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## **Gaming and AI in the Tussle Over Youth Radicalisation**

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As extremist groups tap technology to influence young people, can the authorities hit back with the same tools?*

### **COMMENTARY**

As the world prepares to mark the first anniversary of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, the focus is once again on the enduring conflict between Israel and Palestine – a conflict with deep historical roots that stretch back to the establishment of Israel as a state in 1948.

This pivotal event, which marked the creation of a new nation for Jews in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, also resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, triggering decades of tension, violence, and competing claims to land, identity and sovereignty.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is far from being a simple story of black and white; it's a narrative of historical grievances, mutual fears, and complex political realities that have evolved over more than seven decades.

In this context, the attack by Hamas one year ago is but another chapter in a long and painful history, serving as a reminder of how these conflicts not only remain unresolved but also continue to find new battlegrounds in the digital age.

Today, extremist groups are increasingly weaponising technology to recruit, radicalise and exploit young people, and they are infiltrating some unexpected arenas – gaming and artificial intelligence (AI).

As we reflect on the deep-seated roots of historical conflicts, we must also recognise the pressing need to address how these technologies are being used to propagate radical ideologies and how they have emerged as powerful tools in the war for hearts and minds.

### **The Dark Side of The Game**

Imagine young teenagers starting a gaming session on their computers, seeking a momentary escape from reality. As they delve into a virtual world, they are unaware that this seemingly innocent experience could become a pathway to radicalisation. Increasingly, games are being co-opted by extremist groups, transforming them into tools of indoctrination and recruitment.

Take the terrorist group ISIS, for example. It created *Salil Al-Sawareem* (The Clanging Of The Swords), a video game directly inspired by Grand Theft Auto. Here, players engage in simulated attacks against targets representing ISIS' enemies, with the objective of carrying out acts of terror. The game is designed to desensitise players to violence and instil extremist ideologies through repetitive exposure, turning terror into a thrilling experience rather than a real-life horror.

Extremists have even found ways to manipulate popular games like Minecraft. By setting up private servers that replicate real-world conflict zones, they allow young players to participate in virtual attacks, normalising violence and reinforcing the notion of engaging in such acts for a higher cause. This tactic is particularly insidious, as it transforms terrorist activities into a shared group experience, fostering a sense of camaraderie and purpose among young players who might be searching for a sense of belonging.

White supremacist groups have similarly exploited the gaming world. Following the Christchurch shootings in 2019, extremists created video games that simulated the attack, encouraging players to replicate the violence and rack up high scores. This gamification of violence not only glorifies acts of terror but also serves as a recruitment tool, making players more receptive to extremist narratives.

But then two can play the game. Those seeking to counter extremist groups can also use gaming as a powerful medium for promoting empathy, understanding and resilience.

Consider *Salaam*, a game developed by South Sudanese refugee Lual Mayen. Instead of glorifying violence, *Salaam* places players in the shoes of a refugee fleeing conflict, navigating the challenges and dangers of displacement. This approach fosters empathy, allowing players to experience the hardships of refugees and encouraging them to view real-world issues through a more compassionate lens.

Similarly, *PeaceMaker*, a game that explores the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from both perspectives, challenges players to navigate the complexities of political decision-making, conflict resolution and peace-building. By immersing themselves in the challenges faced by both sides, players gain a deeper understanding of the nuanced realities that fuel these longstanding conflicts.

Closer to home, in Indonesia, the Frosh Project ID by PeaceGen has taken an innovative approach by engaging university students in games that build empathy, critical thinking and collaboration. Through these experiences, players develop the skills needed to resist extremist ideologies and make positive contributions to their communities. These counter-radicalisation games offer an essential alternative narrative, helping to equip young people with the tools to challenge extremist ideologies and build resilience against radicalisation.

## **The Power and Perils of AI**

While gaming is a potent tool for both extremism and counter-radicalisation, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as an equally powerful weapon in the battle for influence. Extremist groups are harnessing AI's capabilities to target and manipulate vulnerable individuals with unprecedented precision. By analysing vast data sets from social media, extremists can identify individuals who exhibit signs of anger, frustration or isolation and craft tailored propaganda that resonates with their emotions and grievances.

This ability to personalise recruitment efforts means that individuals who express dissatisfaction or loneliness online might soon find themselves bombarded with extremist content that offers a sense of purpose and belonging. AI-driven algorithms can monitor these individuals' online behaviours, adapt messaging strategies in real time, and create an echo chamber that reinforces radical ideologies.

Deepfakes add another layer to this AI-driven manipulation. By generating hyper-realistic videos that depict false events or fabricated statements, extremists can manipulate public perception, fuel misinformation and stoke anger. A deepfake video might show a political leader making incendiary comments or depict a violent attack that never happened, further blurring the lines between reality and fiction and making it easier to spread extremist propaganda.

But just as in the case of gaming, AI can also be harnessed for positive change. Counter-extremism organisations and social media platforms are using machine learning algorithms to detect and flag extremist content, identify individuals at risk of radicalisation, and intervene before they fully engage with extremist groups. These systems can monitor language patterns, search histories and engagement with online content to identify early warning signs, allowing timely interventions.

AI-driven chatbots are another innovative tool in the fight against radicalisation. These chatbots engage with individuals displaying signs of extremist tendencies, offering them factual information, alternative narratives and empathetic support. For example, if a person expresses interest in extremist ideologies, a chatbot can guide them to resources that challenge these beliefs or provide a listening ear that counters the echo chamber effect.

## **The Digital Battlefield**

The question remains: Who has the upper hand in this digital conflict – extremists or those fighting against radicalisation? Extremist groups have proven to be agile, innovative and adept at exploiting emerging technologies to spread their narratives.

Their decentralised structures allow them to adapt quickly, making it challenging for governments and counter-radicalisation efforts to keep pace.

However, there is hope. Governments, civil society organisations and tech companies possess the resources, expertise and collaborative potential to develop comprehensive strategies that leverage gaming and AI to promote critical thinking and community resilience. They can create compelling alternatives to extremist narratives.

As we reflect on the historical roots of conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, it's clear that the digital battlefield is now an equally critical arena where ideas, identities and loyalties are being shaped. The challenge lies in using technology to tell stories of empathy, resilience and peace rather than hatred, violence and division.

As the struggle for hearts and minds continues, we must remember that technology is not inherently good or evil – it's a tool that can be wielded in service of our highest ideals or our darkest impulses.

The choice is ours. By understanding how extremists exploit gaming and AI, and by investing in innovative solutions that promote empathy, understanding, and resilience, we can ensure that the next chapter in this digital battle is written by those who choose to build bridges rather than walls.

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