

# From Screen to Scene: The Gamification of Mass Violence

*This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.*

## Source article

Adam Lankford, Claire S. Allely, and Sonya A. McLaren, "The Gamification of Mass Violence: Social Factors, Video Game Influence, and Attack Presentation in the Christchurch Mass Shooting and Its Copycats," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 47, no. 10 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2413184>.

## Key Findings and Implications

- Social isolation was an important driver of gaming-related radicalization for the eight attackers analyzed in this study.
- These individuals differed from most video game players because their entire social lives were online.
- These individuals differed from most people who express hatred online because they were not satisfied with restricting their aggression to that realm.
- Interest in past attackers and the use of gaming language to describe past acts of targeted violence may be potential warning signs of radicalization to violence.

## Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Mass casualty attackers have been found to reference, imitate, and compete with one another, particularly following highly publicized attacks. The 2019 Christchurch shooting is an example. The attacker wrote a manifesto designed for online circulation, framed the attack using language and imagery drawn from video games, and livestreamed the assault. After Christchurch, many subsequent attackers explicitly named the shooter as an influence and used similar tactics.

Research suggests that intense media coverage of mass shooters and terrorists increases the risk of copycats, particularly among young people who may identify with past perpetrators, mimic their language or style, and even try to outdo their violence. However, it is not fully understood why some perpetrators inspire more imitation than others. To better understand this effect, researchers and practitioners have increasingly examined the

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“gamification” of violence, which refers to the ways game-like elements, memes, and humor can encourage real-world harm by making it seem “fun.”

## Methodology

This study focused on the Christchurch attacker and seven attackers who directly cited him. The research objectives were to understand what the attackers had in common, how they used gaming-related language and platforms, and how gamification showed up in their planning and execution of violence. The researchers used publicly available information, including court documents, law enforcement reports, news coverage, manifestos, and online posts, to analyze the eight attackers. For each case, the researchers documented contextual information (e.g., attacker age, ideology, violent role models, attack location), details of the attacker’s real-world social lives, their involvement in gaming and in online forums commonly used by gamers, and evidence of gamification tactics (e.g., livestreaming, manifestos, strategic advice, references to scores and rankings). The researchers then compared the attackers to national data on video game players to see how they differed from typical gamers.

## Findings

- **All eight attackers were deeply socially isolated.** They had few in-person friendships and little or no romantic experience. Online gaming and gaming-adjacent forums with extremist content served as their primary social connections.
- **Gaming language and platforms played a visible role in their radicalization and attacks.** They frequently referenced video games, used gamer slang, and talked about violence using gaming language (e.g., describing the number of victims killed as “getting a high score”). Most attackers attempted to livestream their attacks and shared strategic advice for future attackers in their manifestos.
- **These attackers appeared very different from typical gamers.** Compared to the general gaming population, this group was younger, only male, and more socially isolated and almost never gamed with offline friends.
- **Eventually, expressing hatred in online spaces failed to satisfy these attackers’ desire for recognition or impact.** Through violence, they moved from a small audience online to a much larger global one.

## How can practitioners working in early-stage intervention and threat assessment use these findings?

- Recognize that expressing excessive interest in past attackers and using gamified language to describe real acts of targeted violence are potential indicators of concern.
- Be aware that people who seem satisfied with making angry posts online may pose a less imminent threat than those who grow bored of online hatred and express the desire for something real.
- Assess a person's social engagement, work to strengthen their offline connections, and help them achieve supportive relationships and opportunities.



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