

Counter Recruiting in the Online Gaming Community

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Abstract

Organisations ranging from violent extremist groups to the US Army have used online gaming, a popular form of entertainment among the world's youth, for recruiting purposes. To date, efforts to curtail online recruiting have been siloed to reduce recruitment of certain groups, such as violent extremist groups, or aimed at specific platforms, such as certain online games geared for children. Efforts to address online recruitment in gaming have engaged with governments, NGOs, and the gaming industry, leaving out gamers themselves. This Policy Brief describes why recruiting in online gaming should be understood as a more general problem, involving any armed group recruiting online, which has simple solutions. It then presents several concepts from peacebuilding that can be applied to counter recruiting efforts in online gaming.

Introduction

As the world reeled during the Coronavirus pandemic in the summer of 2020, a controversy emerged on the US Army eSports Team Twitch channel. Short for "electronic sports," eSports simply refers to the world of video game competitions. Journalist Jordan Uhl was banned from the Army's channel when he trolled the live chat during a video game stream by asking, "What is your favorite u.s. w4r crime?" Uhl typed in slang to avoid algorithmically flagged language. The streamer, Sgt. 1st Class Joshua Davis, acknowledged Uhl's post saying

“have a nice time getting banned my dude” while he continued to play the first-person shooter (FPS) game. In effect, Uhl was protesting the US military’s presence on a public forum frequented by youth gamers well under the age of military eligibility. This exchange spurred a 1st Amendment lawsuit against the Army eSports team during which it suspended its Twitch channel for roughly six weeks. The event briefly drew public attention to the military’s recruiting efforts through online gaming and led US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, herself a well-known online gamer, to propose an amendment to the House Committee on Appropriations bill that would ban funding for the military to recruit on live video game streaming platforms such as Twitch. The amendment failed to pass the House. Despite the seemingly ephemeral nature of this anecdote, I suggest that the controversy and representative Ocasio-Cortez’s failed attempt to restrict online recruiting contain valuable lessons for leaders concerned about the vulnerability of the world’s youth to unforeseen consequences of online gaming.

Online gaming—that is, playing video games online with people from around the world while communicating with any number of other players and observers—is a major form of entertainment. On streaming platforms like Twitch and social media sites like Discord, the online gaming community has grown significantly. Researchers estimate that [3.24 billion people worldwide played online games in 2021](#); while 38 percent of US gamers were between the ages of 18 and 34, 20 percent were under 18 making them the second biggest age group.¹ Along with the various ways in which social media has fundamentally marked our political and cultural existence, online gaming is here to stay as a form of entertainment that especially appeals to youth. Furthermore, the Russian invasion and subsequent war in Ukraine has brought drone warfare to the fore. [Ukraine](#) has followed the [US’s lead](#) in recruiting drone pilots through video games. Regardless of the outcome and motivations in that conflict, increased reliance on drone pilots and other automated weapons systems moves war closer to video games, thus closer to the world’s youth.

Video games that simulate direct violence, especially first-person shooter (FPS) games, are a prevalent feature of online gaming. Games like *Halo*, *Call of Duty*, and *Counterstrike* are played online every day. The atmosphere created by the social interactions surrounding the gamification and spectacle of violence is fertile ground for recruitment into organisations that carry out direct violence. *America’s Army*, the US Army’s own FPS online game, was first released in 2002. Not long after that, violent extremist groups also started using online games to spread their message and recruit members. For more than a decade, recruitment through online gaming has attracted the attention of academics, activists, and policymakers. Social scientists like Matthew T. Payne have gone to great lengths in demonstrating the deep cultural and psychological potential in FPS gaming.² The fact that groups from the US Army to the Islamic State (ISIS) have used online gaming to access the world’s youth makes this a serious threat to peace.

In this Policy Brief, I offer a novel approach to countering online gaming in two ways: combining efforts to limit state and non-state recruiting, and applying principles from peace

¹ Clement, J. “Number of Gamers Worldwide 2021.” Statista. Accessed February 16, 2023.

² Payne, Matthew T. *Playing War: Military Video Games after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

studies that shift the focus from preventative measures, such as those attempted by Ocasio-Cortez, to building upon the sense of community among gamers. When implemented, these ideas will make online platforms more resilient against recruitment and other potentially violent ends. The discussion begins with an assessment of the various efforts to counter recruiting to date, demonstrating how these approaches have been hindered by their siloed nature. Then it describes a set of concepts from contemporary peacebuilding and how they apply to online recruiting. Regulation in this space must be accompanied with a gamer-centred approach, fostering their ability to create an environment that is not hospitable to violent implementation.

“Counter Recruiting” to Date

The issue of recruiting in online gaming has attracted attention for more than a decade. However, academic analysis, government initiatives, and NGO efforts have hitherto tackled recruiting from a specific source: usually either the US military or violent extremist organisations. But the anonymity, fast pace, scale, and sense of community in online gaming render these narrow approaches inadequate. The purpose here is not to equate militaries with violent extremists. Their missions are often diametrically opposed. However, any recruiting practices in the FPS online environment are fundamentally similar from a youth perspective. They both capitalise on the enjoyment that gaming brings and use the platform to establish connections with young people. The goal is to have healthy gaming environments, resilient to as many attempts to manipulate gamers as possible. This cannot be accomplished with overly targeted approaches.

Military recruitment

The US Army launched its eSports team in 2018 in an effort to reach more potential recruits (it missed its recruiting goals that year which hadn't happened since 2005).³ Its involvement in the production of FPS games dates back to the early 2000s, and is an important part of what some scholars refer to as the military entertainment complex.⁴ The US Army says its eSports outreach team members “are not recruiters.” But they also claim their purpose is “to create awareness about the Army and the opportunities it provides” and “help young people see soldiers in a different light and understand the many different roles people can have in the Army [which will help] address the growing disconnect with society.”⁵ Furthermore, in a digital and social media marketing article, a US Army Reserve officer and an employee of US Army Recruiting Command state “virtual recruiting now includes a US Army eSports Team.”⁶ Despite the blurred line between recruitment and public relations, the eSports team, its Naval counterpart, and the military's involvement

³ Baldor, Lolita C. “AP News Break: Army Misses 2018 Recruiting Goal.” AP NEWS, September 21, 2018.

⁴ Godfrey, Richard. “The Politics of Consuming War: Video Games, the Military-Entertainment Complex and the Spectacle of Violence.” *Journal of Marketing Management*, November 5, 2021, 1–22.

⁵ [U.S. Army eSports Team](#)

⁶ Garfinkel, Xeriqua, and Shauna M. Clark. “The US Army's Path to Virtual Recruiting.” *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing* 9, no. 1 (2021): 6–12.

with the production of FPS games are all cause for concern. If nothing else, they demonstrate the military's proximity to the gaming community.

A detailed consideration of *America's Army* further illustrates the resources the military has put into gaming as a means to connect with youth. The game was first released on July 4 2002, and was immediately available for download and online play. From 2007 to 2010, the Pentagon collaborated with high schools, shopping malls and the marketing company Ignited to bring the *American Army* platform to areas that "historically [had] been difficult for recruitment" through the Army Experience Center and Virtual Army Experience.⁷ In 2008 the game was even integrated into the state of Ohio's high school education curriculum via a collaboration between the Pentagon and an NGO named Project Lead the Way.⁸ Although *America's Army* was recently discontinued, some experts suggest:

The current market of FPS and other military-themed commercial games might inadvertently be doing the work of recruitment, even as the commercial version of *America's Army* fades into irrelevancy amid much more visually compelling games that have exponentially larger fan bases, such as those games in the *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* series that are released on a near-annual basis.⁹

Thus, the US Army has been using online video games as recruiting tools for two decades now. The FPS market's recruiting potential demonstrated by this commitment merits increased attention from peacebuilders.

There are deeper connections and contradictions between *war* and *game* that are worth considering in this conversation. Making sense of "militarized play's perplexing hold on power" is a long-standing tradition.¹⁰ To what extent militarized games represent the reality of war is a fundamental question at the heart of such inquiry. Recent commentary reveals a troubling disconnect between the representation of reality in FPS games and the reality of military service:

The proximity or resemblance, in recent years, between real war and videogame war seems to work against the authenticity of actual military activity: insofar as war is 'like a videogame', it is not 'proper' war. If the relationship makes games appear more realistic, it seems equally to accentuate a sense of contemporary warfare's unreality or inauthenticity.¹¹

⁷ Robertson, Allen. *America's Digital Army: Games at Work and War*. Anthropology of Contemporary North America. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017, 8.

⁸ Mead, Corey. *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict*. United States: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 238.

⁹ Robertson, *America's Digital Army*, 10.

¹⁰ Payne, Matthew T, "War/Game." In Hammond, Philip, & Pötzsch, Holger (Eds), *War Games*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2019, 259.

¹¹ Hammond, Phillip "Reality Check: Video Games as Propaganda for Inauthentic War." In *Ibid*, 19.

Such a contradiction makes recruiting with video games and its ambient effects all the more problematic. If the US Army eSports team is meant to create awareness and understanding of the various roles a soldier may have while the gamification of war misrepresents the reality of said roles, then this form of recruiting is particularly manipulative.

Aside from commendable investigative journalism, the most important attempt at curtailing military recruitment to date has been Representative Cortez's aforementioned funding bill in the summer of 2020: House amendment 863 (Ocasio-Cortez) to H.R. 7617. After the Army eSports and Jordan Uhl scandal made a few headlines, Ocasio-Cortez gave a passionate speech on the house floor in which she highlighted the young age of viewers on Twitch and the eSports Team's misleading use of free give-away links—for an Xbox controller or other gaming products—which instead led to online recruitment forms. However, her amendment that would have restricted the eSports team fell flat, with 70 percent of the US House voting against it. The limitations of the current political climate notwithstanding, this is a problem that demands collective grassroots solutions that come from the extant online gaming community.

P/CVE for gaming

On the other side of the coin there are groups who advocate Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in gaming spaces. The Extremism in Gaming Research Network (EGRN) and the Global Network on Extremism in Technology (GNET) both aim to bring P/CVE into the online gaming community. They find that “new platforms, including the chat application Discord, live-streaming sites such as Twitch, online games like Fortnite and gaming platforms like Steam, are rife with extremist content and recruiters.”¹² They generally advocate for more organic grassroots approaches compared to a US house amendment, yet their concern remains monodirectional.

Recent work has documented how white supremacist groups use online gaming to provide “an ideal environment for the recruitment and radicalization of young white men.”¹³

ISIS has also openly used popular video games as propaganda and recruiting tools. They coopt the branding, aesthetics, and even the programming of games like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* by working Jihadist messages into the gameplay. An Islamic State official said that the goal of using video games is to “raise the morale of the mujahedin and to train children and youth how to battle the West and to strike terror into the hearts of those who oppose the Islamic State.”¹⁴ Journalists have found alarming amounts of racist hate speech on video game platforms.¹⁵ Taken together, these circumstances make a combined

¹² RUSI. Extremism and Gaming Research Network ([EGRN](#)).

¹³ Condis, Megan. “Hateful Games: Why White Supremacist Recruiters Target Gamers and How to Stop Them.” In Reyman, Jessica & Sparby, Erika M. (Eds), *Digital Ethics*. Routledge, 2020. 145.

¹⁴ Wilson, Lydia. “Understanding the Appeal of ISIS,” *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 29 : Is. 1, Article 5, 2017.

¹⁵ Maiberg, Emanuel. “Steam Is Full of Hate Groups.” *Vice* (blog), October 19, 2017.

approach to online gaming recruitment necessary. With this in mind, policy makers can turn to insights from peacebuilding for effective solutions.

A Holistic Approach

The most important place to start in crafting new strategies is on the ground, even when it is on the internet. The good news is we have indicators of a strong sense of cohesion and awareness in gaming spaces. Research has shown that along with the violent aspects of gaming atmospheres, the spaces are also “underpinned by a kind of virtual sense of community bringing players together to develop relationships and the self, adventure together...and overcome obstacles in order to complete quests.”¹⁶ Feelings of belonging and shared identity are forged through the collaborative storytelling found in online gaming experiences. Given these aspects, we can apply concepts from Peace Studies to foster organic and holistic counter recruiting in the online gaming community.

Scholarship in the field of peace studies has demonstrated the overwhelming importance of local actors as opposed to often ineffective interventions by large and powerful institutions.¹⁷ In this agenda, scholar-practitioners have attempted to shift ownership of peacebuilding processes from centers of power, which are dominated by the Global North, to people on the ground. While the concept has garnered some scrutiny in the world of international relations, it could be a valuable insight for counter recruiting in online gaming.

For example, Dan Rosen, an influencer and anchor on a YouTube channel called *The Score eSports* with nearly 2 million subscribers, posted a video titled “How the U.S. Army Lost the War for Twitch” following the Uhl-US Army eSports controversy. The video is a thorough and in-depth analysis of the scandal and Rosen takes an inspiring anti-recruiting stance throughout his commentary. His ideas are to online gaming what everyday peace indicators are to peacebuilding. These are qualitative metrics that seek to measure peace through the opinions and experiences of normal everyday people instead of those whose power and influence far outweigh their experiences in specific contexts and proximity to interpersonal dynamics.¹⁸ Rosen’s voice is just one example of many in the online gaming community who already feel strongly about the integrity of their platforms and would like to see them free of manipulative recruiting practices.

Digital “spaces,” any online forum accessible via common digital devices, like online gaming platforms, create new models of place and belonging. Perspectives from those who we might think of as “digital locals”—defined here as people who experience and/or foster a

¹⁶ Gui, Dean Anthony Fabi. “Virtual Sense of Community in a World of Warcraft® Storytelling Open Forum Thread.” *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research* 11, no. 2 (July 30, 2018).

¹⁷ Mac Ginty, Roger, and Oliver P. Richmond. “The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace.” *Third world quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763-783. Leonardsson, Hanna, and Rudd, Gustav. “The ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding: a literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding.” *Third world quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825-839.

¹⁸ Mac Ginty, Roger, and Pamina Firchow. “Everyday Peace Indicators: Capturing local voices through surveys.” *Shared Space: A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* 18 (2014): 33-39.

sense of community in digital spaces—like Rosen are imperative for policy makers, given the challenges posed by digital communication. Digital spaces tend to be relatively autonomous, making it difficult to impose regulatory measures as evidenced by Representative Cortez’s ill-fated attempt. There are many digital gaming spaces existing in parallel at any given time. These aspects make clear the imperative to seek and work with gamers who already have an aversion to recruiting online; while people like Rosen might not use terms like “peacebuilding”, the courage they demonstrate by speaking out against recruiting on gaming platforms which they cherish constitutes valuable peacebuilding effort.

Recruitment can be happening in a vast array of different languages, laws limiting recruiting have been unsuccessful, and companies in the industry have little incentive to control discussion or promote peace. The need to turn to the community itself is made even more evident by considering the role of gender in online gaming. Despite a steady rise in participation by women and non-gender conforming people in online gaming, eSports, especially FPS games, remain highly masculine spaces.¹⁹ Such gendered aspects only intensify the violent environments of FPS games. This requires counter recruiting efforts to take seriously non-male influences and actors in the gaming community, who are not accurately represented by the industry. The inclusion of women on the Army’s eSports team represents only one conception of what feminine gaming can look like. Appealing to and following the diverse range of gender identities that influence online gaming will go far in limiting the appeal of recruitment.

Finally, the concept of resilience is a rapidly growing category of analysis for peacebuilding, and it is particularly well suited when thinking about counter recruiting in online gaming. Leading resilience theorists describe how “human resilience is now studied as a dynamic process in which individuals and their environments interact to optimize human potential.”²⁰ Engaging with the way that gaming community members navigate recruiting will be most effective with resilience in mind. The more resistant a gaming platform is to recruitment attempts, the less violent groups will dedicate time to said platforms, thereby increasing the safety of youth gamers regardless of any specific game’s content. When violent extremists or the US Army’s eSports team turn to online gaming for recruiting, they engage in an inherently manipulative practice. Participants in resilient digital spaces recognise recruitment as such and name it, opening the possibility for younger members to question their perceptions. The bonds created through gaming platforms make participants more resistant to recruiting attempts. Given how hard it is to “police” online recruiting, these bonds are the best chance to counter it. Gamers already have the tools; policy makers can sharpen them, rendering the community more resilient to recruiting.

¹⁹ Fisher, Jolene, and Joshua Foust. “#GirlGamers, Soldiers, and Public Relations: Analyzing Gender Representation in U.S. Army eSports.” *Journal of Communication* 72, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 165-86.

²⁰ Clark, Janine Natalya and Ungar, Michael. *Resilience, Adaptive Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice How Societies Recover after Collective Violence*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 4.

Conclusion

Policy makers, practitioners, and leaders of all stripes must take recruiting in online gaming seriously. This issue exists at the intersection of internet regulation and the effort to limit violence, and as such it concerns a broad range of civil society. Recruiting represents a link between online gaming platforms and direct violence. Thus far, attempts to curtail recruiting by enforcing anti-recruitment legislation or limiting efforts to specific types of recruiters have returned modest results. Putting more power and influence into the constituent parts of the gaming community that do not welcome the appropriation of their pastime and identity for violent ends, is the way forward.

Policy Recommendations

In order to effectively counter recruit in online gaming, policy makers should:

1. Collaborate with influential stakeholders in the online gaming community who have already spoken out against recruitment such as eSports Talk, Waypoint, or The Score eSports.
2. Foster the resilience of online gaming communities by hosting counter recruiting events, such as explicitly counter recruiting streams and counter recruiting tournaments led by the gamers who have already spoken out on the issue.
3. Fund more research and journalism that will continue to draw attention to online gaming recruitment.

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