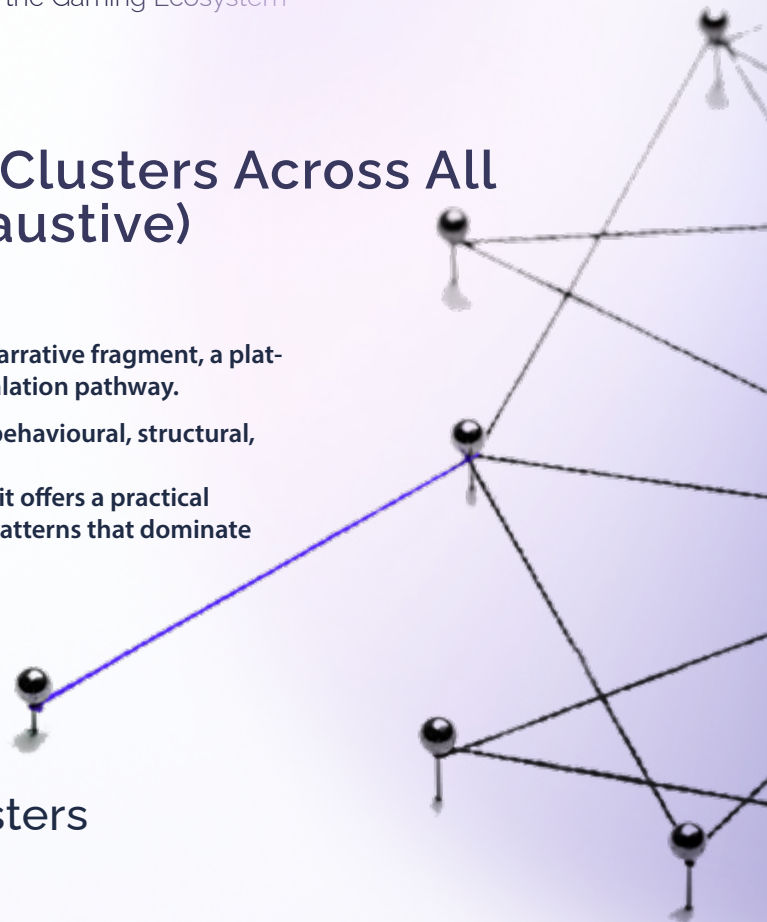
The layers are analytically distinct but operationally intertwined. A hostile narrative (content) has different effects depending on whether a community challenges it, laughs at it, or stays silent (behavioural), and on whether moderation is consistent and visible (structural). Escalation becomes more plausible when these factors converge and when cross-layer pathways, such as private migration, grooming, or developmental sensitivity, intensify exposure and bonding.

2 Typology of Risk Clusters Across All Layers (Non-Exhaustive)

Risks in gaming ecosystems, when rarely emerge, cluster. A narrative fragment, a platform feature, and a group dynamic may combine into an escalation pathway.

The typology below maps recurring clusters across content, behavioural, structural, and cross-layer dynamics.

It is not exhaustive and not a checklist for suspicion. Instead, it offers a practical analytical map derived from GEMS research findings on the patterns that dominate gaming environments when exploited by extremists.



2.1. Content-Layer Narrative Clusters

These clusters describe what circulates: recurring frames, storylines, symbolic content, and rhetorical patterns that may appear in gaming chat, forums, streaming culture, memes, or community servers. Often, they circulate in fragments, under humour or irony, rather than as explicit ideological statements.

Conspiracy narratives frame complex events as the result of hidden coordination by elites, institutions, or secret groups. They offer emotionally satisfying explanations, identify clear enemies, and invite “insider” identity. In gaming environments, they often appear through memes or “just asking questions” claims that slowly normalise distrust and scapegoating.

Misogyny narratives portray women as inferior, manipulative, or responsible for social decline, often tying gender hostility to identity defence (“they are ruining our space”). These narratives can function as social glue in some subcultures, reinforcing exclusion and normalising harassment.

Incel and “blackpill” grievance framing presents romantic or social frustration as structural injustice and often as irreversible. The risk lies in the fatalism: when “nothing can change” becomes normalised, resentment can harden, empathy may erode, and hostility can appear justified.

“Woke gaming” grievance framing turns representation debates into claims of cultural warfare, censorship, or coordinated ideological capture. The risk is not critique of storytelling. The risk is when critique becomes a gateway narrative into broader conspiratorial or dehumanising frames.

White supremacist and ethno-nationalist narratives use exclusionary identity politics, hierarchical views of human groups, or romanticised conflict framing. These narratives often circulate through coded references, ironic memes, or symbolic shorthand rather than overt slogans.

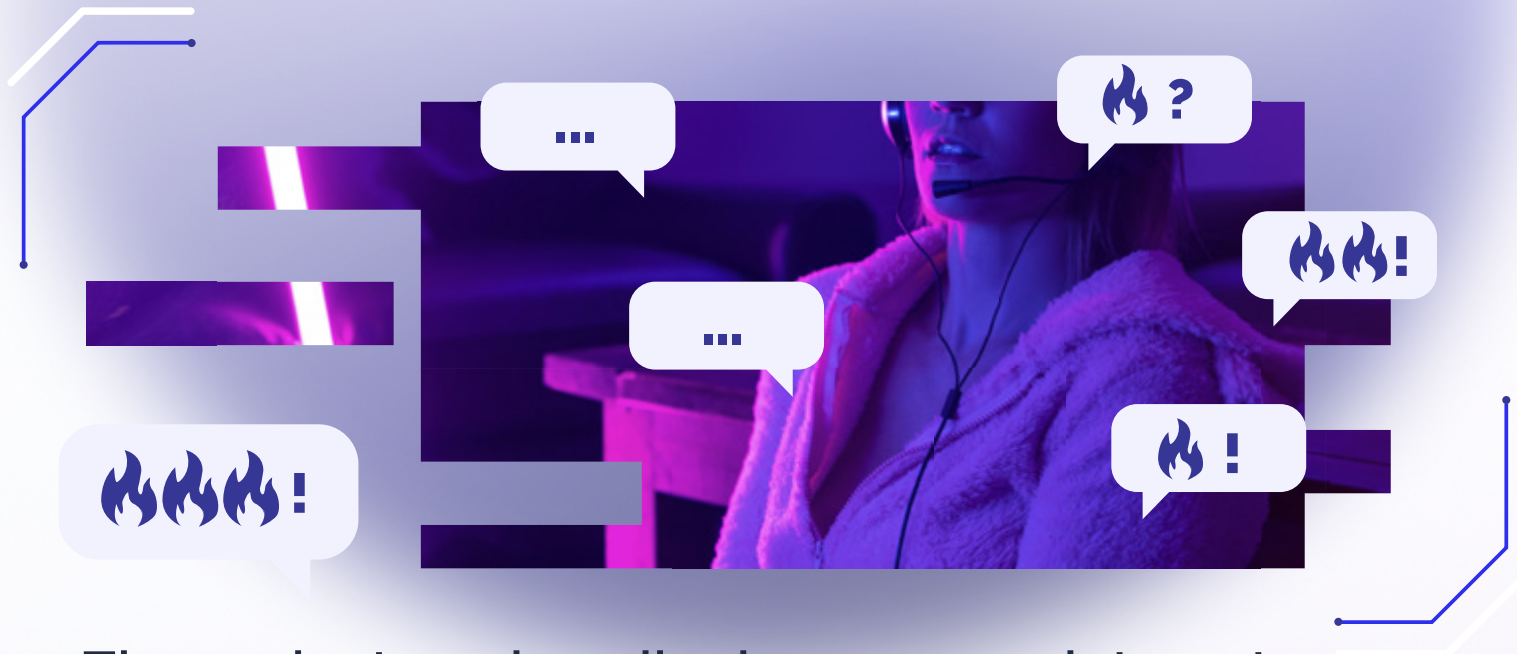
Jihadist extremist narratives frame violence as religious duty, glorify martyrdom, and promote polarised “us versus them” worldviews. In gaming-adjacent environments, these may appear less as long propaganda texts and more as fragments, references, or recruitment outreach, particularly outside the game itself.

Nihilistic or accelerationist narratives glorify collapse, chaos, and the idea that disorder should be intensified. They may appear as “edgy” detachment, moral nihilism, or aesthetic celebration of destruction rather than explicit organisational ideology.

Dogwhistling and coded messaging refers to indirect signalling through euphemisms, “ironic” phrasing, symbols, and insider references that allow alignment to be communicated while maintaining plausible deniability. This includes numerical codes and symbolic shorthand, used to test recognition, signal belonging, or evade moderation.

Aestheticised violence and “attack-as-content” framing refers to the stylisation of real-world violence using formats familiar to gaming audiences (first-person visual grammar, livestream framing, spectacle editing). The concern is not fictional violence in games, but the transformation of real harm into shareable performance artefacts.

2.2. Behavioural-Layer Social Dynamics Clusters



These clusters describe how groups interact around content: the social processes that normalise, escalate, enforce, or insulate harmful narratives. They matter because many escalation pathways operate less through persuasion and more through group reinforcement.

Conformity and norm drift dynamics occur when silence, laughter, or passive participation gradually becomes interpreted as acceptance. Over time, communities can normalise harsher language without any explicit agreement, because objection becomes socially costly.

Attention-reward escalation dynamics occur **when provocative behaviour generates visibility and recognition, encouraging boundary pushing**. Users may escalate tone not because they are ideological but because extremity performs well socially, and what performs becomes the baseline.

Identity fusion dynamics occur when belonging and status in a group become tied to self-worth. When identity becomes anchored to a community, defending group norms feels like defending the self, making critical distance harder and disengagement psychologically costly.

Desensitisation dynamics occur when repeated exposure to hostile or extremist-coded material reduces emotional shock. When “that’s just how it is here” becomes normal, moral boundaries soften and resistance to escalation weakens.

Exit of moderating voices dynamics occur when reasonable users leave rather than challenge toxicity. This creates a demographic shift: the space becomes dominated by those comfortable with escalation, and newcomers perceive the dominant tone as consensus.

Coordinated harassment and swarm mobilisation dynamics occur when communities move from talk to targeting. Harassment becomes a bonding ritual and a norm-enforcement tool, particularly against women, LGBTQ+ players, minorities, journalists, developers, or dissenters. Even when not ideologically driven at the outset, this behaviour can strengthen “us versus them” identity and lower barriers to further escalation.

2.3. Structural-Layer Enabling Conditions Clusters

These clusters describe what the environment makes possible: design features and systemic conditions that can unintentionally increase vulnerability by enabling amplification, ambiguity, or insulation.

Structural conditions do not create ideology, but they shape exposure, accountability, and governance capacity.

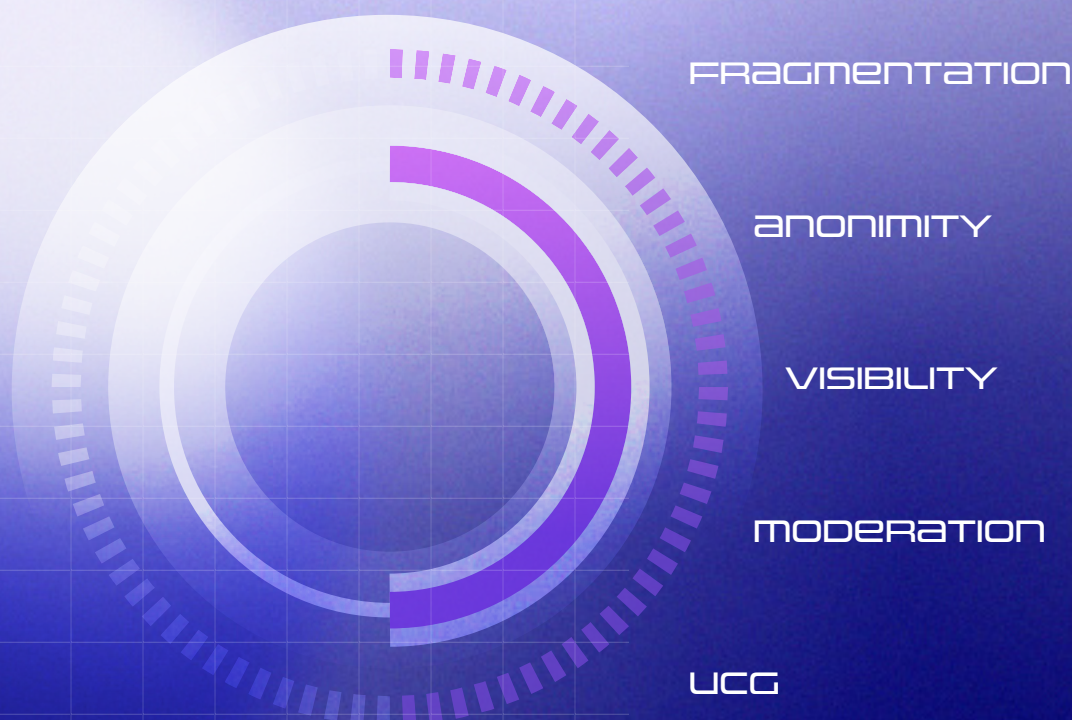
Fragmentation and **cross-platform diffusion** conditions arise when gaming-related communication is distributed across multiple platforms, none of which has full visibility of escalation pathways. This makes early detection difficult and enables narratives to harden as they migrate.

Anonymity and **low-accountability** conditions arise when pseudonymity and identity switching reduce perceived social cost for harmful behaviour. These features are often valuable for privacy and creativity, but in permissive environments they can accelerate boundary testing and repeated harm.

Visibility and **recommendation** conditions arise when engagement-driven ranking and recommendation systems amplify emotionally charged content. The system does not “promote extremism,” but it can amplify polarising narratives and distort perceived consensus through repetition.

Moderation capacity and **enforcement consistency** conditions arise when rules exist but are unevenly applied across servers and platforms. In grey zones, coded content flourishes, boundaries are tested, and users learn that enforcement is inconsistent or avoidable.

User-generated flexibility conditions arise when sandbox tools and UGC affordances allow symbolic reenactment, extremist symbolism, or ideologically framed scenarios to be created and circulated. This tool is not the problem; the risk emerges when creative affordances are repurposed within grievance-driven or insulated communities.



2.4. Bridge and Cross-Layer Pathway Clusters



These clusters describe how risks move across layers by linking narrative content, group behaviour, and structural affordances into escalation pathways. They are especially useful for explaining why gaming is often a “preselection” environment rather than the endpoint.

Funnel migration and private bonding pathways describe movement from public spaces into semi-private or private groups where trust deepens, oversight reduces, and narratives can intensify with less challenge. Belonging often comes before ideology, which is why these pathways can be effective even when initial content is non-ideological.

The Escalation Path

A JOKE.
EVERYONE
LAUGHS.

NO ONE
OBJECTS.
REPETITION.

THE **TONE**
SHIFTS.
STILL FEELS
NORMAL.

REWARD.
EXTREMITY
PERFORMS
WELL.

GETS LOUDER.

MIGRATION.
THE CONVERSATION
MOVES SOMEWHERE
SMALLER.

PRIVATE SPACE.
FEWER VOICES.
IDEAS HARDEN.



Forwarded





● **Cross-platform amplification** pathways describe how artefacts are clipped, edited, reframed, and redistributed across platforms, becoming reinforced through repetition and community-specific interpretation. Meaning shifts as content travels, and reinforcement loops can form.

● **Event-driven spike** pathways occur during major releases, controversies, or cultural flashpoints. High emotion, high traffic, and strained moderation create opportunities for grievance framing and recruitment redirection into private spaces.

● **Prolific influencer-node** pathways occur when a small number of high-visibility users shape tone through volume and engagement. Visibility becomes perceived consensus, imitation follows, and dissent becomes harder.



● **Grooming** pathways describe relational escalation where trust-building, emotional dependency, narrative introduction, and private migration converge. Grooming may be ideological, sexual, criminal, or hybrid, and often begins as mentorship or support.



● **Recruitment and escalatory migration** pathways describe gradual movement from casual participation to deeper ideological engagement, typically consolidating outside gaming. Gaming functions as filtering: a small subset of susceptible users are identified through shared grievance and bonded in insulated spaces.



● **Youth developmental sensitivity** pathways describe how adolescence can amplify imprinting effects. Identity formation, peer validation needs, and worldview exploration can increase susceptibility under layered exposure, especially when reinforced socially and insulated structurally. This is a sensitivity layer, not a deterministic risk.

3 Risks Associated at Gaming Cafes Hybrid Spaces

Field research²⁹ demonstrated that gaming cafés are important social spaces for young people with minors, (including minors under the age of 12) often sharing these venues with adults in environments where problematic behaviour is normalised.

Minors in gaming cafés face a concentrated set of risks that stem from unsupervised exposure, adult influence, and unmoderated digital platforms. Fieldwork shows that children as young as 11 often spend long hours in these venues. Risks associated include:

- Exposure to toxic and discriminatory language. In many cafés, adults and older teens regularly use slurs, misogynistic expressions, and ethnic stereotypes. Minors often imitate this behaviour because it is socially rewarded.
- “In-game chats often featured discriminatory language, with slurs and ethnic stereotypes normalized within peer groups.”
- Ethnonationalist and identity based hostility. In some cafés, players form teams based on ethnic identity and celebrate victories as symbolic wins over real-world groups. This reinforces exclusionary thinking and can shape how minors understand conflict.
- “Victories were celebrated as metaphorical triumphs over rival ethnic groups, reinforcing nationalist pride.”
- Antiestablishment and conspiratorial content. In Athens, youth were frequently exposed content and peers and adult views promoting anti-government narratives, far right symbolism, and conspiracy theories.



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- “Victories were celebrated as metaphorical triumphs over rival ethnic groups, reinforcing nationalist pride.”
- Antiestablishment and conspiratorial content. In Athens, youth were frequently exposed content and peers and adult views promoting anti-government narratives, far right symbolism, and conspiracy theories.
- “Unmoderated platforms served as conduits for extremist memes, anti-government rhetoric, and conspiracy theories.”
- Unsupervised access to adult digital spaces. Many minors used external platforms inside cafés without any oversight, increasing exposure to extremist memes, violent music videos, and ideological discussions.
- “Minors were observed engaging with external platforms... exposed to toxic discourse, misogynistic language, conspiracy theories, and ideologically charged content.”
- Peer pressure and mimicry. Younger players often copy the speech, attitudes, and behaviours of older gamers, including aggression, extremist humour, and hostility toward outgroups.
- “Minors were particularly vulnerable to mimicry, adopting the speech patterns and attitudes of older players.”
- Emotional vulnerability and escapism. Many adolescents described gaming cafés as an “escape,” which can reduce critical thinking and make them more receptive to manipulative narratives.
- “Gaming as an escape can reduce critical vigilance and foster complacency toward manipulative content.”
- Lack of safeguards. Most cafés had no age restrictions, no content moderation, and no protocols for responding to extremist or harmful behaviour.
- “Most cafés lack protocols for identifying or responding to extremist material.”
- Access to games not suitable for their age. Many cafés do not check age or the application PEGI²⁰ standards by the gamers, allowing minors to play violent or mature-rated games intended for adults. This exposes them to intense violence, sexualised content, and hostile online interactions they are not developmentally prepared to process, increasing emotional desensitisation and normalising aggressive behaviour.

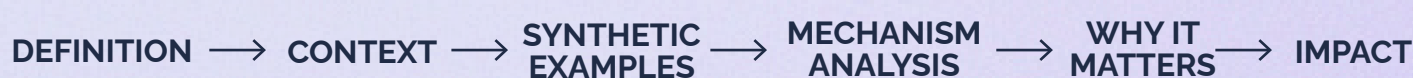
These risks do not mean gaming cafés are dangerous by definition. They remain valued community spaces. But they require awareness and simple protective actions from gamers, parents, and educators to ensure minors can enjoy them safely.



4 Risk Examples

Building on GEMS empirical findings, Part B identifies the key narrative, behavioural, and structural patterns through which extremist discourse may emerge, circulate, and intensify across gaming and gaming-adjacent spaces, according to the layer framework presented above.

The template used



Each risk presented below follows a consistent structure. This aims to offer clarity, proportionality, and analytical precision.

- **Definition** clarifies what the risk is, preventing conceptual inflation or moral panic.
- **Context and Analytical Framing** situates the risk within the gaming ecosystem, emphasising that **most users do not radicalise and that risks are conditional rather than inherent**.
- **Synthetic Examples** illustrate mechanisms without amplifying real extremist material or targeting specific communities.
- **Mechanism Analysis** explains how escalation unfolds, focusing on processes such as repetition, reward loops, desensitisation, identity fusion, or migration.
- **Why It Matters** connects micro-dynamics to broader resilience concerns without exaggeration.
- **Impact on Users** differentiates between general players, bystanders, and vulnerable individuals, avoiding blanket assumptions.

The use of the term “vulnerable individuals” does not refer to a specific type of gamer or a fixed personal trait.

It refers to individuals who, due to social isolation, emotional distress, accumulated grievances, or immersion in highly insulated online communities, may be more susceptible to harmful narratives. Vulnerability is situational and dynamic and not inherent or permanent.

Also, it is important to stress that several of the risks discussed in this report remain niche phenomena within the broader gaming ecosystem. While extremist or incel-related narratives do appear in specific sub-communities, they represent a small fraction of overall gaming-related activity and are typically concentrated in already self-selecting spaces rather than mainstream gameplay environments. Large-scale findings within GEMS also indicate that support for political violence among gamers is marginal, reinforcing that radicalisation is not the norm but an exception within gaming communities. Accordingly, these risks should be understood as targeted and context-specific, not structural features of gaming culture as a whole.

4.1 Content Layer Risks: How radicalisation happens in gaming ecosystems: what circulates and why it matters

The content layer captures risks rooted in narratives and symbolic communication. As with all risks presented in the guide, these do not assume that gaming causes extremism, research has consistently demonstrated that simplistic causal claims are unfounded. Instead, this layer examines how extremist actors may exploit elements of the gaming ecosystem by introducing, adapting, or amplifying certain forms of content that can shape interpretative climates and gradually lower resistance to exclusionary or violent framing over time.

Normalisation of Hate: When banter becomes cultural conditioning



DEFINITION

Normalisation of hate refers to the gradual embedding of discriminatory, dehumanising, or exclusionary language into everyday interaction within gaming communities until it becomes socially tolerated, expected, or trivialised. It often does not begin with explicit extremist ideology, it begins with repetition without consequence.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

In many gaming environments, competitive intensity and humour culture create a communicative style where “edgy” language can be framed as normal banter.

- The analytical concern is not that most gamers endorse extremist beliefs.
- It is that repeated dehumanising language, especially when unchallenged, can create permissive moral conditions.
- This permissiveness is a community-level vulnerability.
- It makes extremist narratives socially survivable by reducing the amount of moral resistance they encounter when they appear later, especially in adjacent spaces where ideological actors can reframe hostility as grievance solidarity.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“In a competitive multiplayer game, racist insults and anti-LGBTQ+ slurs are used casually. Players describe it as “just jokes.” No one intervenes. New members adopt the language to fit in, and within weeks the slurs feel less like exceptions and more like part of ordinary communication.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

The mechanism develops through norm drift rather than doctrine. Boundary testing occurs first: slurs function as signals to identify who laughs, who objects, and who stays silent. Silence becomes perceived compliance, and objection becomes socially risky. Emotional desensitisation follows: repeated exposure reduces discomfort and makes dehumanisation feel like background noise. Moral thresholds then lower: empathy toward targeted groups weakens and sanctions against escalation soften. Over time, the community internalises the norm that “this is how we talk here,” making future ideological framing easier to insert.

WHY IT MATTERS

Not every insult is extremist. The risk lies elsewhere: when hate becomes normalised, it creates a permissive interpretative environment. Once moral disengagement takes hold, narratives portraying violence or exclusion as justified may appear less extreme, because the groundwork of dehumanisation has already been laid.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Targeted users may withdraw, self-censor, or experience psychological harm.
- Bystanders may become desensitised and conform to prevailing tone.
- Vulnerable individuals may become more receptive to grievance narratives because the community’s moral baseline has shifted.

Cultural Grievance: “Woke gaming” as a gateway narrative

DEFINITION

Cultural grievance in gaming refers to the reframing of aesthetic or narrative disagreement (such as criticism of inclusive storylines, diverse protagonists, or representation choices) into claims of coordinated ideological manipulation or civilisational threat. It begins as dissatisfaction with change.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Games often function as identity symbols, nostalgia carriers, and cultural territory. This makes gaming controversies emotionally potent. The analytical risk is not that criticism of storytelling is extremist. The risk lies in the narrative transition:

- When dissatisfaction is framed as systemic cultural attack, conspiratorial interpretations become available. In such conditions, ideological actors can insert broader frames, anti-“global elite,” antisemitic conspiracies, or replacement narratives, by presenting them as explanations for perceived cultural loss.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“A major game release features a female protagonist and a racially diverse cast. Discussion begins with critique of plot and character design. The conversation shifts toward claims that developers are “captured,” that media is coordinated, and that changes represent deliberate cultural warfare. Conspiracy memes and links to external channels begin circulating.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

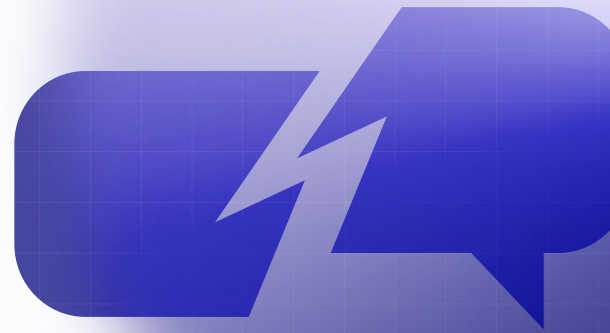
- The mechanism begins with aesthetic disagreement and moves toward identity threat: changes are interpreted as loss of cultural ownership or displacement.
- Frustration then demands attribution, and blame is externalised toward systemic enemies.
- Conspiratorial framing provides coherence and simplifies complexity.
- Over time, ideological alignment becomes possible as users adopt coded language and begin cross-linking to extremist-adjacent spaces. The grievance migrates from product critique to civilisational narrative.

WHY IT MATTERS

The danger is interpretative escalation. When cultural frustration becomes an “attack narrative,” extremist ideologies gain interpretative authority by offering simple enemies, clear explanations, and an emotionally satisfying sense of purpose.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Engaged participants may normalise systemic blame frameworks and become more tolerant of conspiratorial thinking.
- Bystanders may become desensitised to civilisational threat rhetoric.
- Vulnerable individuals may fuse identity with grievance communities and become more receptive to recruitment attempts beyond gaming.



Violent Misogyny and Incel Ideology: From status anxiety to dehumanisation

DEFINITION

This risk concerns the transformation of personal romantic, sexual, or social frustration into collective grievance identity that frames women as structural enemies and legitimises hostility or, in rare cases, violence. It may begin with status anxiety and grievance collectivisation.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Competitive gaming environments often intersect with online masculinity cultures, status visibility systems, and social hierarchies. For some young men, rejection or social isolation can become a vulnerability point. In manosphere-adjacent spaces, personal disappointment may be reframed as systemic injustice, and women may be cast as a collective adversary. The key analytical shift is the politicisation of personal frustration into a worldview that normalises hostility through grievance narratives.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A discussion about female character design begins as complaint about attractiveness and "developers ignoring male players." It shifts toward claims that men are losing status everywhere and that society is rigged. "Blackpill" memes circulate. References to past attackers appear as ironic jokes. Language describing women as parasitic becomes normal in the group."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

The mechanism begins with ordinary frustration, which becomes validated in community spaces. Over time, collective identity forms around shared resentment. Personal experience is reinterpreted through systemic explanations and conspiratorial gender narratives. Language shifts toward stereotyping and dehumanisation. Hostility becomes morally justified as "truth-telling" or resistance. While most participants do not endorse violence, repeated exposure can lower psychological barriers to violent rhetoric and normalise aggressive identity performances.

WHY IT MATTERS

Gaming spaces are identity rich. When grievance collectivisation becomes embedded, the distance between resentment and radicalisation can shrink, especially if ideological actors offer belonging and coherent enemies. The risk is cumulative and relational rather than doctrinal.

IMPACT ON USERS

Women and girls may withdraw, self-censor, or experience distress and exclusion. Participating users may experience identity narrowing and increased hostility. Vulnerable individuals may adopt fatalistic belief systems that make violent rhetoric feel less shocking, even if action remains rare.



Gamification of Extremism: When ideology becomes competitive

DEFINITION

Gamification of extremism refers to the transformation of ideological signalling into competitive performance through points systems, rankings, badges, status roles, escalation challenges, or reaction-based prestige. Ideology becomes something one performs and “levels up.”

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming cultures are structurally oriented toward progress tracking, recognition, and status. In some communities, shock and transgression become shortcuts to visibility. Extremist-coded content may begin as “ironic” memes but can become social currency when rewarded. The analytic emphasis is on reward loops: when recognition correlates with transgression, escalation can become self-reinforcing even without explicit recruitment.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“A private Discord server begins as a “dark humour” space for competitive FPS players. A leaderboard rewards for instance the “edgelord of the week.” Users compete to post the most offensive content, gradually moving into antisemitic memes, racial slurs, and coded white supremacist references. Status roles are awarded for extremity.”



MECHANISM ANALYSIS

The mechanism starts with reward recalibration:

- Attention becomes the reward rather than skill.
- Competition accelerates escalation by shifting baselines; yesterday’s shocking meme becomes today’s norm.
- Identity fuses with status as users internalise the idea that extremity equals value.

Repetition normalises what is shared, while irony provides psychological insulation that reduces accountability. Participation becomes ideological rehearsal.

WHY IT MATTERS

Traditional extremist persuasion relies on argument. Gamified extremism relies on participation and reward. It can socialise users into extremist-coded cultures without requiring explicit ideological commitment at the outset.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Participants may gradually internalise dehumanising norms and align identity with transgressive status.
- Bystanders may become desensitised and learn that extremity gains admiration.
- Vulnerable individuals may adopt memes without recognising ideological roots and later migrate to more explicit spaces.

Aestheticisation of Violence: When attacks look like gameplay

DEFINITION

Aestheticisation of violence refers to the presentation or stylisation of real-world violence using gaming visual grammar, particularly first-person shooter aesthetics, livestream mechanics, and performance framing. It concerns communication, symbolism, and circulation, not causal claims about gaming.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

In rare but high-impact cases, extremist actors have borrowed gaming aesthetics to stage violence as spectacle for online circulation. The analytic point is about very few perpetrators that deliberately weaponise familiar digital formats to maximise virality, signal subcultural alignment, and transform atrocity into shareable media artefacts.

Real cases that gained extensive coverage in the media involve:

- The attacker in the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings who live-streamed the assault using a head-mounted camera that mirrored first-person shooter (FPS) perspectives, drawing explicit comparisons to gameplay formats
- Similarly, Anders Breivik who referenced commercial war games in preparing and conceptualising his 2011 attack, illustrating how gaming imagery can be symbolically appropriated within extremist narratives

These extremist actors selectively borrowed familiar visual tropes from gaming culture to maximise online virality, aestheticise violence, and resonate with digitally native audiences.²¹

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A violent act is livestreamed using a head-mounted camera in FPS-style perspective. Clips are edited with overlays and circulated in gaming-adjacent spaces. Discussion focuses on "execution" rather than victims, turning atrocity into performance content."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Violence is constructed as spectacle, anticipating an audience. Gaming aesthetics act as subcultural signalling devices that align violence with youth digital performance norms. Familiar framing can create emotional distance and blur perception by resembling entertainment formats.

- While copycat pathways remain rare, circulation can create a niche environment where fascination shifts toward admiration and identification.

WHY IT MATTERS

This is low-frequency but high-impact. When violence becomes formatted content, the logic of extremist communication changes: attention becomes part of the act. Understanding the mechanism helps prevention.

IMPACT ON USERS

- General audiences may experience reduced shock through repeated exposure to stylised clips.
- Certain subcultures may shift toward tactical or competitive discussion and acts
- Rare vulnerable individuals may identify with attacker personas, increasing concern.



Simulation and Re-Enactment of Real Attacks: When real suffering becomes competitive play

DEFINITION

This risk arises when real-world atrocities or conflicts are recreated inside gaming environments in ways that transform real suffering into competitive reenactment, ideological bonding, or symbolic rehearsal. The risk is not war-themed fiction. It is the convergence of real tragedy, ideological framing, and competitive reenactment.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Sandbox tools enable creativity and collaboration. Most uses are harmless. However, when creative affordances intersect with grievance narratives and insulated communities, simulations can become symbolic stages. The vulnerability is interpretative, not mechanical: the same tool can be playful creativity in one context and ideological reinforcement in another.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“Players recreate a recent mass-casualty event inside a sandbox game, replicating location and tactical movements, recording clips with dramatic edits, and sharing them in private channels. Real victims disappear from the narrative, while realism becomes a status metric.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Emotional distancing can emerge as tragedy becomes abstracted through replay. Competitive framing shifts attention from moral reflection to performance evaluation. In ideologically aligned enclaves, reenactment can become bonding ritual that reinforces narratives. Private spaces reduce counter-arguments and accelerate norm hardening.

WHY IT MATTERS

Most players keep clear boundaries. The risk emerges when the boundary blurs through interpretative escalation. The process remains niche, but where it occurs, it can reshape empathy and increase identification with perpetrators.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users remain unaffected. In insulated communities, emotional sensitivity may decline and ideological reinforcement may strengthen.
- Rare vulnerable individuals may develop fantasy rehearsal or increased identification with perpetrators.



5.2. Behavioural Layer Risks: How communities respond, reinforce, and escalate

Behavioural risks concern interaction patterns that can normalise, escalate, or insulate harmful content. They focus on group dynamics: who speaks, who stays silent, who leaves, who escalates, and who coordinates. While such dynamics are common to many online communities, they may also be exploited by extremist actors who seek to reinforce narratives, test boundaries, or gradually shift community norms.

Social Conformity Pressure: When silence shapes norms

DEFINITION

Social conformity pressure occurs when users adapt behaviour to match dominant community tone even if they privately disagree. Silence, laughter, or passive participation gradually reinforce harmful norms.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming communities rely heavily on visible and informal social signals. When problematic statements receive no pushback, users interpret that absence as acceptance. Confrontation carries social cost, especially in groups where belonging and status matter. Over time, communities can drift without explicit agreement as users adjust to avoid exclusion.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“Political jokes appear in voice chat. A few members feel uncomfortable but say nothing. Others laugh. New members mirror the tone to avoid being seen as overly serious. The community shifts without anyone declaring a new norm.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Silence becomes perceived approval, objection becomes socially risky, and newcomers model the dominant behaviour. Tone shifts through norm drift rather than persuasion. The group changes because resistance weakens, not because belief increases.

WHY IT MATTERS

Sometimes radicalisation does not require mass agreement; it requires lowered resistance and reduced corrective capacity. Conformity pressure weakens resilience.

IMPACT ON USERS

Many users adapt superficially. Some disengage quietly. Vulnerable individuals may interpret permissiveness as endorsement and become more open to escalation.



Escalation Through Attention-Seeking: When visibility rewards boundary pushing

DEFINITION

This risk arises when users learn that provocative or extreme behaviour generates attention, reactions, and recognition, which encourages escalation over time. It is incentive-driven and social, not necessarily ideological.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming culture is visibility oriented. Recognition is public, reactions are immediate, and status can be gained through performance. In some spaces, shock becomes an efficient route to attention. When engagement rewards boundary pushing, the incentive structure unintentionally favours escalation and polarised framing.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

A user posts an aggressive meme during a debate and receives far more reactions than measured comments. Others notice. Soon, multiple users exaggerate tone to attract attention. The shift happens without formal gamification, driven by recognition loops.



MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Attention reinforces behaviour and reinforced behaviour intensifies. Moderate contributions lose visibility. Extremity becomes the fastest path to recognition. Competition emerges implicitly, and the baseline shifts as users push further to stand out.

WHY IT MATTERS

Even without extremist intent, attention economies can create environments where hostile framing travels faster and appears dominant. Such climates become hospitable to ideological actors who thrive in polarised spaces.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users treat this as noise, but some internalise extremity as identity. Others withdraw.
- Vulnerable users may seek belonging through provocation, accelerating their movement into harsher subcultures.



Over-Identification with Online Groups: When the community becomes the self

DEFINITION

This risk emerges when a person's sense of identity becomes deeply tied to an online gaming community, increasing loyalty to group norms and reducing openness to outside perspectives.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming communities often provide belonging, recognition, shared language, and hierarchy.

- For socially isolated users, the community can become the primary identity anchor. When identity fuses with group membership, disagreement feels personal, and defending the group becomes self-defence.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A young player spends most of their time in a private server where political interpretations circulate. Over time, criticism of the server feels like an attack on the individual. Outside perspectives are dismissed as hostile."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Identity fusion increases conformity and defensiveness. Loyalty to group narratives grows, exposure to alternative views decreases, and leaving becomes psychologically costly. Group beliefs become internal beliefs through repeated social reinforcement.

WHY IT MATTERS

Radicalisation often follows belonging. If an identity-fused group shifts toward grievance narratives, individuals may shift with it to preserve attachment and status.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users maintain multiple identity anchors.
- Highly fused individuals may narrow worldview, adopt group narratives without critical distance, and resist disengagement even as content intensifies.

Gradual Desensitisation: When repeated exposure reduces moral shock



DEFINITION

Gradual desensitisation occurs when repeated exposure to hostile language, violent references, or extremist-coded humour reduces emotional sensitivity and moral resistance. It concerns repetition, not a single exposure.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Digital environments enable constant replay and meme circulation. Familiarity changes perception. Over time, what once felt shocking can become routine, and routine can reshape the moral baseline of a community.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A server regularly shares edgy memes referencing extremist symbols or real-world violence. Early discomfort fades over months. No one announces a shift, but the emotional tone changes and the content feel ordinary."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Repetition produces emotional habituation. Shock responses weaken, empathy can erode subtly, and tolerance for aggressive framing increases. The process does not automatically radicalise most users, but it lowers barriers for later ideological framing to feel acceptable.

WHY IT MATTERS

When shock fades, boundaries blur. Escalation feels less dramatic. Harmful narratives encounter less resistance, and ideological actors can enter an already softened environment.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users retain moral clarity.
- Some adopt harsher tones.
- Vulnerable individuals may become more receptive to grievance frames and show reduced empathy toward targeted groups.

Withdrawal of Moderating Voices: When reasonable users disengage



DEFINITION

This risk occurs when users who disagree with toxic or escalating trends disengage rather than challenge them, leaving the space dominated by more extreme voices.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Online conflict is exhausting. Many users avoid confrontation, especially when challenges carry social risk. Over time, those comfortable with escalation remain, and the visible community changes. The shift can be demographic before it is ideological.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“As political jokes grow harsher, several moderate members quietly leave a server. The remaining community is more comfortable with escalation. Newcomers adapt to the dominant tone and assume it reflects consensus.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Moderate users withdraw, extreme voices remain visible, perceived consensus grows, and newcomers model the dominant tone. The absence of dissent becomes a force multiplier for escalation.

WHY IT MATTERS

Radicalisation environments often form not because everyone agrees but because dissent disappears. Loss of pluralism reduces resilience and increases norm hardening.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Remaining users may perceive extreme views as mainstream, feel pressure to conform, and drift toward stronger alignment.
- Vulnerable individuals may interpret dominance as legitimacy and move toward deeper involvement.

5.3. Structural Layer risks: When design features create opportunity, ambiguity, or insulation

Structural risks are not about individual behaviour. They concern the broader environment: architecture, governance, and systems that shape visibility, moderation, and accountability. While these features are designed to enable participation and scale, certain structural conditions may be exploited by extremist actors to increase reach, avoid detection, or consolidate influence.

Fragmented Platform Ecosystems: When no one sees the full picture

DEFINITION

Fragmentation occurs when gaming-related communication is spread across multiple platforms, making it difficult to monitor escalation patterns or understand narrative trajectories.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming ecosystems are layered and interconnected. Content can originate in a game, move to Discord, appear on video platforms, and be reframed ideologically elsewhere. Each platform has distinct moderation policies and enforcement capacity. Fragmentation creates blind spots and reduces coordinated prevention.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“A controversial in-game conversation leads to a private Discord group. Clips are edited and posted on short video, then circulate in a political forum. No platform sees the full trajectory.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Limited cross-platform oversight and inconsistent enforcement allow narratives to migrate and reinforce. Accountability weakens because responsibility is distributed.

WHY IT MATTERS

When no one sees the full picture, early warning signals are missed and intervention becomes reactive.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users remain unaware.
- Vulnerable individuals may follow narratives across spaces and experience repeated reinforcement without counter-narratives.



Anonymity and Pseudonymity: When accountability is structurally weakened



DEFINITION

Anonymity allows participation without revealing real-world identity. While often protective, it can reduce accountability for harmful behaviour when combined with permissive norms.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Anonymity supports creative identity and safety. Yet it can reduce inhibition and enable performative hostility, especially where moderation is inconsistent and social rewards favour boundary pushing.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

A user posts inflammatory memes under a pseudonym. Because consequences feel minimal and reactions are rewarding, tone escalates and others imitate.

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Reduced fear of reputational cost increases experimentation with extreme language and boundary testing. In toxic spaces, anonymity accelerates escalation.

WHY IT MATTERS

Governance must protect anonymity while preventing abuse, particularly where weak moderation and private migration intersect.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most use anonymity responsibly.
- Vulnerable users may explore extremist narratives more freely or engage in harmful behaviour they would avoid offline.



Algorithmic Visibility and Recommendation Dynamics:

When engagement rewards polarisation

DEFINITION

Recommendation systems and visibility metrics can unintentionally amplify emotionally charged content because such content generates high engagement.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Across digital platforms, controversy and outrage travel further than nuance. In gaming-adjacent spaces, provocative memes may receive disproportionate visibility. Algorithms do not promote extremism intentionally; they promote engagement.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“A provocative meme about a game update receives high reactions, is recommended widely, and triggers escalating debate. More extreme versions appear and gain engagement, reinforcing the feedback loop.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Engagement-based ranking drives amplification. Emotional intensity increases interaction, which increases exposure. Repetition and clustering can lead users toward progressively more polarised narratives.

WHY IT MATTERS

Visibility systems can distort perceived consensus and make extreme views appear common. Repetition can be misread as validation.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Vulnerable users may be repeatedly exposed to grievance framing, perceive polarisation as normal, and migrate into more ideologically intense spaces.



Moderation Gaps and Inconsistent Enforcement: When rules exist but signals are unclear



DEFINITION

Moderation gaps occur when platform rules exist but are inconsistently applied or difficult to enforce across layered ecosystems.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming ecosystems distribute responsibility across developers, third-party tools, user-generated servers, and cross-platform communities. Enforcement varies. Users learn where boundaries are weak, and coded content can persist in grey zones.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A server removes explicit hate speech but tolerates coded memes. On another platform, the same content remains untouched. Users learn to evade detection."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Inconsistent enforcement produces ambiguity. Ambiguity encourages boundary testing and strategic use of coded language. Credibility weakens when rules appear symbolic.

WHY IT MATTERS

Clear enforcement sets norms and deters escalation. Weak enforcement reduces deterrence and enables persistence.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users adapt to clear rules.
- In inconsistent environments, extremist actors exploit grey zones, and vulnerable users receive mixed signals about acceptability.

User-Generated Content Flexibility: When creative tools can be repurposed

DEFINITION

Sandbox and user-generated environments enable custom maps, scenarios, and narratives. While empowering, this flexibility can be misused to recreate extremist symbols, propaganda, or real-world attacks.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

UGC tools enable replication of locations and reenactment scenarios. The risk is conditional: the same tool supports harmless creativity and, in grievance-driven contexts, can become a vehicle for symbolic reinforcement.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"Players build a map resembling a real-world conflict site and share recordings. Discussion shifts from gameplay to ideological commentary about the real event, and clips circulate as narrative artefacts."



MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Flexibility enables repetition and circulation of symbolic narratives. In-group bonding can form around reenactment. Fiction and reality may blur symbolically even when users understand the difference technically.

WHY IT MATTERS

Without safeguards, creative tools can circulate harmful symbolism, reinforce extremist mythology, and reduce emotional distance from real violence in niche contexts.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users create responsibly.
- Vulnerable users in grievance-driven groups may repeatedly use tools to reinforce ideological identity and normalise symbolic alignment.

5.4. Cross layers Dynamics Risks: Where structure and behaviour combine to enable pathways

These risks sit between layers. They are not just structural or narrative based behavioural. They describe pathways: where conversations happen, how they move, and how escalation becomes socially reinforced through communication architecture.

Funnel Migration and Private Group Bonding: From public chat to insulated spaces

DEFINITION

Funnel migration happens when users move from open gaming spaces into semi-private or private groups where oversight is reduced and narratives can intensify with less challenge. Escalation, when it occurs, often consolidates in smaller rooms rather than public lobbies.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming ecosystems are layered. Public chats and forums provide visibility, while invite-only channels reduce oversight. Many migrations begin as normal community-building: strategy servers, team coordination, friend groups. The risk emerges when private bonding becomes the foundation for narrative hardening and when insulation reduces dissent and counter-arguments.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A teenager receives a message: "Join our strategy server for better teamwork." The group starts with gameplay discussion and social bonding. Weeks later, cultural grievances and political commentary increase.

Memes appear. The teenager stays because friendships and belonging have formed. Ideology enters slowly rather than suddenly."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

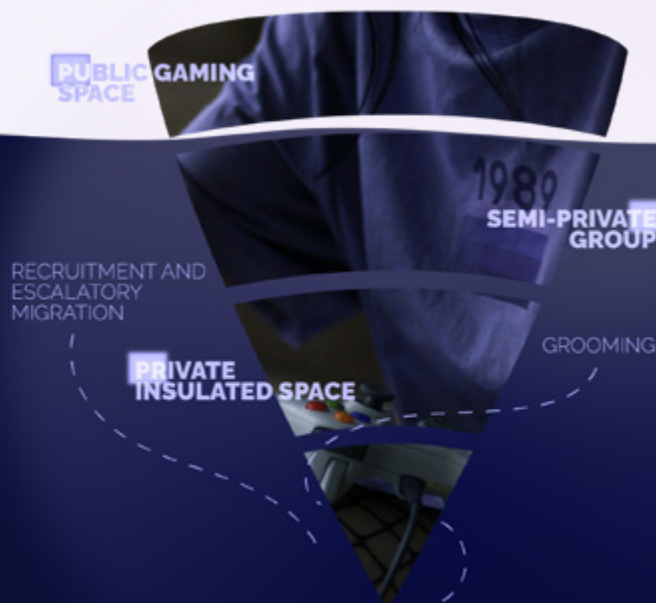
Trust-building and bonding precede ideology. Migration reduces external moderation, lowers exposure to alternative views, and increases conformity pressure. Insulation hardens norms and makes disengagement socially costly.

WHY IT MATTERS

Insulated spaces intensify narrative reinforcement and can function as staging grounds for recruitment migration. The risk is not private speech; it is private escalation without counterbalance.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users leave if uncomfortable.
- Vulnerable users may develop strong identity fusion, reduce outside perspective, and accept hardened narratives as normal.



Cross-Platform Amplification: When narratives travel and harden

DEFINITION

Cross-platform amplification occurs when content originating in one space spreads across multiple platforms, becoming reinforced, reframed, and sometimes intensified as it travels.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming-related narratives often move between in-game chat, Discord, streaming platforms, TikTok-style short video, forums, and encrypted channels. Each platform has different norms and moderation capacity. The same artefact can be re-captioned and reframed, producing reinforcement loops and making escalation harder to track.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“A sandbox clip is shared as edgy humour in a Discord server, edited into a short meme video on social media, and then reframed ideologically in a politically charged forum. Meaning shifts as it spreads, and repetition increases perceived legitimacy.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Amplification works through audience expansion, reframing across communities, algorithmic visibility, and echo chambers for reinforcement. Each step can intensify interpretation. Fragmentation also reduces accountability and makes coordinated intervention harder.

WHY IT MATTERS

Fragmented ecosystems allow narratives to migrate and intensify beyond the view of any single platform. What appears playful in one space may be ideological elsewhere.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most viewers scroll past.
- Vulnerable individuals may encounter repetition, interpret it as validation, and migrate toward more ideologically intense spaces.

Prolific High-Visibility Users: When a few voices shape the room

DEFINITION

This risk occurs when a small number of highly active users disproportionately shape discussion tone and perceived norms within a community, concentrating influence through visibility and repetition.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Online communities often operate on attention and reaction metrics. Highly active users can shape what is seen and what becomes normal simply through volume and persistence. This matters because perceived consensus often depends on what is visible, not on what most members believe.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“In a large server, three users post most political memes. Their posts receive frequent reactions, and newcomers assume this tone represents the community. Over time, silence from others reinforces the impression of consensus.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Influence grows through agenda setting and norm signalling. Engagement reinforces visibility and encourages imitation. Over time, dominant voices become cultural baselines, discouraging dissent and pushing moderating voices out.

WHY IT MATTERS

A small cluster can normalise extremist-adjacent framing and distort perceived consensus. Targeted intervention can therefore be more effective than broad monitoring.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users remain passive consumers.
- Vulnerable individuals may admire dominant voices, adopt their framing, and imitate their tone to gain status.

Event-Driven Communication Spikes: When attention peaks create opportunity

DEFINITION

Event-driven spikes occur when major gaming releases, controversies, or community flashpoints generate intense discussion, creating openings for grievance framing, polarisation, and funnel migration into insulated spaces.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

High-visibility moments concentrate emotion, traffic, and debate. Moderation capacity may be strained. Polarised framing spreads faster. Extremist-adjacent actors can exploit these moments to inject simplified narratives, recruit attention, and redirect users into private channels.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A new game introduces an inclusive protagonist. Debate surges. Grievance narratives appear claiming cultural decline. Invite links circulate to "uncensored discussion spaces," where framing becomes sharper and conspiratorial."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Spikes amplify emotional intensity and compress time. Hot takes dominate. Reframing occurs rapidly. Migration accelerates as users are redirected into private groups that persist after public attention fades.

WHY IT MATTERS

Unmoderated spikes can accelerate escalation that would otherwise develop slowly. Early intervention during spikes is disproportionately important.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most users move on.
- Vulnerable individuals may anchor identity around grievance narratives formed during the spike and migrate into more ideologically intense spaces.



Grooming in Gaming Ecosystems: When bonding becomes leverage

DEFINITION

Grooming in gaming ecosystems refers to a gradual relational process through which an individual builds trust with a player-, in order to influence, manipulate, ideologically shape, exploit, or recruit them. It may serve ideological, sexual, criminal, financial, or other exploitative purposes, and these motives may overlap. It rarely begins with explicit abuse or extremism; it begins with bonding.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming environments enable repeated interaction, teamwork, mentoring, private messaging, and migration to external platforms. These conditions can accelerate trust-building and create relational asymmetries. Grooming therefore functions as a cross-layer escalation mechanism: structural affordances enable contact and privacy, behavioural bonding generates dependency, and narrative content is introduced gradually through “mentorship” framing.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“An experienced player regularly teams up with a younger gamer and offers advice and emotional support. After weeks, the older player introduces claims that “media lies” and “truth is hidden,” then invites the younger player to a private Discord server “for serious players.” Inside that server, conversation slowly shifts toward civilisational grievance and ethnic conspiracy framing. The younger player stays because they feel valued and included. The ideological shift is subtle”.

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Trust formation precedes ideological content. Emotional bonding creates reliance. Narrative introduction is incremental, often framed as guidance. Platform migration reduces external visibility and increases insulation. Identity shaping occurs as the relationship becomes central and outside influences diminish. The process is relational rather than coercive at first.

WHY IT MATTERS

Gaming is immersive and peer-driven. For youth, digital mentorship can substitute for offline validation. Grooming exploits developmental plasticity and can escalate unnoticed because it feels like friendship.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most players experience no impact. Some may encounter manipulative behaviour without becoming involved.
- Vulnerable users may develop emotional dependency, identity shaping, and become increasingly susceptible to extremist recruitment, sexual exploitation, criminal recruitment, financial exploitation or coercive control.

Recruitment Pathways and Escalatory Migration: When gaming becomes a filtering stage



DEFINITION

Recruitment refers to the gradual movement of individuals from casual gaming participation toward deeper ideological engagement, often culminating in migration to external extremist spaces. Gaming is rarely the endpoint; it functions as a preselection and filtering stage.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Gaming communities provide shared identity, cultural shorthand, humour codes, and emotional engagement. These features can enable soft recruitment and filtering. Recruitment typically does not begin with explicit ideology in public lobbies, it begins through grievance alignment and community bonding, then consolidates via private migration and cross-platform movement.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

“A forum frequently discusses “forced diversity” in games. A subgroup shares memes criticising “global elites.” Members are invited to a Discord channel framed as “uncensored gaming talk.” Over months, conversation shifts from game criticism to demographic conspiracy narratives, and links to external ideological forums appear. A few members migrate. Most do not. The funnel is narrow, but impactful.”

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

Cultural grievance provides entry. Social bonding reinforces attachment. Narratives intensify and become more structured. Migration moves conversation into insulated spaces where counter-arguments fade. Ideological alignment becomes explicit for a small subset, who then transition outside gaming into extremist ecosystems.

WHY IT MATTERS

Gaming can provide social conditions for filtering: belonging, identity, and emotional engagement. Extremist actors need only a small subset of susceptible users to be effective.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most gamers remain uninvolved. Some experience exposure without adoption.
- Highly susceptible individuals may realign identity, enter insulated ecosystems, and become resistant to outside critique.

Youth Developmental Sensitivity as Risk Amplifier: When adolescence increases imprinting effects

DEFINITION

Youth vulnerability is not a discrete risk but a developmental sensitivity layer that modifies exposure and susceptibility across structural, communication, content, and behavioural risks. Adolescence involves identity formation, peer validation needs, and worldview exploration, which can amplify certain dynamics.

CONTEXT AND ANALYTICAL FRAMING

Youth sensitivity does not imply inevitability. Most young gamers remain resilient. However, developmental plasticity can intensify imprinting effects when layered exposure to grievance narratives, conformity pressure, algorithmic amplification, and private group insulation converges.

SYNTHETIC EXAMPLE

"A fifteen-year-old spends significant time in a competitive community. They repeatedly encounter claims that "the system is broken" and that "certain groups are destroying culture." Peers reward repetition. Over time, the adolescent integrates these frames into self-understanding. The shift is gradual and socially reinforced."

A fifteen-year-old active in an online gaming forum repeatedly encounters posts claiming that immigration is "destroying Europe" and that migrants are responsible for crime, unemployment, or cultural decline. Memes portray refugees as invaders and diversity in games as proof that "native culture" is being erased.

At first, the teenager shares the content as humour. Other players respond positively, reinforcing the language. Over time, the framing shifts from joke to belief. Migrants are increasingly described as threats rather than people."

MECHANISM ANALYSIS

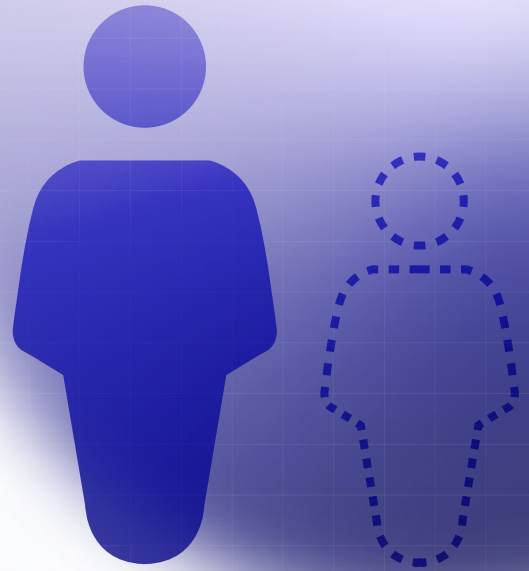
Belonging needs drive engagement. Narrative exposure supplies simplified interpretative frames. Social reinforcement rewards repetition. Identity integration gradually embeds narratives into worldview. Developmental plasticity increases sensitivity to these dynamics without guaranteeing permanence.

WHY IT MATTERS

Youth protection must focus on resilience and literacy rather than restriction. Gaming is not inherently harmful, but layered exposure combined with developmental sensitivity can intensify impact for a minority.

IMPACT ON USERS

- Most youth maintain fiction-reality separation and do not radicalise. Some show stronger susceptibility to grievance framing.
- A small minority may experience identity fusion and increased recruitment vulnerability.



PART C

Strengthening Resilience in the Online Gaming Ecosystem



From Risk Awareness to Shared Responsibility

Understanding risk is only the first step. In complex digital ecosystems, prevention cannot rely on restriction alone. It must be grounded in literacy, proportionate governance and the strengthening of community norms that make harmful escalation socially unsustainable.

As outlined in the previous sections, escalation in gaming environments is not inevitable. It emerges when narrative exposure, behavioural reinforcement, structural affordances and cross-layer migration converge across the same content, behavioural, structural and bridge dynamics layers identified in the typology above. Strengthening resilience therefore requires attention across those same layers.

Resilience in gaming ecosystems is a shared multi-stakeholder responsibility and this is widely acknowledged. It involves platforms, regulators, educators, families, civil society organisations and young users themselves.

No single actor sees the full trajectory of escalation, particularly in fragmented cross-platform environments where content migrates and intensifies through bridge pathways and funnel migration dynamics. Effective prevention depends on cooperation across institutional boundaries as much as on awareness within communities.

Large-scale evidence, including research in GEMS project, suggests that support for extremist violence within gaming communities remains marginal. The overwhelming majority of gaming experiences are positive, creative and socially meaningful. Resilience efforts therefore aim not to correct widespread harm, but to prevent specific risk clusters from converging under particular conditions. The objective is reinforcement of healthy environments, not suspicion of ordinary play.



As mentioned above, many platforms encourage users to take an active role in protecting themselves by reporting harmful content, blocking users, adjusting privacy settings, and leaving problematic communities. These measures are important and can significantly reduce exposure to harmful interactions. However, responsibility for safety cannot rest solely with individual users.

Young people, in particular, may not always have the experience, confidence, or knowledge required to recognise manipulation, identify grooming behaviours, understand the dynamics of social pressure, or disengage from communities that provide a sense of belonging and identity. As a result, many experts and policymakers increasingly emphasise **the importance of a shared responsibility model in which platforms, community managers, educators, parents, policy-makers, and users all play a role in promoting safer digital environments.**

This includes:



1.1. Digital Literacy: Interpreting Narrative Clusters

Digital literacy in gaming contexts is very important. It extends beyond technical competence. It involves interpretative awareness and the ability to recognise how content-layer narrative clusters operate within digital conversations. This includes, amongst others described above, understanding how humour can gradually shift into dehumanisation, how aesthetic disagreement may become grievance framing, how conspiratorial narratives simplify complexity, and how coded language or dogwhistling signals in-group alignment.

By recognising these narrative patterns early, users reduce the likelihood that repetition will normalise exclusionary framing. In environments characterised by speed, repetition and social reinforcement, literacy directly interrupts the normalisation dynamics and restores reflection before escalation pathways consolidate.

The importance of these skills is increasingly recognised at the European Union level. As young people spend growing portions of their social, educational, and recreational lives in digitally mediated environments, policymakers have become increasingly concerned with how digital ecosystems influence information exposure, identity formation, civic participation, social cohesion, and democratic resilience. It is within this broader context that the European Commission developed the Guidelines for Teachers and Educators on Tackling Disinformation and Promoting Digital Literacy through Education and Training (2026).

The Guidelines seek to strengthen individuals' ability to critically assess information, recognise manipulation, understand how digital environments shape perceptions and behaviour, and participate responsibly in democratic societies. In doing so, they reflect a wider European recognition that resilience in the digital age depends not only on technological safeguards but also on education, critical thinking, and informed digital citizenship.

1.1.1 Digital Literacy and Democratic Resilience: Key Takeaways from the European Commission's 2026 Guidelines²²

The European Commission's Guidelines for Teachers and Educators on Tackling Disinformation and Promoting Digital Literacy through Education and Training (2026) positions digital literacy as a fundamental democratic competence rather than merely a technical skill. The Guidelines emphasise that digital literacy plays a crucial role in strengthening democratic resilience, civic participation, social cohesion, and individuals' ability to navigate increasingly complex online environments.

In this context, digital literacy is not only about accessing information but also about critically evaluating it, recognising manipulation, understanding how digital platforms shape information exposure, and participating responsibly in digital society.

A key message of the Guidelines is that being proficient in using digital technologies does not automatically make someone digitally literate. Young people may use social media, apps, and digital devices extensively while still struggling to recognise manipulative content, understand algorithmic influences, assess credibility, or identify disinformation. Consequently, digital literacy education should focus not only on technical skills but also on critical thinking, reflection, ethical engagement, and informed decision-making.

The Guidelines further stress the importance of creating safe and inclusive learning environments where controversial issues can be discussed through dialogue, empathy, and critical reflection rather than confrontation or stigmatisation.



They also highlight the value of prebunking—building resilience before exposure to manipulation by helping learners recognise common persuasion techniques, emotional triggers, and deceptive framing. At the same time, digital citizenship is presented as a broader concept encompassing privacy, digital rights, freedom of expression, responsible participation, and online wellbeing.

Importantly, the Guidelines advocate a whole-school approach, recognising that digital literacy is a shared responsibility involving teachers, school leaders, parents, psychologists, librarians, civil society organisations, and the wider community. Perhaps their most significant contribution is the recognition that disinformation should not be understood simply as false information, but as part of a broader ecosystem shaped by technology, algorithms, emotions, identity, social belonging, and influence dynamics. Building resilience therefore requires not only fact-checking skills but also a deeper understanding of how digital environments shape perceptions, behaviours, and social norms.

This Guide, builds upon and complements this framework by focusing on a digital environment that has become increasingly significant in the lives of young people: the gaming ecosystem. While the Commission Guidelines address digital platforms, social media, influencers, AI, and information literacy more broadly, references to gaming are relatively limited. The broader gaming ecosystem, as a social, cultural, and communication environment where young people interact, form communities, consume information, and develop identities, remains largely outside the scope of the Guidelines.

This Guide extends established digital literacy principles to the interconnected spaces where gaming, streaming, social media, communication platforms, and online communities converge. This distinctive approach recognises that gaming should not be viewed solely as a form of entertainment, but as a complex social ecosystem where communication, influence, identity formation, and community dynamics increasingly take place.

The GEMS project is among the first European initiatives to examine these environments through the lenses of prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation.



1.2. Ecosystem Literacy: Understanding Structural Conditions and Amplification

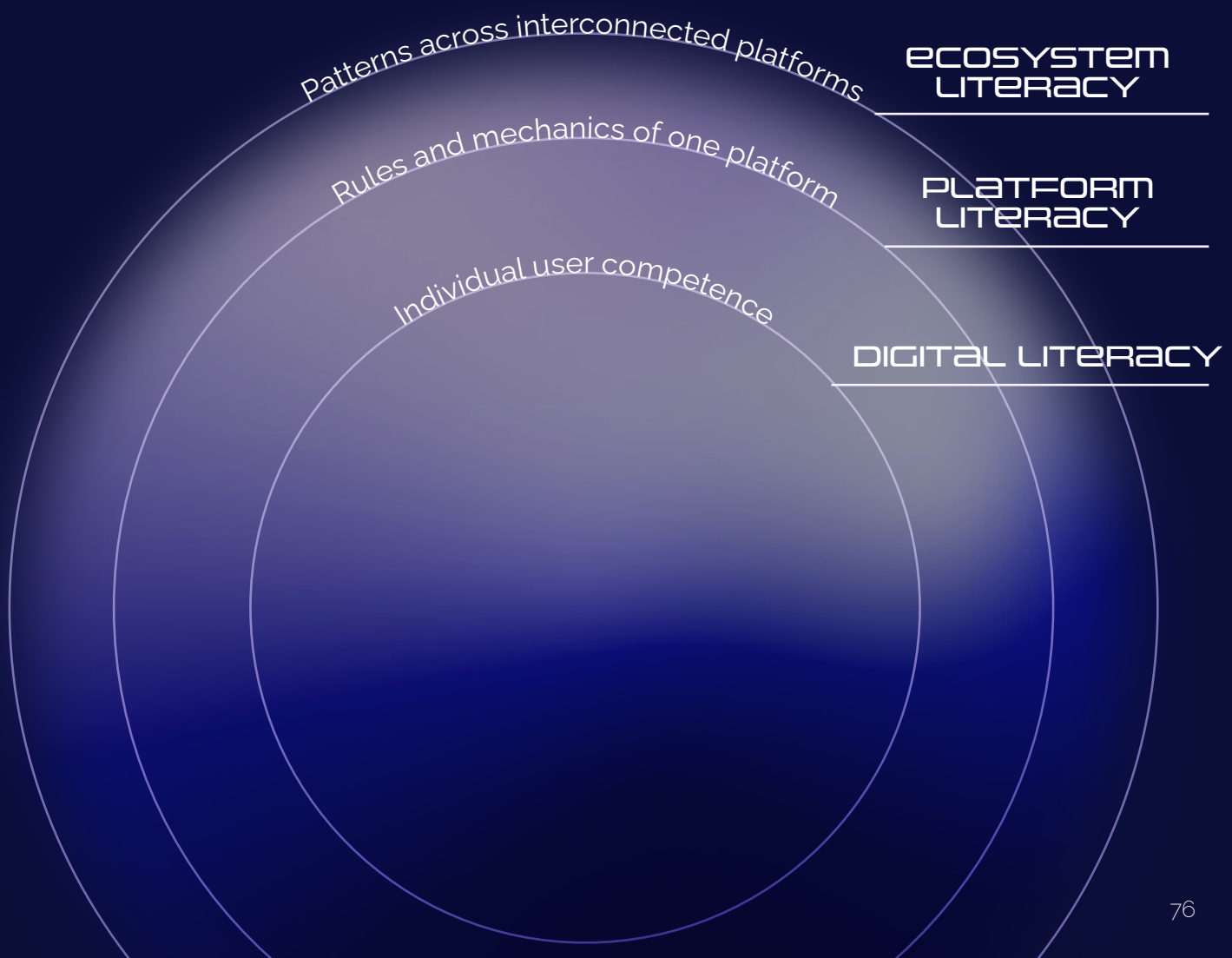
Gaming does not occur within a single bound space. It unfolds across interconnected platforms, in-game environments, streaming channels, community servers, social media and private messaging applications. Content may originate in one location, be reframed in another, and intensify as it migrates through cross-platform amplification pathways.

While digital literacy focuses on understanding and critically interpreting content, narratives, and persuasive techniques, resilience also requires an understanding of the environments through which these narratives circulate.

Ecosystem literacy involves understanding structural enabling conditions such as algorithmic amplification, visibility metrics, fragmented moderation capacity and anonymity features.

It also involves recognising how private group migration and funnel dynamics reduce oversight and increase insulation. Without this perspective, isolated incidents may appear disconnected. With it, patterns across layers become visible and proportionate responses possible.

Fragmentation means that no platform has full visibility of escalation trajectories. Cross-platform cooperation, systemic risk assessment and transparent notice-and-action mechanisms therefore strengthen structural resilience. Regulatory frameworks such as the Digital Services Act reinforce these obligations, addressing systemic risk rather than isolated incidents.



1.3 A toolkit on literacies:

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy refers to the technical and cognitive skills required to use digital technologies safely and effectively.

In gaming contexts, this includes:

- Managing privacy settings
- Recognising misinformation
- Evaluating online sources
- Practising respectful communication
- Understanding basic online safety

Digital literacy focuses primarily on the individual user's competence.

However, technical competence alone does not explain how group dynamics evolve.

Platform Literacy

Platform literacy refers to understanding how a specific platform operates.

This includes knowledge of:

- Community guidelines and enforcement rules
- Reporting mechanisms
- Content moderation practices
- Visibility indicators (likes, reactions, trending sections)
- Recommendation systems

Platform literacy helps users understand the rules and mechanics within a single environment.

But gaming today rarely unfolds within one platform.

Ecosystem Literacy

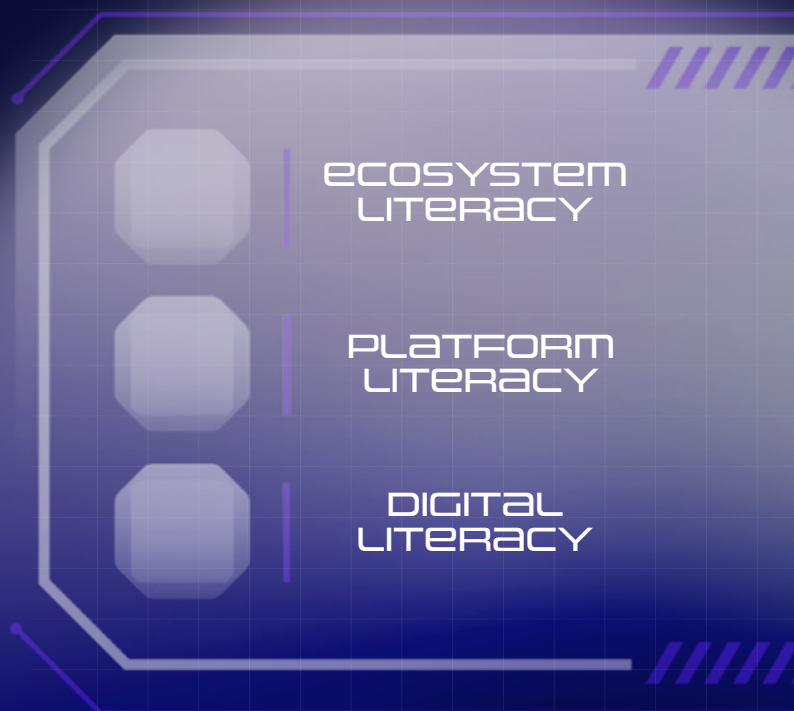
Ecosystem literacy goes further.

It involves understanding how multiple platforms, systems and communities interact.

In gaming environments, this includes recognising:

- How conversations migrate from in-game chat to streaming platforms to private servers
- How content visibility increases through engagement
- How repetition shifts what feels acceptable
- How private groups reduce external scrutiny
- How behaviour in one space influences tone in another

Ecosystem literacy therefore focuses on patterns across interconnected environments, not isolated incidents.



Algorithm Amplification: Why Some Content Becomes More Visible

Most major platforms, including gaming-adjacent spaces, use algorithmic systems to organise and recommend content.

These systems typically prioritise content based on engagement signals such as:

- Clicks
- Comments
- Shares
- Reactions
- Watch time

Content that generates strong emotional responses, whether positive or negative, often attracts higher engagement. As a result, it may receive greater visibility.

This is known as algorithmic amplification.

Importantly:

- Algorithms are designed to maximise engagement, not to promote extremism.
- However, emotionally charged or polarising content may be amplified because it generates interaction.

In gaming ecosystems, this may mean that:

- Controversial discussions spread faster than nuanced ones.
- Outrage receives more visibility than moderation.
- Repeated grievance narratives appear more frequently in feeds.
- Algorithm literacy helps users understand that increased visibility does not necessarily mean increased legitimacy.

Algorithmic Bias: What It Means in Practice

When discussing algorithmic bias in this context, we do not mean deliberate ideological bias. Rather, bias refers to systematic tendencies in how systems function.

For example:

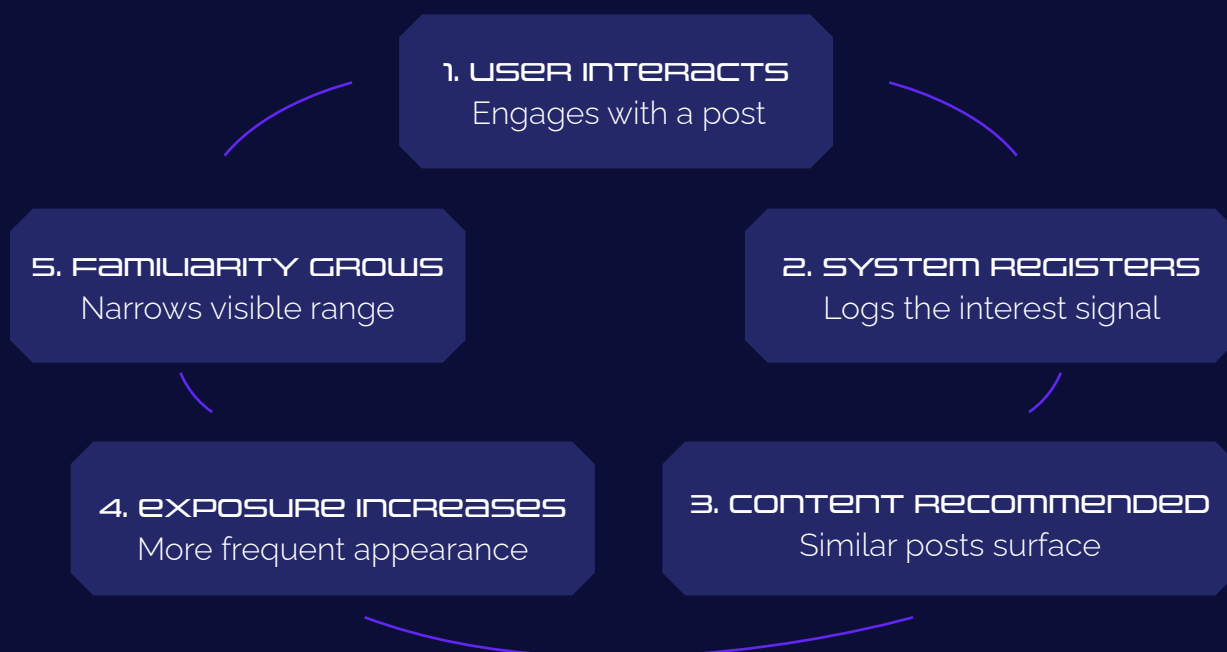
- Engagement-based systems may favour emotionally intense content over reflective discussion.
- Highly active users may shape visibility disproportionately.
- Recommendation systems may reinforce exposure to similar content once engagement begins.
- Repetition can create feedback loops where users are shown more of what they already interact with.

This creates what is sometimes called an “engagement loop”:

- A user interacts with a grievance-based post.
- The system registers that interest.
- Similar content is recommended.
- Exposure increases.
- Familiarity grows.

Over time, this can narrow the range of visible perspectives.

Understanding this dynamic does not imply that users lack agency. It clarifies how exposure patterns can gradually intensify without explicit intent.



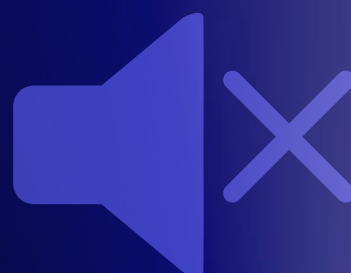
1.4 Platform Safety Tools: What Exists, What Users Need to Know

1.4.1 Block and mute: the right to step away

Among the most accessible self-protection tools available to gamers are functions such as **blocking, muting, and restricting communication**. These features allow gamers to stop receiving messages, remove individuals from voice communications, prevent unwanted contact requests, and limit who can interact with them within a platform or community.

Although these measures may appear simple, they represent important components of digital self-protection. In practice, some young users may hesitate to use such tools because they fear social repercussions, including being ridiculed, excluded, perceived as weak, or pressured to continue engaging in unwanted interactions. As a result, they may remain exposed to harmful, abusive, or distressing content longer than necessary.

Important note: The ability to disengage from harmful interactions should be recognised as a fundamental digital resilience skill rather than a sign of weakness. Users should be encouraged to understand that protecting their wellbeing is a legitimate and responsible choice. No online interaction, community, or digital relationship should take precedence over an individual's psychological safety and wellbeing.



1.4.2. Reporting systems: when something crosses the line

User reporting mechanisms constitute an important component of platform safety and moderation systems. While automated detection tools play an increasingly significant role in identifying harmful content and behaviour, platforms continue to rely heavily on user reports to identify incidents that may not be visible to automated systems or moderators. Consequently, users play an active role in supporting safer online environments by **flagging content or behaviour that may violate platform rules or community standards**.

Depending on the platform, users can typically report a wide range of content and behaviours, including harassment, threats, hate speech, grooming attempts, extremist content, impersonation, sexual exploitation, and other forms of harmful or potentially unlawful conduct.

Reporting tools are generally available for:

- individual messages,
- direct messages (DMs),
- images,
- videos,
- user profiles,
- channels,
- servers, and
- other forms of user-generated content.

In most cases, reporting involves selecting the relevant content and using a designated reporting function integrated into the platform interface.

Important note: User confidence in reporting systems can vary. Some users may perceive reporting mechanisms as ineffective due to delayed responses, limited feedback on outcomes, inconsistent enforcement, or the ability of offenders to reappear under new accounts. As a result, the effectiveness of reporting systems depends not only on their availability but also on the transparency, consistency, proportionality, and timeliness of moderation responses. Effective reporting mechanisms therefore form part of a broader platform governance framework that combines user reporting, proactive moderation, clear community standards, and appropriate enforcement measures to promote safer and more resilient online communities.



1.4.3. Privacy settings: who can find you?

Most digital platforms provide gamers with a range of privacy and account management tools, including:

- controls over friend requests,
- direct messaging,
- profile visibility,
- communication preferences, and
- participation in group interactions. These settings enable users to exercise greater control over who can contact them, view their information, invite them into conversations, or interact with them across the platform.

For younger users in particular, privacy settings constitute an important layer of protection. Many harmful interactions, including harassment, grooming attempts, scams, and unwanted contact, may originate through unsolicited friend requests, shared communities, or private messages.

Understanding and regularly reviewing privacy settings is therefore an important component of digital self-protection and platform literacy.

Important note: Platform providers operate within a complex environment where user safety and user engagement must be balanced. Digital platforms are designed to facilitate interaction, visibility, and participation, all of which contribute to community growth and user engagement.

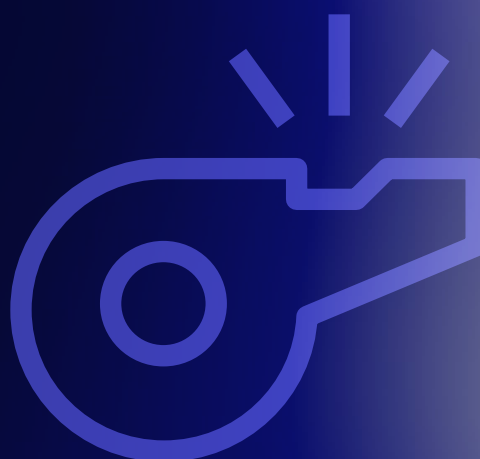


1.4.4. Moderators and community rules: The “Referee who may step in”

Most platforms establish community standards and moderation mechanisms intended to promote respectful behaviour and address harmful conduct. Moderators may:

- remove content,
- restrict or suspend accounts,
- intervene in disputes, and
- enforce community rules designed to protect users and maintain the integrity of the platform environment.

Important note: The quality, consistency, and effectiveness of moderation can vary significantly across communities and platforms. While some communities maintain clear standards, transparent enforcement practices, and active safeguarding measures, others may apply rules inconsistently or have limited moderation capacity. As a result, users may encounter varying levels of protection depending on the specific community in which they participate.



1.4.5. AI moderation: the “invisible guardian”

Platforms increasingly rely on artificial intelligence and automated detection systems to support moderation activities at scale. These systems may use:

- machine learning,
- keyword detection,
- image recognition,
- behavioural analysis, and
- other techniques to identify content associated with violence, hate speech, sexual exploitation, terrorist propaganda, grooming attempts, and other forms of harmful behaviour.

Important note: Automated moderation systems can contribute significantly to platform safety, but they are not infallible. AI systems may struggle to interpret context, irony, humour, memes, coded language, or rapidly evolving online subcultures. They may incorrectly flag

benign content or fail to detect harmful behaviour that is intentionally disguised. Furthermore, some communities adapt their communication practices to circumvent automated detection through the use of symbols, coded references, alternative terminology, or migration to less visible spaces. For this reason, **effective moderation typically requires a combination of automated tools, human judgement, user reporting, and clear governance frameworks.**



The Cognitive Load of Platform Safety — Discord as an Illustrative Example

While Discord²³, for example, provides an extensive framework of safety resources, parental guidance tools, community standards, reporting mechanisms and youth-protection policies, the practical accessibility of this information remains a challenge. The volume of documentation spans files distributed across numerous interconnected pages and policy documents. Expecting teenagers or average users to systematically navigate, read and operationalise this material may therefore be unrealistic.

The challenge is not only information availability, but information discoverability, usability and cognitive accessibility within fast-paced digital environments. See more at Appendix



1.5 Indicative Checklist - Practical Action Signals

FOR PARENTS

Platform & Algorithm Awareness

- ☐ Does my child understand that liking, sharing, or reacting increases the visibility of similar content?
- ☐ Have we discussed how recommendation systems work in games, streaming, and adjacent platforms?
- ☐ Does my child know that humour, memes, and “edgy jokes” can sometimes carry ideological messages?

Migration & Boundary Awareness

- ☐ Have conversations moved from the game itself to private servers, encrypted chats, or invite-only groups?
- ☐ Has my child been invited to join “exclusive” gaming communities?
- ☐ Do I know which third-party platforms (e.g., chat apps, forums) are connected to their gaming activity?

Narrative & Social Dynamics

- ☐ Are the same grievances or “culture decline” themes appearing repeatedly?
- ☐ Is expressing anger or hostility being socially rewarded within the group?
- ☐ Are dissenting voices mocked, silenced, or excluded?

Emotional & Identity Signals

- ☐ Has my child’s language shifted toward “us vs them” framing?
- ☐ Is gaming becoming the primary or only space of belonging?
- ☐ Have conversations about fairness or “the system being broken” become more rigid or absolute?

FOR EDUCATORS

Curriculum Integration

- ☐ Is algorithmic amplification explained in digital literacy modules?
- ☐ Are students taught how online ecosystems connect across platforms?
- ☐ Is gaming discussed as a legitimate part of youth digital culture, rather than ignored or stigmatized?

Narrative Recognition

- ☐ Can students distinguish between general online toxicity and ideologically motivated extremism?
- ☐ Are students able to identify when humour or irony masks dehumanising language?
- ☐ Do classroom discussions address how conspiracy narratives evolve?

Structural & Platform Literacy

- ☐ Do students understand how moderation works — and where it does not?
- ☐ Are they aware that different platforms have different safety architectures?
- ☐ Is the concept of “cross-platform migration” explained?

Community & Resilience

- ☐ Are peer-support mechanisms encouraged?
- ☐ Do students practice respectful disagreement?
- ☐ Is there a safe space to discuss concerning online experiences without fear of punishment?

FOR GAMERS

Content Awareness

- ☐ Has the visibility of certain narratives increased suddenly in your community?
- ☐ Are memes or jokes becoming more explicitly hostile over time?
- ☐ Are violent “fantasy scenarios” framed as entertainment but repeatedly tied to real-world groups?

Behavioural Signals

- ☐ Are certain users consistently steering conversations toward grievance or exclusion?
- ☐ Is social status within the group linked to increasingly extreme statements?
- ☐ Are newcomers tested through increasingly edgy or offensive language?

Structural & Migration Signals

- ☐ Are discussions moving from public channels to closed or encrypted spaces?
- ☐ Are the same actors active across multiple platforms?
- ☐ Are moderators passive, partisan, or encouraging hostility?

Self-Reflection

- ☐ Do you feel pressure to agree to stay part of the group?
- ☐ Are you hesitating to disagree because of ridicule?
- ☐ Is the tone of the space shifting from competitive banter to moral hostility?



1.6 Special Context: Gaming Cafés and Shared Gaming Spaces

While much of this Guide focuses on online ecosystems, risks may also emerge in physical gaming environments such as gaming cafés, LAN centres, or hybrid gaming spaces. Fieldwork indicates that minors and adults often share the same space without clear supervision, creating opportunities for exposure to toxic language, extremist memes, or manipulative conversations.

The guidance below translates ecosystem literacy into concrete behavioural steps for different groups.

GUIDANCE FOR GAMERS (YOUTH)

- ☐ Be aware of who is around you. If adults nearby use toxic or extremist language, move to another area or switch tables.
- ☐ Avoid copying harmful behaviour. Many minors imitate older players' aggressive or extremist expressions.
- ☐ Use your own channels wisely. If Discord or in-game chats turn hostile or ideological, mute, block, or leave the server.
- ☐ Stick with trusted friends. Playing with peers reduces exposure to harmful adult influence.
- ☐ Report what feels wrong. If someone pushes extremist ideas or harasses others, tell café staff or a trusted adult.

GUIDANCE FOR GAMERS (ADULTS)

- ☐ Stay alert to manipulative behaviour. Extremist actors often use jokes, memes, or casual grievances to test reactions before introducing ideological content. Distance yourself from repeated political or hateful framing.
- ☐ Keep gaming spaces welcoming. Remember minors are often present. Avoid toxic language or discriminatory humour.
- ☐ Set a positive tone in shared chats. Model respectful communication. Simply not participating in harmful talk can shift the dynamic.
- ☐ Avoid sharing extremist memes "as humour." Normalisation often begins ironically.
- ☐ Report concerning behaviour to staff, especially if minors are targeted.
- ☐ Protect your own digital safety. Be cautious when joining unknown servers or accepting unsolicited invites.
- ☐ Support a safe environment. If minors are exposed to inappropriate discussions, redirect or help them relocate.

GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS

- ☐ Visit the café at least once. Ask for youth-friendly seating areas.
- ☐ Ask about supervision policies. Many cafés lack age separation or moderation.
- ☐ Discuss PEGI ratings at home and explain why they matter.
- ☐ Set simple rules (e.g., play with friends, avoid late sessions, leave if adults behave aggressively).
- ☐ Stay informed about which platforms your child uses while in the café.

GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL STAFF

- ☐ Recognise gaming cafés as after-school social spaces.
- ☐ Familiarise yourself with PEGI standards.
- ☐ Integrate PEGI awareness into digital literacy teaching.
- ☐ Teach critical thinking around extremist memes and conspiracy narratives.
- ☐ Encourage safe peer-group play rather than joining unknown adult groups.
- ☐ Build communication channels with parents about gaming environments.

1.7. Design-Level Safeguards and Behavioural Reinforcement

Platform architecture shapes behavioural-layer dynamics. Proportionate and predictable enforcement of clearly communicated rules reduces ambiguity and discourages boundary testing. Transparency in moderation decisions, safeguards for minors, monitoring of high-visibility users who disproportionately shape tone, and consistent enforcement signals mitigate conformity drift, desensitisation, and attention-reward escalation.

Safety-by-design approaches, including friction in high-risk migration pathways, proactive detection systems and collaboration with trusted flaggers, reduce the likelihood that structural enabling conditions amplify grievance narratives. During event-driven spikes, such

as major releases or cultural controversies, early intervention is particularly important. These moments can temporarily intensify behavioural reinforcement loops. Calibrated moderation prevents short-term volatility from solidifying into longer-term identity fusion.

Governance is most effective when it remains visible, consistent and proportionate. Overreach can erode trust, absence of enforcement can reinforce escalation dynamics. The aim is calibrated response grounded in layered awareness.



1.8. Concluding Reflections: Understanding Risks, Strengthening Resilience

Building Skills for the Digital Age

Young people navigate broader societal pressures while forming identities in digitally mediated spaces. Adolescence is marked by heightened belonging needs and worldview exploration. While most young gamers maintain clear fiction–reality boundaries, developmental sensitivity can amplify the effects of exposure when content-layer narratives, behavioural reinforcement and structural insulation converge.

Educational systems therefore play a central role in strengthening resilience. This role has been increasingly recognised by the European Union which has developed a range of policies, strategies and educational initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience and preparedness to navigating complex online environments.²⁴ Beyond general digital literacy, curricula can incorporate ecosystem literacy, helping students understand amplification mechanisms, migration pathways and reinforcement dynamics across platforms. However, resilience is not only technical or analytical; it is civic. Strengthening civic education, including education on democratic values, human rights, pluralism, and the rule of law provides young people with normative anchors against exclusionary or authoritarian narratives. When learners understand why equality before the law matters, how democratic institutions function, and why minority protections exist, grievance-based ideologies become easier to critically interrogate.

Importantly, this learning does not need to be abstract or dull. Gaming itself can be a powerful medium for civic education.

Game-based learning, and simulation-based activities can allow young people to experience democratic decision-making, ethical dilemmas, media manipulation scenarios, or rule-of-law trade-offs in interactive and engaging formats. When civic concepts are embedded in gameplay through narrative choice, cooperative problem-solving, or consequence-based scenarios students practice democratic reasoning rather than merely memorising it. In this sense, gaming is not only a potential risk environment; it can also be part of the solution.

Emotional literacy and critical narrative analysis further enable young people to recognise grievance framing without internalising it. Teaching how propaganda reframes frustration into blame, or how conspiracy narratives simplify complex societal issues, equips students to evaluate claims rather than absorb them.

Open dialogue remains more effective than alarmist restriction. Schools and families that validate frustration without legitimising dehumanisation help prevent identity fusion with exclusionary communities. Importantly, early awareness mechanisms should prioritise support rather than surveillance, distinguishing between ordinary experimentation and sustained convergence across risk clusters.

In this context, youth protection is not about shielding young people from all exposure, but about strengthening their capacity to navigate pluralistic societies with critical judgement, empathy, and commitment to democratic norms.



Seeing the Bigger Picture

A central insight of this Guide is that risks rarely operate in isolation. Escalation becomes more plausible when content-layer narratives, behavioural reinforcement dynamics, structural enabling conditions and bridge pathways align. Resilience therefore depends on recognising convergence early, before private migration, identity fusion or insulation become entrenched. This logic aligns closely with the concept of prebunking, as mentioned above, which seeks to strengthen awareness of manipulation techniques, persuasion strategies and escalation patterns before they become established.

While digital platforms continue to expand their safety features and moderation capabilities, technological safeguards alone cannot eliminate all risks. Ultimately, one of the most important protective factors remains the gamer's ability to think critically about the environments in which they participate.

Digital resilience involves recognising potentially harmful dynamics within online communities and responding to them with critical awareness and informed judgement.

From this perspective, resilience is not about avoiding gaming or digital participation.

Rather, it is about developing the awareness and judgement necessary to recognise unhealthy dynamics before they become normalised. Supporting gamers in developing this capacity is a central objective of digital literacy, platform literacy and ecosystem literacy.

1.9. Preserving the Positive Value of Gaming

A resilient gaming ecosystem is not one without competition, humour or disagreement. It is one where dehumanisation does not become routine, dissent remains possible, moderation signals are clear, youth feel supported rather than stigmatised, and migration into insulated extremist spaces is not normalised.

Gaming does not create extremism. It intersects with broader societal tensions and, under specific conditions, may be exploited. Escalation is layered, relational and cumulative. Resilience must therefore mirror the layered architecture identified throughout this Guide, combining narrative awareness, behavioural safeguards, structural governance and cross-platform cooperation.

The objective is informed awareness, calibrated response and the preservation of the creative, social and developmental value of gaming for the overwhelming majority of users.

PART D

Reflection Questions and Awareness Check



Reflection Questions and Awareness Check

This “Reflection Questions and Awareness Check” sections function as structured self-assessment tools. They are practical prompts designed to help readers pause, think, and apply the Guide’s concepts to real-life situations.

They can be used by:

- Parents, to better understand their child’s gaming environment and initiate constructive conversations.
- Educators, to build classroom discussions around digital resilience and online behaviour.
- Gamers themselves, especially adolescents, to develop self-awareness and peer awareness.

They translate research findings to practical everyday contexts in order to:

- Encourage readers to reflect on what they are observing in gaming environments
- Help distinguish between normal gaming culture (competition, humour, disagreement) and warning signs of extremist narrative drift
- Support early awareness without promoting panic or overreaction
- Strengthen critical thinking and ecosystem literacy

1.1. Set A: Foundational Risk Awareness (True or False)

“If a young person plays violent video games, they are more likely to start supporting racist or authoritarian ideologies.”

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Playing violent games does not cause someone to adopt racist, antisemitic, or supremacist beliefs. Identity shifts toward exclusionary worldviews usually involve repeated exposure to grievance narratives, belonging dynamics, and reinforcement within social groups — not gameplay alone.

2

“Supporting exclusionary or supremacist ideas usually happens suddenly.”

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Adopting beliefs that minorities are inferior, that democracy is weak, or that violence is justified typically develops gradually. Repetition and normalisation lower resistance over time.

3

“Promoting hatred against minorities always involves direct physical violence.”

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Hatred may begin with memes, slurs, conspiracy narratives, or dehumanising language. Support for violence often precedes actual violent behaviour.

4 *“Calling someone a slur in a game is automatically the same as belonging to an extremist movement.”*

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Toxic insults are not automatically ideological. However, when racist, antisemitic, or anti-LGBTQ+ slurs become routine and unchallenged, they can make exclusionary narratives feel socially acceptable.

5 *“Online recruitment usually starts with someone clearly asking a player to join a violent group.”*

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Recruitment often begins with humour, shared frustration, memes about ‘cultural decline (borders are open, culture diluted, destruction of western civilisation),’ or invitations to private servers — not explicit calls to join a group.

6 *“If a young person shares memes mocking minorities but says it is ‘just irony,’ there is no concern.”*

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Repeated ironic sharing of antisemitic or racist memes can desensitise individuals and blur the line between humour and belief.

7 *“A young person can begin endorsing authoritarian or exclusionary ideas without meeting anyone offline.”*

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: Online communities can provide identity reinforcement, belonging, and repeated exposure to narratives that justify inequality or hostility.

8

"Most gamers regularly engage with racist or extremist communities."

Answer: FALSE (in most cases)

Trigger or reflection point: The majority of gaming content is not extremist. However, specific clusters and spikes can increase visibility.

9

"Complaints about 'woke gaming' can sometimes evolve into conspiracy narratives about minorities controlling society."

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: Frustration about diversity in games can be reframed into antisemitic or anti-LGBTQ+ conspiracy narratives when exploited by extremist actors.

10

"A young person can reject violence but still start believing that some groups deserve fewer rights."

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: Support for unequal treatment, authoritarian leadership, or minority exclusion can develop independently of violent intent.

1.2. Set B: Advanced (Risk Clusters and Cross Layer Dynamics)

1

"If racist or antisemitic posts are rare on a platform, they cannot influence anyone."

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Small but highly active communities can disproportionately shape norms within specific clusters.

2

"If hateful jokes are repeated often enough, they can shift what players see as acceptable."

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: Normalisation lowers emotional thresholds and reduces social resistance to dehumanisation.

3

"Groups promoting supremacist ideas usually build entirely new gaming platforms."

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: They typically embed themselves within existing communities and use shared interests as entry points.

4

"Online grooming into extremist spaces often begins with friendship and belonging rather than ideology."

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: The pathway may move from humour →grievance bonding →private migration →ideological reinforcement.

5

"If a hateful Discord server is removed, its members will simply abandon their ideas."

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Communities often migrate to encrypted or less regulated platforms.

6 *"Sandbox games can sometimes be used to role-play real-world violent attacks or historical atrocities."*

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Certain mechanics can be misused to simulate or symbolically rehearse violent scenarios.

7 *"Adolescents seeking belonging may be more responsive to communities that offer strong identity narratives."*

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: Identity formation increases sensitivity to recognition and group validation.

8 *"Leaderboards, meme competitions, or point systems can turn hateful expression into a status game."*

Answer: TRUE

Trigger or reflection point: Gamification mechanisms can reward escalation and competition in offensiveness.

9 *"If players do not challenge hate speech, it always means they agree with it."*

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Silence may reflect fear, fatigue, normalisation, or lack of trust in reporting systems.

10 *"Protecting young people means simply blocking them from online gaming spaces."*

Answer: FALSE

Trigger or reflection point: Long-term resilience comes from civic education, digital literacy, critical thinking, and emotional awareness — not restriction alone.

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²⁰ PEGI (Pan European Game Information) is the European age-rating system for video games. It provides age classifications (3, 7, 12, 16, and 18) and content descriptors (e.g., violence, fear, gambling, online interactions) to help consumers, parents, and educators make informed decisions about the suitability of games for different age groups. <https://pegi.info>

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²³ Discord is used here as an illustrative example because it represents one of the largest communication platforms associated with gaming and online communities. According to Discord, the platform serves more than 90 million daily active users, while over 90% of users report playing video games. As a result, Discord has developed an extensive safety framework that includes community guidelines, child safety policies, parental guidance resources, age-assurance information, reporting mechanisms, moderation resources, transparency reporting and user education materials.

²⁴ These include, among others, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 (<https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>), the Better Internet for Kids (BIK+) Strategy (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/strategy-better-internet-kids>), the Union of Skills initiative (<https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/union-of-skills>), and the European Commission's Guidelines for Teachers and Educators on Tackling Disinformation and Promoting Digital Literacy through Education and Training (2026) (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/60fddd7a-17dc-11f1-8870-01aa75ed71a1/>).