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WORKING PAPER

Protecting Children in Online Gaming: Mitigating Risks from Organized Violence

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Executive summary

Gaming is now the most profitable form of entertainment worldwide, with over 3.42 billion people playing some form of games, accounting for a market of $187.7 billion engaging across consoles, PCs, and mobile devices.[1] Nearly nine in ten children in middle and upper-income countries play online games[2]. While online multiplayer games foster social connection, creativity, and community-building, they are also increasingly exploited by violent organizations, ranging from non-state armed groups in conflict-affected settings to hybrid criminal networks. These actors use gaming spaces to propagandize, groom, recruit, and organize, leveraging gaming platforms' social and technical features to target children and young players. This policy brief examines how gaming ecosystems are being exploited to socialize and recruit children to participate in organized violence and provides recommendations for policymakers, practitioners working with children, and the gaming industry to safeguard children in online gaming environments.

Online gaming is neither inherently harmful nor a direct cause of violence, but its social and technical infrastructure is being exploited at scale by malign actors.[3] Indeed, as the American Psychological Association framed the issue in a 2020 resolution, "attributing violence to violent video gaming is not scientifically sound and draws attention away from other factors."[4] At the same time, specific harms are affecting children via online gaming today. To protect children and young players, industry leaders, regulators, law enforcement, and practitioners working with children must act now, establishing robust prevention, detection, and response strategies that ensure children can enjoy their right to play and their right to be protected from violence. Gaming's prosperous future depends on ensuring its spaces remain safe, inclusive, and free from children being targeted by violent actors and organizations. This report provides a series of recommendations to help achieve that aim.

Recommendations

To International Organizations

- **Commission and lead global research** to close data gaps on socialization and online harms experienced by children across gaming platforms, especially in under-researched and rapidly digitizing regions. These should include disaggregated information about the nature of harmful content they encounter, cases of organized exploitation, while also listening to the role of online play and social engagement for children.
- **Advocate for child-centric digital policies and** adherence across gaming platforms by promoting General Comment 25 and ensuring that children's digital rights are reflected in national laws, with explicit mention of protection from violence and recruitment. Multistakeholder forums and convenings, drawing on tech, civil society, and youth representatives, should also be held to ensure that policy implementation reflects the needs of children and guardians.

- **Support industry accountability and learning** by encouraging the adoption of good practices, including safety-by-design principles for gaming studios, industry-led standards for safety mirroring those of INEE and ISO, and systematic trust and safety reviews of threats posed by organized violent actors on specific services.
- **Listen to and empower children** by elevating, listening, and acting upon children and youth voices. This could include, for example, co-designing gaming safely curricula for children and concerned adults that reflect realities of online play, while also helping to assist children in avoiding online harms.

To Governments and Regulators

- **Integrate online violence prevention and response mechanisms into national child protection systems** that cover gaming platforms and services. These should seek to protect children from socialization and recruitment to violence in a holistic manner by recognizing, monitoring, and responding to gaming-related social spheres as part of integrated national and sub-national child protection systems.
- **Strengthen and enforce legal protections** by updating legal frameworks to address modern online harms, including by specifically naming gaming platforms and services as part of online safety or harms acts. By passing and enforcing comprehensive online safety laws while applying the provisions of General Comment 25 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which embeds children's rights online, governments can impose a duty on platforms to proactively monitoring and prevent illegal content and behaviours including chat-based recruitment and socialization to violence targeting children, as well as proscribed user generated content which children may access.
- **Invest in prevention and intervention programs** to develop protective online factors, including gaming and digital media literacy in schools and among educators, parents, and communities. Specifically, these should detail the ecosystems of violence-related harms to which children can be exposed across gaming platforms, along with tools such as conversation guides, guidance on watching for behavioral threat flags, and psychosocial referral services. Meanwhile, traditional social and child support workers can amplify violence prevention programming by extending their efforts into gaming social spaces, from offline gaming corners and cafés, to e-sports mentorships, to online 'digital street work' outreach.
- **Increase international cooperation and norm setting** which recognizes recruitment of children and socialization to violence as an often cross-border issue. Setting international norms against exploiting children online or creating common investigation standards and reporting frameworks regionally can help to protect and serve children when targeted by online threat actors.

To Gaming Companies and Platforms

- **Implement safety by design principles in multiplayer games** grounded in child rights standards, ensuring that gaming spaces for children are safe spaces for play. From game

design training for developers and studios ensuring a robust understanding of potential harms, to policies and community guidelines that explicitly forbid harmful activity related to organized violence, to active trust and safety monitoring approaches that listen and respond to the concerns of children online, such as child-friendly in-game reporting tools, there are ample ways to improve modern gaming experiences.

- **Strengthen age verification and parental controls** which can be implemented by proportionate age assurance measures, alongside easy-to-use parental controls and clear limits on contact from strangers.
- **Proactively detect and respond to organized misuse** via internal or contracted teams to detect, disrupt, and share data on organized misuse and violence, while collaborating with law enforcement and industry coalitions.
- **Commit and enact transparency and accountability** by publishing regular transparency reports, aligned to relevant legal frameworks, which include detailed child safety metrics related to organized violence content and behaviours.
- **Cultivate positive community building and norm change**, which can help to mitigate the influence of violent or hateful groups in gaming settings. There are a wide range of ways in which to do so, including through community moderator training, building better in-game responses to targeted bullying, or good player commitments undertaken as part of player on-boarding processes in the game.

To Civil Society, Educators & Parents

- **Support awareness and educational campaigns** which promote safe gaming, demystify gaming platforms, and directly speak to ways in which communities, parents, and concerned adults can help support children thriving online.
- **Provide specialized child protection and related support services for child victims and survivors of violence**. These programs, including counselling, exit from violence programs, and rehabilitation projects, among others, should connect children who are affected by organized violence online, not just offline, with services.

Contents

1. Introduction

Why does gaming matter?

Gaming, specifically online multiplayer games and the communities that form around them, provide players across ages with striking pro-social benefits: immersive opportunities to build human relationships, strengthen community bonds, and relieve stress. For many children across the world, online games are a critical modality of socialization – and as the COVID pandemic illustrated – sometimes even the primary one.[5] To start with, a small note of clarification: we refer to people, including children, who play games as *players* in this report. The term *gamers* is a subset of people who both play games and who use that as a marker of self-identification (e.g. "I am a gamer").

While exact estimates of the number of children playing video games globally are hard to come by, research in *Pediatrics Review* suggested in 2023 that more than 90% of children over the age of 2 play video games in middle and upper-income countries.[6] Recent industry meta-analysis indicates that almost 80% of 2- to 18-year-olds globally engage in video games in some form.[7] If accurate, this equates to an estimated 1.5–1.8 billion children playing video games, out of roughly 2.3 billion worldwide. In many high-income countries, gaming participation among children is at record levels. For example, in the United Kingdom, around 89% of all children aged 3–17 play video games.[8] In the United States, 85% of teens (13–17) report playing video games, with about 45% playing every day.[9] Similar high rates are seen across Europe, East Asia, and North America, where gaming is a mainstream form of entertainment for youth. Across all ages, an estimated 3.42 billion people worldwide play video games, constituting a market worth around $187.7 billion, making it the most valuable entertainment sector and dwarfing film, music, and TV.[10]

The industry also spans an ecosystem that includes a range of actors, including the studios making games, like CD Projekt Red; console and hardware manufacturers, like Nintendo; sales and social platforms, like Steam; livestreaming platforms, like Twitch; and 'gaming-adjacent' platforms with gaming content from Discord to YouTube. UNICEF's previous work on Child Rights and Online Gaming illustrates components of the "online gaming value chain" as follows:[11]

1. **Developers**: Game developers create the storyline and design the characters, visuals, and software to make the game work. Game developers also set the monetizing methods and rules of the game. Larger game developers are also publishers and distributors. They include: Mojang, King, Epic Games, Riot, Supercell, Tencent, Valve, Rovio Entertainment, and independent studios

2. **Publishers:** Game publishers are primarily responsible for the marketing and advertising of games. They may finance the game's production, and they may have influence over its features, like an editor would. They oversee releasing the final product and marketing it, sharing the profits with the developer. Many game publishers are also developers and distributors. These include: Microsoft, Electronic Arts, Nintendo, Sony, Activision Blizzard,

Bandai Namco Entertainment, Square Enix, Sega, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, Ubisoft

3. **Distributors:** Online games are mostly distributed and sold by major game publishers, console manufacturers, and dedicated or general online retailers. Games can be bought directly online from game developers and publishers – whether these are large or small. These stores will be displaying age restrictions and ratings and collecting payment information. These include console stores (Sony PlayStation, Microsoft Xbox Marketplace), computer game distributors (Steam, Amazon, Epic Store), App stores (Google Play, Apple App Store).

4. **Gaming-related experiences, including:**
    a. **Streaming and interaction services** (Twitch, DLive, Steam)
    b. **E-sport organizations/teams** (Gfinity, Alliance, EG)
    c. **Sponsors** (Companies including Intel, Nvidia, T-Mobile and many more)
    d. **Betting Companies** (For betting on e-sports, including Bet365 and GGBet)
    e. **Leagues/Tournament Organizers** (Blizard, ESL, etc)
    f. **Individual Streamers & Professional Gamers**

Contemporary players often use multiple layers of this ecosystem simultaneously: playing Minecraft and chatting in-game while messaging friends on Discord, then shifting to watch Let's Play videos of gaming influencers playing their favorite titles on Twitch and perhaps looking up mods or skins (user-generated content that changes the base game) on interactive forums. The remarkable connectivity of modern games shapes vast social spaces where friendship bonds are built faster and are often stronger than those formed through other online communities like social media.[12]

How is gaming being exploited for organized violence?

However, those strong connections and specific functionalities of video games can also be exploited by malicious actors and violent groups to socialize and recruit children to participate in acts of violence.[13] This paper draws on a definition modified from a recent UNICEF working paper on children's involvement in organized violence in which organized violence is defined as the intentional use by non-state armed groups, criminal entitles, and/or hybrid networks "of physical force, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. This violent act is committed by a member of a group…with a common purpose and knowledge violence will be used to pursue it."[14] As this policy brief will show, violent actors – ultra-gore and school massacre ideation networks, ideologically motivated nonstate armed groups, or by criminal organizations – actively use gaming surfaces to coerce and attract children into involvement in organized violence,.[15]

To preempt a popular misconnection, years of study show that depictions of violence in video games are not connected to real-world violence.[16] On the contrary, games have been shown to produce a wide range of pro-social benefits, from improvements in cognitive performance[17] to mental health benefits.[18] With this in mind, it is the social, cultural, and technical elements of games and gaming spaces that these violent actors exploit. The use of these functionalities by other actors who may wish to harm children is an unfortunate commonality, whether it is for targeted hate speech and harassment, for child sexual exploitation (CSE), or and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).

Safeguarding children against those risks requires understanding the physical and virtual spaces where they play. To better set the virtual side of that scene, we should first review what gaming looks like today and who the players are. Globally, around 53% of people playing games live in the Asia-Pacific region (1,089mn people, growing +4.0% Year on Year 'YoY'), followed by the Middle East & Africa (559mn, +8.2% YoY), Europe (454mn, +2.4% YoY), Latin America (355m, +5.6% YoY) and North America (244mn, +2.9% YoY).[19] Mobile games, including multi-player games with social connectivity, are incredibly popular in growth markets, and now account for 49% ($92.6bn) of game revenues, followed by consoles (28%, $51.9bn) and computers (23%, $43.2bn).[20] For example, mobile games are the leading choice across Africa (92% of players use mobile phones), where an estimated over 349 million players across the continent are now spending nearly $1.8 billion annually.[21] Notably, as the Pan Africa Gaming Group puts it, the next 1 billion players will be African.[22]

As players become more global than ever, they are also getting older. While, as mentioned above, nearly all children play video games, just 24% of players in the US are under 18, while 47% are 18-50, and 29% are 50+.[23] Similar trends hold true in much of the world. At the same time, the defining feature of modern gaming is interactivity – children are not just playing against computer programs but playing with and against other people online. This social dimension is popular: by their early teens, a large share of young gamers is on multiplayer platforms where they interact (via chat, voice, or virtual avatars) with peers and strangers. For instance, in the UK, about 72% of players (ages 3–15) have played online with people they know, such as friends, and 31% have played with people they have never met in person.[24] The likelihood of interacting with strangers increases with age. Some ~15% of preschoolers' gaming involves strangers, but over one-third (37%) of 12–15-year-olds report playing against or cooperating with unknown players on the internet.[25] In general, younger children (ages 5–12) often start with casual or educational games (frequently on tablets or parents' phones), while older youth (13–17) gravitate to more interactive online multiplayer games. These mixed-age spaces, including in child-centric games like Roblox or Minecraft, are a bit unique: imagine a playground where three of four people playing are adults. Imagine further, that children are organizing and ordering adults around, determining strategies, goals and how these adults should spend their time in the game. Playing games can provide agency to children, which can be empowering, but can also create exploitable risks due to the social elements and the ability to masquerade as a younger (or older) player. Age verification standards across platforms vary greatly and, even when in place, players may have no way of knowing the actual age of another (nor is this

inherently desirable). While an imperfect analogy as player demographics vary by type of game, these mixed social environments have more in common with a public square or a busy marketplace than with a monitored playground. Yet parents and caregivers frequently treat games as lonely, single-player spaces or as safe, protected environments.

Players across all ages today are no longer male-dominated, with most markets reaching gender parity at nearly 50-50 participation. While global figures are unavailable, one survey suggested that around 17% of gamers in the United States also identify as LGBTQ+.[26] Gaming cuts across demographic groups, though some age and gender trends are evident. As noted, participation now starts in early childhood: surveys show that most children under 12 play games, and gaming becomes nearly universal for boys and very common for girls by the teenage years. In the UK, boys and girls are equally likely to play games until mid-adolescence, after which boys' participation remains higher (94% of boys vs 80% of girls at age 16–17).[27] Yet gendered differences persist: recent research in Norway found that male teenagers find video games more socially significant and accepted, while girls appear to prefer social media for meaning-making.[28] Gender divides in the types of games played in the Norway study remain, with first-person shooters that tend to have a higher prevalence of identity-based harassment across player communities remaining more popular among male players.[29] Nonetheless, the gender gap in basic access is narrowing as gaming becomes more social and mobile.

This gender divide is, however, still reflected in the lack of women in industry and problematic gender normative representation inside games. As of 2024, based on a global poll of 3000 game developers, just 23% of game developers are women, while 21% identify as LGBTQ+, and 5% are non-binary.[30] Women's levels of participation in the game industry are low, even against similarly male-dominated fields. In the US, women hold 35% of jobs in the wider tech industry, and a similar figure in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.[31]

Simultaneously, multi-country, gender-sensitive research on organized violence and related socialization on gaming platforms has also shown that misogyny, anti-LGBTQ+, and other forms of targeted hate are extremely prevalent across gaming spaces.[32] Gender-based violence in gaming spaces, sometimes grouped under the Technologically Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV) umbrella,[33] intersects with other forms of identity-based harassment, notably racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Towards this end, UNICEF has provided guidance on improving efforts in gaming through the *Industry Toolkit on Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*.[34]

Ultimately, the demographic diversity of children playing games emphasizes the importance of developing safeguarding frameworks that apply to gaming spaces while preserving the right of children to play. Prior work from UNICEF in applying child rights perspectives to online gaming has sought to outline how companies' responsibility to respect children's rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to online gaming– including the right of "children to be protected from all types of exploitation (Article 36)."[35] That 2019 piece notes that "although the industry has participated in various efforts to protect children, most solutions remain piecemeal,

disconnected, localized or difficult to enforce." Despite marked improvements in preventing Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) in the years since, efforts to mitigate against exploitation by organized violent actors in the gaming sector are nominal:

2. Threats and Risks from Gaming

How are violent groups exploiting gaming?

While we know online multiplayer gaming is widespread among youth, quantifying exactly how many children are at risk of encountering violent actors in the game environment individuals or groups that aim to engage them in organized violence is challenging. Platforms do not typically publish age-disaggregated user counts for specific game modes, and harmful interactions are underreported. As such, we often must rely on surveys and case studies from specific countries. There is a clear need for more granular data on what fraction of children playing online games use voice chat, join public servers, or play with strangers regularly, since those factors increase exposure risk. Additionally, cross-country data on online play trends are limited. National regulators (e.g., Ofcom in the UK and the E-Safety Commissioner in Australia) have begun tracking some indicators of violent actors, but a global picture remains elusive. As one EU policy analysis noted, research on organized forms of violence and "violent extremism" in gaming is "at a nascent stage" and largely anecdotal, indicating a distinct lack of empirical data in this domain.[36] This is clearly an area that warrants investment in further investigation and research.

We do know that, by their teens, many players encounter harassment, hate, and content for violent groups during online play. Large-scale surveys confirm high exposure rates to online harm among young players. In the United States, the Anti-Defamation League's annual study on gaming found that approximately 75% of young people (ages 10–17) experienced some form of harassment in online multiplayer games in 2023 – a sharp increase from 67% the year before.[37] From that survey, black and female players experienced the most identity-based harassment in multiplayer games. Further, 37% of young players faced identity-based hate (e.g. racism, antisemitism, homophobia) while gaming, up from 29% the prior year. These figures show that negative and harmful behaviors are widespread in gaming spaces where youth congregate. Harassment and hate speech, while not always organized in nature, can create a hostile environment and sometimes serve as gateways to violent narratives and recruitment.[38] At the same time, organic (self-led) organization into violence is facilitated in part by violently misogynistic subcultures present in some gaming communities. Recent research across seven countries has illustrated how gendered "socialisation processes coupled with exposure to harassment, hate-based discrimination and extreme content can potentially lower resilience" to joining violent movements in gaming and gaming-adjacent spaces.[39]

Regardless, research into how violent groups exploit gaming has expanded rapidly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: from a single publication in 2019 to 36 in 2024. Members in groups like the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN) and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) have sought to answer how malicious actors use gaming for ill, as well as how gaming can be used for good. Starting from the understanding that gaming *itself* is not the problem, the EGRN has iterated a typology of six harms that can be adapted to use by wider violent

groups (see endnote for full typology).[40] That framework can be simplified for the purposes of protecting children into three main harms:

- Creating new video games and modifications to motivate violence
- Gamifying offline violence and using gaming culture for propaganda
- Using gaming communications functionalities to groom and recruit

Creating Games and Mods

Violent groups have been creating various forms of video games for at least thirty years. The Extremist and Terrorist Games Database (ETGD), for example, documents over 150 standalone PC and console games, along with modifications for existing games (mods) created to promote violence dating from 1982 to present day.[41] These games include creations by white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, non-state armed groups in conflict areas, criminal syndicates, and even hybrid school massacre ideation titles made by individual actors.[42] Many of these games target younger users. Additionally, some user-generated "experiences" through which players build their own games and virtual worlds in youth-focused sandbox games like Roblox and Minecraft include recreations of mass casualty events such as the Christchurch attack (2019), the Buffalo attack (2022), and other mass shooting events.[43] These games and mods follow trends in political violence, often increasing in numbers during periods of global unrest. Creators sometimes seek to advance clear narratives espousing violent ideologies in the games. In contrast, others modify mainstream titles to align them with the worldviews of the creators by, for example, replacing black and indigenous game characters with Klu Klux Klan members, or replacing LGBTQ+ content with nationalist iconography.[44]

Of particular concern for younger demographics are school massacre games, which are often outlinked from nihilist, fatalistic online communities usually associated with self-harm and mass shooting incidents. These titles allow players to recreate both well-known incidents such as those of Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook in the US, as well as fictional shootings inside elementary, secondary, and university campuses.[45] Virtual reality simulations have also been used by recent school shooting perpetrators to plan their attacks.[46]

Gamifying offline violence and using gaming culture for propaganda

Games also hold immense pop culture appeal, especially for younger audiences who overwhelmingly view them as part and parcel of cultural experience. Sneaker companies once had partnerships with basketball and rap stars; now they also partner with Fortnite,[47] Roblox,[48] PlayStation, and Nintendo.[49] Violent groups also recognize the cultural salience of gaming iconography. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) used a *Grand Theft Auto V* mod in their propaganda videos to give the illusion that they were making their games and increase engagement with young audiences. In contrast, white supremacist groups in northern Europe used

memes from *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and *Far Cry 5* as forms of 'memetic warfare' to weaponize video games aesthetics into effective propaganda.[50] Propaganda has always sought to utilize powerful pop cultural references of its era, from music to print and film. Today's propagandistic actors actively use gaming references to increase their salience, reach, and impact, especially among young audiences. For example, violent groups in Indonesia, as well as among global far-right groups, actively use anime and Japanese-style game imagery in Telegram channels to gamify propaganda to reach children, along with older audiences.[51]

Meanwhile, gamification, or game-like elements in non-game contexts, is also used by violent actors in both 'top-down' or strategic and 'bottom-up' or organic approaches.[52] Tactics range from livestreaming videos of attacks online with helmet camera footage often designed to look like First-Person Shooter (FPS) gameplay to ranking boards in online forums that sort perpetrators based on the number of people they have killed.[53] Livestreaming mass casualty attacks, often via services popular with gamers such as the mainstream Twitch and more fringe Kick and DLive, also serves to blur the lines between reality and fiction: viewers are immersed in the footage, often feeling like they are playing the role of the attacker. Starting with the Christchurch attack in 2019, at least six ideologically motivated attacks and five other mass shootings have used livestreaming. Platforms have increased enforcement efforts of user-generated content, with Twitch responding to the Buffalo (2022) attack livestream in less than two minutes due to a viewer reporting the stream.[54] However, the risk of children being exposed to harmful content via livestreams remains, with moderation efforts challenging to implement at scale with real-time content.

Such narratives play out in attacks that draw on violent online subcultures and are influenced by the successful tactics used in prior attacks. The perpetrator of a 2022 anti-LGBTQ+ assault in Bratislava commented in his manifesto that after seeing the livestream of the Christchurch attack in 2019, he felt it was: "truly unique—maybe it was the fact that it was livestreamed, or the video-game-like view of the whole event…The video felt 'different' to most other content I had seen before."[55] Videos of these livestreams persist long after the initial attack, uploaded and reshared across countless sites, forming inspiration for future games and mods based on them, memes, Steam gamer tags and profile pictures, and, potentially, further violence.

Using gaming communications functionalities to socialize and recruit

Lastly, and of particular concern to those in the practice of protecting children online, malicious actors also use the social functionalities of gaming platforms to actively socialize and recruit children into organized violence.

Beyond just intuitive connections, research over the last decade has illustrated similarities between online grooming for child sexual exploitation and abuse, organized recruitment into violent groups, and socialization into self-initiated violence.[56] Perpetrators of both exhibit similar content consumption patterns in terms of both viewing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and "fringe or

radical" content,[57] exploiting social vulnerabilities, thriving in low-moderation spaces, and using similar tactics to groom targeted children. Those tactics often involve an initial phase of trust-building, followed by isolation from support networks, and an eventual escalation toward ideological control or coercion.[58] In gaming environments, initial multiplayer matches can help to build a sense of camaraderie and conversation, creating shared interests and experiences with low thresholds for perpetrators to cultivate relationships, helping to make the targeted child feel validated while protecting their own identity. In both CSE and organized violence cases, those initial relationships can then be layered in more private environments – isolating the target – and taking them into specific subcommunities: a concealed location in-game, a white supremacist Discord server, or a predatory Telegram group.[59] Perpetrators can also use in-game items and gifts to manipulate victims. At the same time, some of the most disturbing instances involve escalation of content, such as coercing the target to share self-harm or CSA material, which can then be used to blackmail the individual. Online, networked violent groups such as 764 and 09A are particularly known to manipulate this overlapping set of harms between organized violence and CSE.[60] Recent court cases and investigative journalism have documented in exceptional detail the direct impact of grooming a child online via the Terrorgram collective, namely the perpetrator of an anti-LGBT+ attack in Slovakia from the time he was 16 until he carried out targeted killings three years later.[61] Meanwhile, more traditional non-state armed groups also exploit similar pathways to recruit individuals across gaming settings: connect through a shared game, build trust, move to more private spaces, intensify the nature of content shared, and solicit direct acts to inculcate the individual into the group.[62]

Other organized criminal groups – from local gangs to transnational cartels – have also adapted to gaming. For example, in Canada and the United States, law enforcement agencies have noted that gangs contact teens on platforms like Snapchat or multiplayer games.[63] Another notable example comes from Mexico. In 2021, authorities found that drug cartels were recruiting youth through online games, including a case where three children (ages 11–14) in Oaxaca were groomed via the mobile game *Free Fire*.[64] They were convinced to run away from home to work for a cartel-affiliated human trafficking ring by a trafficker posing as a 13-year-old boy in the game. Another case saw a cartel operative set up a "recruitment drive" inside *Grand Theft Auto V* online, inviting players to join a purported private military battalion, which turned out to be a cartel scheme.[65] These incidents show that gaming spaces can be used to identify vulnerable adolescents and lure them with promises of money, status, or excitement, much as gangs do offline, leading Mexican security services to issue recent warnings about the use of mobile gaming platforms by criminal groups.[66] Criminal networks might also exploit kids in games for scams (e.g., convincing them to launder money or engage in fraud, as seen in some "online friend" scams).

Adjacently, socialization of children in gaming spaces to participate in organized violence also occurs without a specific recruiter present. A cultural backdrop in many gaming sub-communities of misogyny, sexism, racism, homophobia, and antisemitism has been shown to form a fertile ground for organized violence to take root.[67] In multiple documented cases, children have found themselves exposed to ideologically inspired violent content through gaming platforms and

subsequently moved to seek out, build (in the case of Roblox), and further socialize themselves into those communities. For example, a study of children brought into far-right criminal activities in Germany via gaming platforms "did not find evidence for strategic organizational far-right recruitment campaigns, but rather multidirectional social-networking processes which were also initiated by the potential recruits."[68] Similar cases with children in Singapore pledging allegiance to ISIS on Roblox,[69] alerts and investigations from the Australian Federal Police of 37 children over the last four years by counter-terrorism teams citing Discord and Roblox,[70] and persistent warnings from US law enforcement all point to a similar set of socialization patterns. These are not 'lone wolf' instances: these children still operate with social influences and peers that help motivate and facilitate their movement toward the use of violence. It is simply that their pathway into violence is not a direct one led by a recruiter.

Future Risks

Gaming-related technologies are rapidly evolving, from AI development tools to improved VR/XR games, and rapidly proliferating mobile games with new social connectivity functions. Each of these, like any new technology, presents tangible benefits for players along with potential exploits that could harm young players. 62% of game studios are already using AI tools to enhance and streamline how they make games, from character animations, coding, art generation, and narrative storytelling.[71] Ideologically motivated violent groups are also building game development engines that enable targeted hate games to be easily created – the pipelines for these engines include adding AI tooling to future iterations.[72] Neo-Nazi groups are also actively using AI-powered text-to-talk engines to dub over in game voice content, while also developing traditional propaganda including Hitler-like voice readings of texts. The implication here is that threat actors in the future will be able to create narrative content, games, and mods more easily and with higher quality. The number of games and mods produced by targeted hate actors annually is already increasing: this trend will accelerate with the adoption of AI game creation tools.

Augmented reality (AR), extended reality (XR), and virtual reality (VR) also present similar risks to what has already been discussed above. All three offer the user the ability to immerse more deeply into gaming environments, especially in multiplayer ecosystems. There is little research on whether the added layers of immersion might add further social connections or bonds beyond those formed in traditional multiplayer settings, but it seems plausible that the links between players in full VR may well be stronger. Additionally, there is evidence of AR tools – such as Meta's AR glasses – being used for attack preparation by the New Orleans attacker (2024), videoing locations, while also providing potential audio feedback to perpetrators from a livestream feed being broadcast from the glasses. [73]

Lastly, the rapid proliferation of mobile gaming has, historically, not brought with it as many risks for online harms as games have traditionally been single-player and been subject to vetting by Google's Play Store and Apple's App Store. However, a new generation of mobile games offers multiplayer functionality and chat abilities, opening users to the benefits and risks of online

socialization in under-moderated environments. As new cohorts of young gamers across Africa and other rapidly developing settings across Asia and Latin America find joy through mobile games, there will be a need to ensure they are protected.[74] Violent organizations, including ISIS and Iranian-linked non-state armed groups, have developed mobile games in the past, though they have been removed from app stores. New games that skirt platform terms of service are likely, while the social elements of mobile games remain extremely under-evaluated.

3. Opportunities to Enhance Safety in Online Gaming

On a more positive note, it appears most children do not actively seek out organized violent groups present in gaming spaces – these harms are typically imposed on them by others. When equipped with awareness, reporting tools, and digital literacy, children and youth can often recognize and avoid the most overt recruitment attempts. Many teen gamers report using safety tools (mute, block, report functions) to deal with harassment or suspicious contacts.[75] There is also evidence that strong community moderation can greatly reduce the presence of organized violent groups in games. For example, platforms that aggressively ban users for hate speech or suspicious behavior have lower observed rates of extremist incidents based on ADL and EGRN research. Nonetheless, given the scale of usage, even a small fraction of children encountering organized violence online translates to thousands of affected individuals. The challenge is that much of this harm is hidden – in private chats, niche game servers, or under the guise of normal gameplay – making it hard for parents and authorities to track. Consistently, experts call out the need for more longitudinal studies on how exposure to these risks evolves as children age, and which interventions are most effective at prevention.

The above risks, among others not fully elaborated on here, including the use of gaming to fundraise for organized violent groups, form a substantive challenge to protect children online against involvement in organized violence. There are a variety of ways to improve safeguarding, both through institutional and educational interventions, partnerships with industry, and leveraging gaming for violence prevention. The recommendations below are drawn from the gaming-centered *Prevent, Detect, and React Framework* written by this author, recent toolkits for violence prevention in gaming by EGRN members at RUSI, and gaming case studies developed for GIFCT and are adapted for those working with children to focus on prevention and harm mitigation efforts.[76] Below, we present improved recommendations, organized by actor, building on those existing draft proposals and emerging best practices. These recommendations are designed to be specific, actionable, and evidence-based, considering what has proven effective and recent developments in technology and policy.

For International Organizations

- **Convene and Research:** Child rights organizations could lead in filling data gaps on harms by commissioning additional research on children's online gaming behaviors in under-studied regions. A global study, for example, on "Children and Online Gaming – Risks and Opportunities," could systematically collect data on how many children play interactive games in global majority countries, the nature of harmful content they encounter, and any cases of organized exploitation. This evidence base will guide interventions. International organizations could partner with academia and industry to carry out analysis of children's gaming habits and risks of exploitation. They could also spur more inquiry by funding

studies and facilitating expert networks (e.g. an international working group on gaming and violence in partnership with organizations like UNESCO or the WeProtect Global Alliance).

- **Global Advocacy and Standards:** Child rights organizations, such as UNICEF, should continue to advocate for a child-rights-based approach in all digital policies. This means continuing to use General Comment No. 25 (GC25) on children's digital rights to inform national laws, policies, institutional frameworks, and services. It should also go beyond GC25 to make explicit mention of protection from violence and recruitment. These organizations could also help develop Model Guidelines or Policy Toolkits for governments on safeguarding children from organized violence online, and in gaming spaces specifically. For example, a "Checklist for Child Safety in Gaming Platforms" for regulators could be created, drawing from successes (such as the UK's Online Safety Act codes requiring hidden profiles by default). Also, UNICEF should continue convening multi-stakeholder forums – bringing together tech companies, civil society, and youth representatives – to share challenges and solutions.

- **Support Industry Accountability and Learning:** UNICEF can use its influence to encourage companies to adopt voluntary standards, safety by design practices, and conduct Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) for their gaming products. The 2020 UNICEF recommendations for gaming companies are a foundation; these can be updated to reflect new risks like AI-driven content and the metaverse. Efforts like the Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children (RITEC) Design Toolbox and the DEI in Gaming Toolbox developed by UNICEF, the Swiss Safe Game Guide (SSGG), and the Digital Thriving Playbook, an initiative between the Thriving in Games Group (TIGG) and the Sesame Workshop, are good concepts to build on.[77]

  Additionally, UNICEF can seek to partner with entities like the ICT Coalition, Fair Play Alliance, or the Tech Coalition to explore collaboration and opportunities to leverage their networks and interventions to prevent and respond to organized violence (not just sexual exploitation) into their agendas. For example, specific needs, like making reporting in-game harassment easier for children and providing referrals to law enforcement, are also outlined by the Fair Play Alliance in its Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework.[78]

  TIGG and other industry alliances, such as the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC), Games for Change (G4C), and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), , offer opportunities for policy advocacy to promote child rights standards in gaming.[79] Many industry initiatives focus on toxicity and bullying; UNICEF can broaden the conversation to include socialization of children into involvement in organized violence and recruitment into violent groups and movements as recognized harms. In addition, supporting open-source tooling for small and medium size platforms to identify and respond to harmful content holds considerable promise. The recent ROOST (Robust Open Online Safety Tools) initiative,

for example, seeks to develop accessible tooling which will identify, report, and remove child sexual abuse material, classifiers to surface other harms (including organized violence and terrorist-related harms), and infrastructure for moderators and other platform safety actors.

By highlighting positive case studies – such as a game that successfully implemented AI moderation or a platform that built youth participation into safety design – UNICEF can reinforce that solutions are feasible. Many smaller studios building games and experiences for children do not put considerable effort into thinking about child safety, but positive case studies can change this.

Training is critical to help developers and designers incorporate built-in safety measures such as robust reporting systems, content moderation tools, and parental controls. Child rights organizations, such as UNICEF, should be consulted in the development of these tools while other international entities could help developers apply child-centric design principles to minimize harm while enhancing inclusivity and digital resilience.

- **Empower Youth and Communities:** As part of its programming, UNICEF should continue to support digital literacy and resilience education specifically tailored to online gaming. This means developing modules for schools and youth programs that teach children and educators how to recognize recruitment or manipulation tactics in games (for instance, how to spot when an "in-game friend" is asking suspicious personal questions or encouraging violence). UNICEF could expand initiatives like U-Report or other youth engagement platforms to gather input from children on their experiences in games and what safety features they want. Ensuring that youth voices (including those who have been victims of online socialization, recruitment, or hate) inform policy is crucial. Finally, UNICEF should facilitate global cooperation between member states to share valuable lessons on protecting young gamers.

For Governments and Regulators

- **Integrate Prevention and Response into National Child Protection Systems:** Laws, policies, processes and procedures to protect children from socialization and recruitment to become involved in organized violence should not develop as a separate silo in national child protection systems. Instead, efforts to address the problem should be integrated into the national system and involve various actors concerned in government ministries at national and sub-national level and in particular with those who focus on child online protection broadly. Social welfare, protective services, justice, mental health, and education actors need to be aware of the problem and design actions to address it in a coordinated way. Given the issue's complexity, child protection systems should also include actors from the private sector and civil society to participate in prevention and response.

- **Strengthen and Enforce Legal Protections:** Governments should update legal frameworks to address modern online harm, and specifically address gaming companies, platforms, and services. Concretely, they should pass and enforce comprehensive online safety laws where they do not exist and ensure compliance across gaming platforms where they already do. This effort should also take into account General Comment 25 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which calls for non-discrimination against children in digital environments, centering the best interests of the child, ensuring their right to life, survival, and development, and respecting the views of children online. These laws should impose a duty on platforms to proactively identify and mitigate high-risk illegal content and behaviors affecting children. While existing measures are largely focused on content, ranging from child sexual abuse material to terrorist manifestos, new interpretations and legislation are shifting toward an obligation to understand malicious behaviours which may target children, such as chat-based recruitment and socialization. Current regulations applying to online gaming vary drastically across jurisdictions, offering a patchwork of protections, with the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA)[80] and Terrorist Content Online (TCO)[81] leading the way in mandating robust content moderation and transparency obligations, yet even these are not fully applied to gaming platforms.[82] The UK's Online Safety Act (OSA)[83] adds specificity with child safety-focused risk assessments and proactive moderation requirements and is coming into implementation via Ofcom, an independent regulatory body. Meanwhile, Australia's Online Safety Act[84] and China's content control measures set other regulatory benchmarks which can further inform efforts. For jurisdictions without dedicated laws, existing criminal laws (on hate speech, terrorism, child endangerment) should be clearly extended to online contexts: ensure that recruiting children into criminal activity online carries equal penalties as offline recruitment. Experts asked to input into these frameworks should insist that gaming platforms, particularly those enabling real-time user interaction, are explicitly covered under these laws and that transparency reporting is standardized across jurisdictions. Cross-border regulatory cooperation—such as harmonizing laws between the EU, UK, and the US—should be seen as essential to enable enforcement and prevent bad actors from exploiting jurisdictional loopholes. Lastly, it is not enough to pass laws; active enforcement – auditing algorithms, investigating companies' safety measures – is needed. Non-regulatory industry standards and guiding principles for child safety online can also be amplified, bolstering efforts from good-faith actors and sharing best practices across the wider sector.

- **Invest in Prevention and Intervention Programs:** Beyond regulation, governments should support programs that intervene before harm occurs and help to respond when it does. This includes funding online outreach and violence prevention efforts which include – and reach inside of – gaming communities. First and foremost, media literacy curricula must be updated to cover interactive media and games: teaching children, educators, parents, and communities about persuasion techniques used by gangs, armed groups and violent movements online.

Meanwhile, deploying trained youth social workers can amplify programs that leverage gaming for positive engagement, such as promoting empathy and social cohesion. Digital street work,[85] where social workers and psychosocial practitioners work inside games and gaming platforms, can be paired with offline support and gaming corners in child-safe spaces. Some NGOs have tried "counter-gaming" initiatives (gamified education to undermine violent and "extremist" narratives); governments can scale these up. Direct community mentorship with e-sports teams for children, through initiatives like the Raising Good Gamers project,[86] can also help build less negative, more resilient online spaces.

Law enforcement, for its part, should continue running operations against networks targeting children in games (akin to stings used for online predators), and make publicized arrests where it is possible to deter others. At the same time, governments must ensure that law enforcement engagement in online platforms respects privacy and children's rights (targeting only credible threats, not chilling free expression). Governments might also facilitate the inclusion of gaming reporting tools for hotlines to address online harassment, gender-based violence, or recruitment of children by violent groups, so that parents, teachers, or children themselves have somewhere to turn if they suspect such activity.

- **Increase International Cooperation and Norm Setting:** The socialization and recruitment of children to become involved in organized violence is often a cross-border issue (e.g., a recruiter in one country targeting youth in another), requiring closer collaboration between governments. They could initiate or support efforts at the UN to create international norms against exploiting children online. Governments should also engage regional bodies (EU, AU, OAS, ASEAN, etc.) to harmonize approaches – this could involve joint investigations, shared best practices, or even treaties to rapidly remove content from violent groups. For example, the Christchurch Call is a multinational set of commitments to remove "terrorist" content online; building on that, states could specifically pledge to protect children from exploitation by violent groups on online platforms and track progress. Finally, governments should ensure child and youth consultation in policymaking, including young gamers in discussions about new regulations or initiatives, to ground measures in real user experiences.

For Gaming Companies and Platforms

- **Implement Safety by Design:** Gaming companies are responsible for creating safe products for children from the ground up. This model should center child rights due diligence and broader responsibility to respect children's rights (UNGPs) as a way to foster industry-led initiatives to detect and remove harmful content, as well as to limit exploitation by violent actors (see endnote for guidance on this). Advocates should also push platforms to publicly condemn the use of gaming ecosystems by non-state armed groups, criminal networks, and hybrid violent actors, adopt unambiguous internal policies prohibiting it, and equip trust & safety teams to enforce those policies. Gaming spaces should be safe places for

children to play. This starts with strong game design that recognizes and mitigates user risks during the design process, next, robust content moderation and community management in any game that allows user interaction. Companies should invest in automated filtering and human moderators to detect content from violent groups. For example, they should develop AI systems that can flag keywords, suspicious recruiting language, or grooming behavior patterns in chats (Riot and Ubisoft's prototype systems for voice/text are a step in this direction). Firms should supplement AI with trained moderators who understand regional languages and context, especially where hate speech slang or gang codes might be used to evade filters. Moderation must cover not just text but voice and images/video if those are shared in-game. Pre-moderation of user-generated content (for games that allow user-created levels, custom avatars, etc.) can prevent someone from designing a swastika-laden level or a replica of a real-life school to plan violence. Companies can also use safety-by-design checklists (as recommended by organizations like 5Rights) during game development, for example to ensure default settings have voice chat turned off for under-13 accounts. Young players' age or identity should not be public. Gaming companies could also limit direct messaging capabilities for children among certain, younger age cohorts, or allow them only with mutual friends. Child Rights Impact Assessments should be regularly conducted for new features – if a company is introducing a new chat function or VR lobby, they evaluate how it could be misused to harm kids and build in mitigations (like easy "panic" report buttons or AI monitoring from day one).

- **Strengthen Verification and Controls:** Many games have age limits in their terms of services or in their ratings but often lack effective age assurance**,** allowing underage users onto platforms (and content) not designed for them. Companies should implement rights-respecting age assurance measures to keep very young children out of risky platforms (like 18+ open-world games) and to apply appropriate safeguards for teens. Following the UK's Age-Appropriate Design Code principles, they should ensure that when a user is identified as a child additional protective features kick in: such as content filters that screen out chats with violent or sexual content, automatic flagging of unusual contacts (e.g., if a 40-year-old tries to friend a 12-year-old in-game, trigger a review or parental alert), and limiting discoverability (children's profiles should not be publicly searchable). Importantly, platforms should also make parental controls easy to use and prominent: give parents the tools to monitor play time, restrict communication features, and receive summaries of their child's interactions if desired. Not every parent will use them, but availability and ease-of-use are key (the current reality is that many parents find game safety settings confusing or hidden).

- **Proactive Detection of Organized Misuse:** Beyond general moderation, companies should actively seek out organized malicious behavior on their services. This may involve forming dedicated threat intelligence teams within the company who track trends like violent group activity or criminal recruitment patterns in the gaming world. For instance, if there are rumors that an armed group is targeting players of a certain war game, the company should coordinate with law enforcement and monitor for that. Companies can utilize data

analytics to identify patterns suggestive of grooming or recruitment: multiple accounts attempting to befriend young users with similar messages or known hate groups setting up private servers. By analyzing user reports and behavior data, firms can map networks of bad actors and ban them. Some companies have started to use graph analysis of their user networks to find clusters associated with hate or fraud. These techniques should be explicitly expanded to locate rings of accounts potentially engaged in organized exploitation or recruitment of children. When identified, companies should not only remove/bank those accounts but also share the information with industry coalitions and, where appropriate, authorities (respecting due process and privacy laws).

- **Transparency and Accountability:** To build trust and enable external scrutiny, gaming companies should publish regular transparency reports including child safety metrics. For example, companies should report the number of accounts banned for exploitation behavior (including to involve children in organized violence), how many user reports of such content were received and actioned, average moderator response times, etc. Transparency reporting is less common in gaming – this needs to change. In addition, companies could voluntarily submit to independent audits of their child safety practices. An independent assessment (perhaps by a child-safety NGO or certified auditor) might review a popular game's chat moderation or the effectiveness of its parental controls and then publish results. This kind of accountability can spur improvements and reassure the public. Engaging with child advocates and experts in the design process is also recommended: some firms now have youth advisory panels or consult child psychologists when making games for children extending that to consulting experts on how someone might misuse a game would be forward-thinking. Finally, companies must ensure they comply with relevant laws like those described earlier, which means scaling up compliance teams, content moderation staff, and legal oversight. Non-compliance now carries high risk (fines, lawsuits, reputational damage), so safety should be seen as integral to the business, not an afterthought.

- **Positive Community Building and Norm Change:** One way to combat the influence of violent or hateful groups is to amplify positive communities and norms within games. Game companies can invest in in-game events and community moderator team training. For example, hosting charity tournaments against hate, partnering with organizations to create educational game content (narrative modules about the dangers of recruitment, in creative ways that resonate with players). Platforms can formalize the role of players who act as community guardians, as volunteer moderators or community leaders, with training on spotting organized recruitment and provide tools for them to escalate concerns. Some platforms run "trusted user" programs where select adult players can help moderate, ensuring these programs vet participants and include modules on child protection should be a low lift. By cultivating a culture of respect and safety, companies make it harder for malign actors to find footholds. For instance, if a game's player base is accustomed to calling out and reporting harassment or strange behavior ("see something, say something"),

a malign actor trying to groom children might be more quickly noticed and reported by other players. Fostering this culture through consistent messaging – loading screen tips, in-game advertising banners,[87] community guidelines prominently displayed, zero-tolerance enforcement – is key. It's analogous to neighborhood watch in online neighborhoods.

For Civil Society, Educators, and Parents

- **Awareness and Education Campaigns:** Civil society organizations (CSOs) – including child protection organizations, parent associations, and youth groups – should spearhead campaigns to raise awareness about organized violence online. Many parents and educators are less familiar with gaming platforms than with social media. CSOs can, and should, develop practical guides and workshops for parents on safe gaming: explaining game ratings, how to use parental controls, and how to talk to children about strangers in games. Initiatives should explicitly include gaming scenarios (e.g., explaining what harmful socialization and recruitment might look like in a game context).

- **Support for Victims and Survivors of Violence:** Supported by governments, CSOs and service providers which already give counseling and rehabilitation services should ensure they are adapted and made available for children who have been exposed to particularly traumatic experiences online or recruited/socialized into involvement in organized violence in digital spaces. This might involve training counselors and psychologists on unique aspects of online socialization and recruitment by non-state armed groups or gang grooming. For instance, a teenager who spent time exposed to and involved with an online hate group will likely need specialized counselling and reintegration support, even if they did not become involved in offline violence. Civil society groups with expertise in violence prevention and exit work should adapt their programs for children and integrate an understanding of gaming culture. Additionally, when law enforcement intervenes in a case, such as when a child recruited to commit a crime is intercepted, there should be a protocol in place to connect that child and family to social services in line with international standards for justice for children. Civil society can advocate for and facilitate these interventions, acting as liaisons between families and the justice system, recognizing and situating the use of gaming inside wider patterns of societal violence.

Conclusion

Online gaming represents both a powerful opportunity and a significant challenge for child protection. On one hand, online multiplayer games and their ecosystems foster positive socialization, creativity, and community-building, serving as critical spaces for childhood development and play. On the other hand, as shown in this working paper, malicious actors exploit these same platforms to propagandize, socialize, and recruit young players into their organizations and to become involved in organized violence. They often follow similar tactics and techniques used for aspects of intentional grooming into child sexual exploitation, and hybridity between both CSE

and organized violence appears to be increasing. Ultimately, while gaming itself is not inherently harmful (and offers many benefits), the interconnectedness of vast social connections across gaming surfaces, the anonymity they afford, and the toxic cultural norms within some gaming subcommunities create vulnerabilities that must be recognized and addressed.

Recognizing that organized violence is a societal issue far beyond a problem limited to gaming, a multistakeholder approach to violence prevention is essential to mitigate risks effectively. This requires collaboration between child protection practitioners, the gaming industry, educators, guardians, and policymakers, as well as robust, nuanced regulation to hold platforms accountable. By empowering children and their communities with the knowledge, tools, and support needed to navigate these gaming spaces safely, we can ensure that gaming fulfills its promise as a force for positive social engagement while safeguarding against its potential for exploitation. The time to act is now: offline-online divides no longer exist for children. Ensuring a safe, joyful future for them depends on safeguarding digital playgrounds.

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