"If you're on this sub, you're on every watchlist possible."

An open-source investigation into the gamification of terrorism on Reddit's user-run forum r/unexpectedjihad

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Terrorism is a psychological game of escalation. It's not the last attack that scares people. It's the next one.

–Fox, 2020:7

Abstract

This study investigates the emerging phenomenon of gamification of terrorism, understood as the exploitation of video games mechanics and aesthetics to radicalize, proliferate propaganda and produce terror. Through an open-source ethnographic exploration of the "r/unexpectedjihad" community on Reddit, it attempts to answer *how* and *to what extent* violent jihadi sympathizers are gamifying terror in a digital setting. Data harvested from the subreddit underwent thematic analysis and was dissected for symptoms of gamification. Subsequently, two themes, *Playfulness* and *Propaganda*, were drawn, which allowed the researcher to decipher the means and methods used to disperse, ritualize, or even fetishize violence within the community. This thesis argues that "r/unexpectedjihad" acted as a perpetual terror gamification machine where users shared gamified propaganda and interacted with it in gamified ways. At last, it extends the glossary of gamification by introducing a new piece of vocabulary describing the observed mechanisms of propagating terror.

Keywords: Gamification, Terrorism, Extremism, Jihad, Reddit

Word count: 10,000

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1. Introduction
1.1. Background

Paul Wilkinson, Britain's once leading terrorism scholar, analogized anti-terrorism to goalkeeping. "You can make a hundred brilliant saves but the only shot that people remember is the one that gets past you"—an uncanny, yet evocative comparison that can contemporarily be found in endless volumes on the issue of political violence and beyond (Mahan & Griset, 2013:137).

On March 15, 2019, 51 people were killed and 40 injured in New Zealand's Christchurch mosque shootings, filmed and livestreamed on Facebook by a far-right extremist perpetrator in a first-person, game-like perspective (Wakefield, 2019). The terrorist attack, *the one shot*—as one could describe it, drawing on the Wilkinson analogy—that got past the authorities, has ever since been used as an anchor in the scholarly debate on the increasingly prominent usage of gaming elements within extremist communities (Fizek & Dippel, 2020:79).

Subsequently, on August 3, 2019, a lone shooter influenced by the Christchurch massacre opened fire at a supermarket in El Paso, Texas, United States, leaving 22 people dead (Gelineau, 2019). Before their attacks, Christchurch and El Paso shooters posted nationalistic manifestos on 8chan—an unregulated and anonymous messaging board popular among gamers—with the latter expressing support for the Christchurch perpetrator (Ibid). According to Fizek & Dippel (2020:79), those attacks bore the emergence of the term "gamification of terrorism," which made headlines in media and academia alike.

"If 8chan was the shooter's firewood, Facebook the match, and YouTube the oxygen, Reddit is a place where the fire he set is still smoldering," wrote Breland (2019) about the Christchurch massacre, pointing to Reddit as space pulsating with post-shooting hate speech directed towards Muslims.

Copycat far-right crimes have become increasingly more prominent in the months and years following the Christchurch and El Paso incidents. Notable examples include the 2019 Halle synagogue shooting in Germany, and more recently, the 2022 massacre at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, United States—both of which were livestreamed on Twitch, a popular gaming-adjacent service owned by Amazon (Mackintosh & Mezzofiore, 2019; Thorbecke, 2022).

The concept of the gamification of terrorism has since spanned across methods, platforms and ideologies, prominently extending into violent jihadi extremism. Gaming motifs have been, among other groups, utilized by the Islamic State (abbreviated to IS or ISIS) in a variety of forms and timeframes preceding the wave of attacks that bore the emergence of gamification of terrorism as an academic discipline (Al-Rawi, 2016; Dauber et al., 2019).

Not only has the Islamic State mimicked the first-person shooter (FPS) genre in its propaganda videos—most often drawing inspiration from the famous "Call of Duty" franchise (Dauber et al., 2019)—but it also released a children's "tutoring" app utilizing jihadi and military vocabulary (Hunt,

2016; Weiss, 2016). Furthermore, IS attempted to produce its own take on the best-selling "Grand Theft Auto" series as early as 2014 (Crompton, 2014, as cited in Al-Rawi, 2016), and successfully released a "mod" (*modification*) for a military tactical shooter video game called "Arma 3," allowing players to assume the point of view (POV) of an ISIS fighter (Fresco, 2015, as cited in Al-Rawi, 2016).

However, the tentacles of gamified terrorism have since stretched beyond apps, mods and games. Chatting apps and gaming-adjacent platforms, such as DLive, Steam, Signal, Twitch, Telegram and Discord (Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan, 2017; Ebner, 2021; Davey, 2021; Loadenthal, Hausserman & Thierry, 2022:103), have all become riddled with activity linked to "extremist groups across the ideological spectrum—from jihadists and Christian fundamentalists to white nationalists, conspiracy theorists and radical misogynists" (Ebner, 2021:2). These platforms and more offer a degree of secrecy and anonymity that favors extremist online presence, despite the perpetual news coverage on the topic of terrorism (Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan, 2017:1243).

"Chan boards" (4chan, 8chan) and Reddit, a social news website, are also prone to the presence of gamification (Davies, 2022:70; Andrews, 2023:16). Predominantly linked to the far-right, "chans" do not require users to create accounts and remain open to anyone (Gonzalez, 2019). Reddit—although obliging visitors to log in before posting—allows for freeloading and browsing its public communities without user identification. Offering less secrecy than encrypted channels of communication but more discretion than staple social media like Facebook or Twitter, these websites seemingly attract large audiences—like the one observed as part of this study—where crowds can act as covers.

Before moving forward and drawing a more detailed distinction between the concepts introduced above, it is necessary to distinguish the topic of this thesis from the age-old narrative linking brutality in video games to heightened levels of violence among gamers (especially juvenile ones). It constitutes a strait of research on adolescent psychology (Anderson et al., 2008; Ferguson, 2010) and will *not* be discussed in this study.

1.2. Key terms

Before proceeding with the research question, aims and objectives, it is vital to clarify the terms that will continue to be employed throughout this thesis.

1.2.1. Gamification

In its broadest sense, gamification can be defined as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al., 2011:10) and is frequently found in a multitude of disciplines—ranging from education to business to marketing and tourism—where it serves a common purpose: an incentive to engage (Jakubowski, 2014; Xu, Weber & Buhalis, 2014; Huotari & Hamari, 2017). Gamification techniques commonly include badges, trophies, levels and leaderboards, all meant to incite a sense of competitiveness—and thus, efficiency—through entertainment. According to

Marczewski (2013:9), "we [as humans] like to play," and gamification is nothing more than advantaging "behavior that is engrained in human nature from birth."

However, gamification is like a coin—or gaming token. It has two sides, and while our natural inclination towards games can be capitalized on education or labor grounds, it has also been utilized for terror, radicalization and propaganda purposes by groups across the ideological spectrum—from the Christchurch perpetrator to the Islamic State, to unaffiliated jihadist sympathizers and beyond (Ebner, 2021:2; Lakhani & Wiedlitzka, 2022).

Furthermore, in addition to attacks being livestreamed from the FPS perspective, gamification of terrorism also employs traditional video gaming techniques, such as points and rankings. Intending to increase engagement, they are predominantly used within online communities (Fizek & Dippel, 2020; Lakhani & Wiedlitzka, 2022).

1.2.2. Terrorism, Extremism, Radicalization, Propaganda

As Schmid (2011:5) duly notes, the broader the concept of terrorism, the greater the chance people will use it to describe different things. To avoid a possible misunderstanding, this thesis will employ Schmid's general categorization of *terrorism* as "an activity, method or tactic which, as a psychological outcome, aims to produce terror" (Ibid:3).

This rather loose definition captures the phenomenon's essence while retaining enough leeway to interpret it in the context of *violent extremism*, *radicalization*, and *propaganda*—terms that are key to understanding this study.

Violent extremism is a broader classification of "forms of ideologically motivated violence that fall short of constituting terrorist acts" (UNODC, 2018). *Radicalization* shall be understood as a driver of violent extremist ideologies that *may* lead one to committing acts of terrorism (Romaniuk, 2015:7). Finally, *propaganda* will refer to multimedia proliferating a favorable—heroic, humoristic or romanticized—image of ideologically motivated violence (Lieberman, 2017:95).

However, the line between terrorism and violent extremism is blurry, especially within the emerging field of gamified terrorism. In its current state, it serves as an umbrella discipline for the gamification of ideologically motivated violence, radicalization *and* propaganda.

1.2.3. Jihad

Ramlan, Erwinsyahbana & Hakim offer several interpretations of the Arabic word جهاد (jihad), delving into detailed accounts of its etymological and cultural origins. According to their relatively neutral *lexical* definition, jihad stands for "devoting the fullest efforts and ability to get through difficult and serious problems" (2016:36).

Depending on the school of thought, jihad can embody different meanings. And thus, according to Sharia law scholars, jihad means "devoting all the capabilities and efforts to fight the infidels" (Zuhaili, 2011:26, as cited in Ramlan, Erwinsyahbana & Hakim, 2016:36).

While this thesis does not subscribe to the popular Western narrative synonymizing jihad with acts of violence committed by Muslims (Sheridan, 2006:321), it does interpret *certain* criminal acts as violent jihadi extremism or terrorism. In short, jihad does not equal violent jihadi extremism or terrorism. Both, however, shall be interpreted as ideologically motivated violence.

Furthermore, while referring to the subjects of this study—users of "r/unexpectedjihad"—the phrase "violent jihadi sympathizers" will be employed. The reason behind dubbing them "sympathizers" and not "extremists" or "supporters" is that while the individual members of the community expressed varying levels of condonement towards violent jihadi extremism, the study could not verify whether their extremist views translate into violent actions or any form of active support outside of cyberspace. Hence, "softer" terminology was applied.

1.2.4. Reddit: "The Front Page of the Internet"[1]

"Whether you're into breaking news, sports, TV fan theories, or a never-ending stream of the internet's cutest animals, there's a community on Reddit for you" (Reddit, 2023). Home to more than 100,000 of such communities ("subreddits"), Reddit is a free social network website allowing registered users to post, comment, upvote and downvote its content. To aid with the understanding of the platform's architecture, a generic subreddit was generated (*Figure 1*). The account created to do so was not utilized for any other purpose.
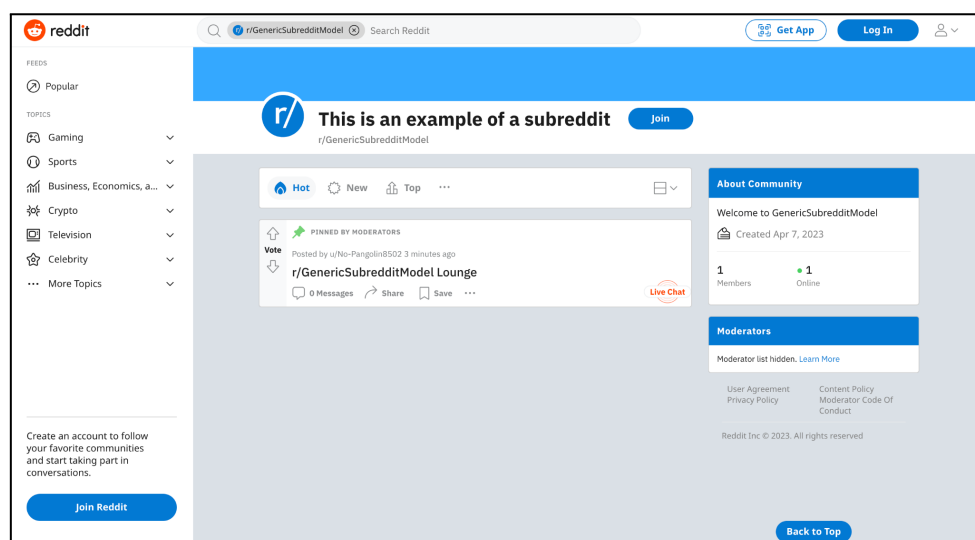

Figure 1 depicts the interface of a dummy called r/GenericSubredditModel.
Reddit's most popular topics—including "Gaming"—are displayed on the left. Every subreddit begins with "r/," followed by a custom name.

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[1] Reddit's tagline.

1.3. Research Question, Aims and Objectives

This study aims to observe, analyze and theorize on the activity of the members of "r/unexpectedjihad" through the lens of gamification theory. While its scope does not allow for a comprehensive overview of the entire platform, it hopes to frame "r/unexpectedjihad" as a *microcosm* of Reddit's other open communities, and to juxtapose it with the *macrocosm* that is the emerging field of gamification of terrorism.

Surveilling the subreddit with gamified terrorism in mind offers a glimpse into a discipline that is as dangerous as it is fascinating. However, this discipline is still in its infancy. The chosen case aims to contribute to the (so far small) pool of empirical studies on gamified terrorism and offer an academically unexplored take on it.

The research question is thus broad and exploratory:

> *How and to what extent are Reddit users gamifying terror on the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit?*

2. Theoretical Framework

Given the field's novelty, the literature on the gamification of terrorism will be discussed and positioned within a broader scholarly context. Utilizing a top-down approach, this section will attempt to connect the dots and decipher patterns across different strains of research. It will identify trends, debates, detours and gaps in the literature on terrorism studies and beyond. At last, it shall argue for the relevance of this study in the context of international development.

2.1. Anchoring the Framework
2.1.1. Orthodox and Critical Terrorism Studies

Before delving into the literature, this section will anchor the review to a specific timeframe: September 11, 2001, onwards. Up until 8:46 AM that day, little did scholars know they were about to enter a new era and witness the sudden birth of a new academic discipline: terrorism studies. Triggered by the September 11 attacks, they instantly expanded from a "relatively minor sub-field of security studies" (Jackson, Gunning & Breen Smyth, 2007:2) to a fully-fledged academic domain. Since 9/11, terrorism studies, as well as politics and media, have become dominated by the existential threat narrative (Wolfendale, 2016:248).

Terrorism studies have subsequently grown a "critical" arm set off by the rapidly progressing "War on Terror," and amplified by the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal involving the U.S. military and CIA-led human rights abuse against Iraqi prison detainees: an operation dubbed a catalyst for retaliatory terror (Shanker, 2006). *Critical* terrorism studies (CTS) have subsequently morphed into a prime alternative to the dominant discourse on terrorism studies.

"The CTS project has witnessed an expanded and deepened discussion about terrorism studies as a field of research, teaching, and public engagement," writes Richard Jackson, one of its founding fathers (2016:21). Furthermore, CTS set out to explore constructivist, feminist, post-structuralist, post-colonialist and post-positivist approaches that were absent from the beaten path of terrorism studies, often described as overly descriptive, derivative and state-centric (Jackson, Gunning & Smyth, 2007; Al-Kassimi, 2019; Wright, 2019).

Up until this point, the orthodox approach largely ignored the concept of *state* terrorism and exclusively referred to it as a product of *non-state* violence. Challenging this dynamic and normalizing the dual discourse is perhaps the most explicit accomplishment of critical terrorism studies (Blakeley, 2007; Franks, 2009; Jarvis & Lister, 2014; Jackson, 2016).

Another substantial rift between critical and orthodox terrorism studies is rooted in their contested views on the existential threat narrative, with CTS criticizing its role in "legitimizing political, legal, military, and academic responses to terrorism" that bear severe consequences for countless individuals and communities everywhere (Wolfendale, 2016:249).

In short, CTS could be broadly described as a staunch skeptic of the Western counterterrorism culture and practice (Jackson, 2016:22; Gunning, 2007) as well as "an umbrella term for a variety of nontraditional approaches to terrorism research" (Jarvis, 2016:78).

CTS proponents argue that researchers from various disciplines should be invited to develop new areas of inquiry—including physical sciences, sociology, history, psychology, law and linguistics, as well as media and communications—allowing for substantial growth within terrorism studies (Robinson, 2009:1; Jackson, 2016:34; Jarvis, 2016:81; Holland, 2016:440).

While the previous literature does not position gamification within the broader realm of terrorism studies, this study argues it should be classified as part of CTS. Despite pertaining to actions of non-state actors, gamification of terrorism is a novel and unconventional approach to terrorism research that spans across other scholarly disciplines described in the subsequent sections of this study.

2.1.2. Media and Communication Studies

"Terrorism is an act of communication," argues O'Loughlin (2016:582), drawing on the works of Schmid (1989), Devji, (2005) and Nacos (2007). However, while many volumes have been written on the media-communication-terrorism triangle, little CTS research addresses the new, digital and Internet-based means of (social) communication. However, vocabulary such as "many" and "little" is not exactly quantifiable. Let's scale it.

At the time of this study, entering "critical terrorism studies" and "communication" on Google Scholar (typed in quotation marks, therefore looking for the *exact* match) generated roughly 1950

results. For comparison, there were 2280 hits for "critical terrorism studies" and "media," and merely 712 for "critical terrorism studies" and "social media."

Thus, two paradigms of study of media and communication in CTS have noticeably emerged: the analog and the digital. They do, however, have a common denominator. As Conway (2012:448) points out, both orthodox and CTS scholars have predominantly explored the intersection of terrorism and news media, giving other "mediascapes" the cold shoulder—those including "online games" and "console computer games." Despite Conway pinpointing an increased interest in the "Internet as a terrorist medium" (2012:447), notably missing from the list(s) are social media. However, this loud absence was partially counterbalanced in the years to come.

2.1.3. Cyber Jihad

Cyber jihad, "a term coined to loosely describe Islamic extremist terrorists' use of the Internet as a communications, fundraising, recruitment, training, and planning tool" (Davis, 2006:122), has been present in the scholarly literature since the early 2000s (Bunt, 2003; Shay, 2005; Davis, 2006). It peaked in 2014–2015 with the re-emergence of the Islamic State and its widespread use of cyberspace, and regressed from 2016 onwards (Lakomy, 2017:40). Despite being the epitome of the violent intersection of media, communication and the Internet, cyber jihad is missing from the CTS literature. Instead, it has formed its own sub-strain[2] of study, primarily concerned with propaganda proliferation on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and YouTube, and occasionally, Reddit, Telegram and WhatsApp—the last two being examples of more covert, encrypted methods of communication (Lakomy, 2017; Awan, 2017; Tønnessen, 2017; Lakomy, 2018).

According to Lakomy (also Pues, 2016), IS has mastered the art of reaching those who would neither seek nor encounter jihadi materials in their "ordinary online environment" (Lakomy, 2017:41). Disseminating content such as executions, battle footage, online magazines and *nasheeds[3]* was intended to "shock and awe" Western cybercitizens (Ibid:40), but IS content has gradually ceased to emulate its violent allure, leading to desensitization and an overall decline of cyber jihadism (Ibid:47–48).

What followed is outlined by Antinori (2017:50), who differentiates between the four phases of Internet jihadism. *Terror arena* (1998–2004), *digihad* (2004–2014), *cyber jihad[4]* (2014–2016) and *lone jihad* (2016–) vary in tactics and communication, with the last two employing more mobile means, such as tablets and smartphones, as opposed to desktops and laptops.

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[2] *Cyber jihad* usually falls under the *cyberterrorism* label, defined as "unlawful attacks and threats of attack against computers, networks, and the information stored therein" (Gordon & Ford, 2002:637). Here, cyber jihad is discussed as *cyber mean*s to *physical outcomes*—not cyber means to cyber outcomes—and is thus discussed independently.

[3] "A cappella song[s] praising the Prophet Muhammad and reciting Quranic verses glorifying jihad" (Alvi, 2020:42).

[4] While cyber jihad is typically an umbrella term for *all* phases of Internet jihadism, Antinori considers it a sub-strain thereof.

According to Antinori (2017:55), the ongoing phase is paving the way for spatially dispersed, tactical-violent actions—shootings, stabbings, bombings—against "soft targets[5]." Lone jihad is fostered through *traditional* and *self*-radicalization, the latter being of particular threat to younger generations, known for being digital natives. At last, Antinori pinpoints mobile devices, instant messaging apps and, most interestingly, online game chats as "(cyber-)hubs of hate and violence where inculturation and self-training are open and available for everyone whether they are active participants or not" (Ibid:52)—a definition that transcends boundaries and bleeds into the subject of this study.

While Reddit is not a prominent subject of cyber jihad studies, it is nevertheless present. For example, Lakomy (2018:6) points to Reddit as a space where the Islamic State's English-language top-down "text propaganda" was uncovered. However, the scope of this is not elaborated on by the author.

Liang also lists Reddit in the tally of "IS Presence in the World Wide Web" without attributing any scores or numbers. Describing it as "an overview of [...] apps and websites that IS uses to spread its propaganda while remaining anonymous," she positioned Reddit at the top of the table (2017:16–17). It remains unknown, however, whether its sequence holds any significance.

2.2. Gamification of Terrorism

Cyber jihad evidently transpires in the emerging field of gamification of terrorism, with Antinori's *lone jihad* phase mirroring the *lone wolf* narrative often adopted in discussions on far-right extremist violence, where the field originates. Here, the story comes full circle: reviewing the literature requires one to retrace their steps to the opening paragraphs of this thesis describing the Christchurch, Halle, and Buffalo attacks.

The lone wolf trope is frequently discussed in two aspects: mechanics and narrative. And thus, Lakhani & Wiedlitzka (2022) focus on the inaugurator of this terror genre—the Christchurch gunman—whose assault featured both gamified narrative and mechanics. While the former materialized in an online manifesto posted prior to the attack, the latter was epitomized in the form of the FPS livestream of the massacre.

In non-violent gaming environments, livestreaming is a popular activity among those who broadcast themselves playing games on the Internet, which usually goes hand in hand with real-time discussions (Schlegel, 2020a:65). The Christchurch attacker implemented a game-like perspective in his crime, which consequently triggered comments alluding to the "kill count" and "leaderboard"—vocabulary described by classical (non-terrorism) gamification scholars (e.g. Marczewski, 2013 or Deterding et al., 2011) as a playful technique aimed at inciting competitiveness through entertainment.

Building on Christchurch's tragic legacy, Fizek & Dippel (2020) as well as Mackintosh & Mezzofiore (2019), invoke Halle and Buffalo as examples of other gamified crimes that triggered live

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[5] Individuals or institutions with no military defense capabilities (Merriam-Webster, 2023a).

commentaries on 4chan and 8chan. This practice, however, has since migrated to other gaming-adjacent platforms, such as Discord, Twitch, Steam and Reddit (Patterson, 2019, Thorbecke, 2022, Hummel & Biscaichipy, 2023:9).

Both gamified terrorism and its host platforms have been primarily discussed in the context of radicalization, with Schlegel (2020a:51) carefully stipulating that "games and gamification *could*, for *some* individuals, increase the *susceptibility* to radicalization or *facilitate* radicalization processes already underway." Fizek & Dippel (2020:80) debate the role of such platforms as "co-agents" and not "mere tools" cultivating the dynamics of radicalization. They introduce Turner's (1982) concept of liminality, arguing that "alternative online social platforms in combination with videogames aesthetic create ritualized liminal spaces," where reality is turned upside down and boundaries between facts and fiction are blurred (Fizek & Dippel, 2020:80).

Furthermore, the discourse on gamification differentiates two broad frameworks: top-down and bottom-up (Lakhani & Wiedlitzka, 2022:2). Top-down gamification is a method utilized by extremist organizations to stimulate engagement and commitment among their followers by employing virtual reward systems in the form of ranks, levels, and the "PBL triad" of points, badges and leaderboards (Schlegel, 2020a:59). To put it concisely, top-down gamification trickles down *from* the organization *to* its followers.

Bottom-up gamification, on the other hand, is a method used *by* users *for* users, driven by individuals acting outside of any direct or organized apparatus. It can occur as a result of independent attacks—such as Christchurch, Halle, or Buffalo—which can be considered the endpoint of the radicalization process, or proceed in a collective online setting occurring at its earlier stages (Schlegel, 2020a:65).

Furthermore, it could be argued that *top-down* and *bottom-up* gamification corresponds to the *traditional* and *self*-radicalization typology drawn by Antinori (2017:51–52), where the *lone jihad* mirrors the *lone wolf*. This demonstrates how multifaceted the gamification of terrorism is. By bringing numerous ideologies to the same playing field, it affirms that methods bridge beliefs in the quest for terror.

At last, with some volumes simultaneously describing games and gamification as means to propagandize and radicalize, one must be careful to distinguish between the two. As Schlegel (2020b) notes, the *radicalization of games* and *gamification of radicalization* fall into separate categories. After all, gamification is "the use of game design elements in *non*-game contexts" (Deterding et al., 2011:10). However, it is equally important to acknowledge that they draw inspiration from the same sources (e.g. the "Call of Duty" franchise) and are utilized for similar purposes, and thus, are difficult to disjoint. For example, Schlegel (2000a:62) describes a networking app utilizing a PBL system, which calls for questions: *Should such an app be considered a game? Where lies the boundary between one and another?* With no outright answers, it is vital to stay aware and agile—some cases fail to fit into predefined labels, and therefore call for individual judgment.

2.2. Gamification of Reddit

Despite the lack of studies linking gamification, jihad and Reddit, the platform has been researched in alternative gamified environments.

Li (2017:24) discusses Reddit in the thematically unrelated—but strategically relevant—context of gamification of dating, pointing to "pickup lines, puns, jokes, emoji and memes and other creative wordplays" as examples of "gamified interactions." Li parallelly introduces the concept of Fuchs's "ludic interfaces," playful experiences assured by the mechanics of an app and its interface, including—but not limited to—actions such as swiping and scrolling (Li, 2017:32).

Playfulness is the key to Li's study. While the linguistic measures do not distinctively derive from (video) games, they do contribute to the playfulness of the experience—the cornerstone of gamification, as argued by Marczewski (2013; subsection 1.2.1. Gamification). It opens up a compelling linguistic narrative regarding the language and its role in gamifying its surroundings.

The interpretation of memes and emojis as means of gamification corresponds with the works of Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan (2017), Fizek & Dippel (2020), Gallagher et al. (2021) as well as Lakhani & Wiedlitzka (2022), who detected them on various platforms and among different ideological groups spearheading gamified terror.

Furthermore, Pellikka (2014) discusses gamification as being embedded in Reddit as a platform. He paints the picture of Reddit as an inherently gamified environment, employing systems such as scores ("karma points" attributed to users in exchange for contributing to communities; post and comment "upvotes[6]"), badges ("awards" and "trophies") and leaderboards ("ordering of posts based on karma points") (Ibid:29–30).

2.3. Research Gap

"Poorly understood," "highly under-researched" and "in its infancy" are phrases that Lakhani & Wiedlitzka (2022:1–2) use to describe the gamification of terrorism. Their words are echoed by Schlegel (2021:54), who describes the literature as "meager" and "largely anecdotal," as well as Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan (2017:2), who signal a lack of academic studies from an akin area of terrorism communication.

The field's novelty, however, only partially accounts for the reason behind the scarcity of academic literature. It is not only the *gamification* but also the *terrorism* component that suffers from an acute shortage of sources—especially primary ones—with Gunning (2007:363) proclaiming "a continuing dearth of primary research data," with over 80% of terrorism studies being desk-based (Ibid:365).

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[6] *Upvotes* displayed by Reddit are, in fact, the net number of upvotes and downvotes. Upvotes minus downvotes equal the post/comment score (*Upvote*).

This research aims to break the cycle of over-reliance on secondary information—or at least, offer a modest contribution towards it. Here, paradoxically, working from behind a desk was key to surveilling the virtual domain of violent jihadi sympathizers on Reddit.

However, a case study requires not only selecting a particular phenomenon but also a setting in which it takes place. Reddit has long remained perpetually *under*researched in the context of gamification, and utterly *un*researched in its violent jihad subvariant. As one of the leading gaming-adjacent communities (Into Indie Games, 2022; Avada Media, 2023; Maxi Players, 2023) and the world's 8th most-visited website (Statista, 2023), Reddit was rendered as a plausible hive harboring gamified terror. To verify this suspicion, this study will thus pioneer the violent jihad-Reddit nexus in an academic context.

2.4. Research Relevance

International relations have traditionally set security and development studies on separate discourses. Human security, however, is where their objectives meet (Duffield, 2005; SIPRI, 2015; UNDP, 2022). According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, human security is a multi-sectoral approach that, among other factors, considers "terrorism, intra-state conflict, cyber threats, and climate change" as risks severely and directly impacting individuals and communities everywhere (NATO, 2022). The proponents of the security-development nexus argue that since conflict curbs growth and well-being, the promotion of security is indispensable to development (Beall, Goodfellow & Putzel, 2006).

However, the intersection of development and security (and, by extension, terrorism and gamification therein) can also be argued for through the lens of sustainable development. A particularly relevant example is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16: *Peace, justice and strong institutions*. One of its targets is to "significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere" (UN, 2015), with a proposed indicator being the number of violent injuries and deaths per 100,000 (SDSN, 2015).

Being one of the most important contemporary political and security challenges (Jackson, 2016:2), terrorism is keeping up with the fast pace of the 21st century. However, while terrorism is ever-evolving, its research is stagnating (Gunning, 2007; Silke, 2009)—and there is no countering without comprehending.

This thesis attempts to revive the idleness of the field by engaging in primary research, bridging the gap between several scholarly disciplines, and bringing new ways of understanding ideologically motivated violence.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design

The research is designed as a single case study focusing on extremist content spearheaded by violent jihadi sympathizers on the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit.

A case study, being a thorough examination of a single case allowing the researcher to untangle its complexity and particular nature (Bryman, 2012:66–68), fits perfectly into the parameters of this thesis. Here, the aim is to take a closer look at the chosen phenomenon (*gamification of terrorism*) in the particular context (*violent jihadi extremism*) and setting (*Reddit*).

3.1.1. Choosing Reddit

Hummel & Biscaichipy define gaming-adjacent platforms as "places where gamers congregate online that are not specifically games but are very popular with gamers and draw on gaming cultural references"—pointing to Reddit as an example thereof (2023:9).

The aim was to investigate a space where (video) gaming references and design elements had a high chance of appearing. The reason is both relevance and convenience—while gamification can appear in any setting, studies ranging from Dauber et al. (2019) to Fizek & Dippel (2020) to Schlegel (2020a, 2020b) have demonstrated the prevalence of cues relating to no other than video games.

According to Ebner, for every subculture—from "anti-globalists and white supremacists" to "shitposters[7]" and "gamers"—there is a corresponding set of language and reference points (2019:5). While the community under scrutiny cannot be uniformly identified as one subculture, the prerequisite was to pick a platform popular among those wielding general gaming prowess. The prevalence of the gaming culture on the platform served as the basis for the assumption that Reddit's users are versed with (video) gaming vocabulary and references, both integral to spearheading gamification.

At last, it is vital to reiterate that the aim of this study is by no means to generalize the findings but to follow the cues pointing to Reddit as a likely location for harboring gamified violent jihadi extremism.

3.1.2. Identifying and Accessing the "r/unexpectedjihad" Subreddit

Identifying and accessing the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit took place via the "Search Reddit" tab on reddit.com. The following keywords were used to identify a suitable target: *jihad*, *caliphate*, *khilafah*, *haram*, *prophet*, *caliph*.

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[7] *Shitposting* means posting nonsense. The word, albeit vulgar, is part of the academic discourse on Internet culture (e.g. Conway, 2019 or Urbina Blanco, 2021).

The search was narrowed down to subreddits marked as *Public*—as opposed to *Private*, *Restricted* or *Premium-Only*—which, under constraints dissected in subsection 3.5. Limitations, allow unregistered users to view their content.

The foraged communities were tentatively assessed according to their size, language, number and type of posts. The chosen subreddit was not only public with the highest number of subscribers—116,884 as of March 10, 2023—but in the English language, and accruing hundreds of posts. It was additionally deemed fit for study purposes upon inspecting its name ("r/unexpectedjihad"), title ("You're now on a list") and description ("ayy 💣💣💣") which purportedly mimicked a terrorist watchlist notification and contained visual references to explosives.

3.2. Research Method

In the quest for information and access to a cyberspace-based community, digital ethnography was selected as the research method.

While Hine (2015:55) describes ethnography as an "immersive method" in which the researcher plays an active role, this particular principle had to be compromised due to Lund University's ethical guidelines forbidding undercover research. While immersiveness does not equal covertness, actively partaking in the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit without assuming a cover could jeopardize the safety of the researcher. Notwithstanding, the main principle of ethnography—participant observation—remained central to the research.

Furthermore, given the topic of this thesis, pursuing an online field study was the only viable path forward—which, according to Hine (2015:23), is "perfectly possible and widely accepted."

3.3. Data Harvesting

This research is purely qualitative in nature, based on empirical evidence collected from a single subreddit ("r/unexpectedjihad") and archived in the form of screenshots. Going forward, the data collection process will be primarily referred to as "data harvesting," a term specifically used to describe information extracted from online resources (Gupta, Kumar & Kumar Shukla, 2010).

Concurrent data collection and analysis were conducted in the name of pragmatism. Prior research indicated that the shelf life of similarly-themed communities generally spans between "a few hours to as many as seven days" (Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan, 2017:1247). While "r/unexpectedjihad" has operated since January 2015, its controversial nature called for an agile methodology accounting for the possibility of a sudden shutdown—which materialized at the turn of April and May 2023 (*Item i*)
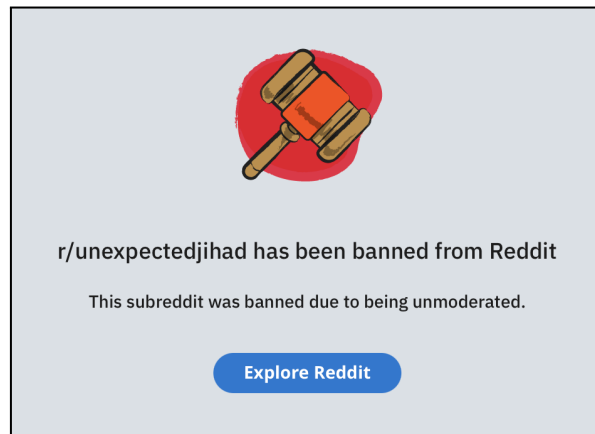
Item i displays a notification encountered on May 9, 2023.

Figure 2 is a diagram representing the data collection and analysis process. Notes were additionally kept to preserve residual information, context and timeline of developments on the subreddit.
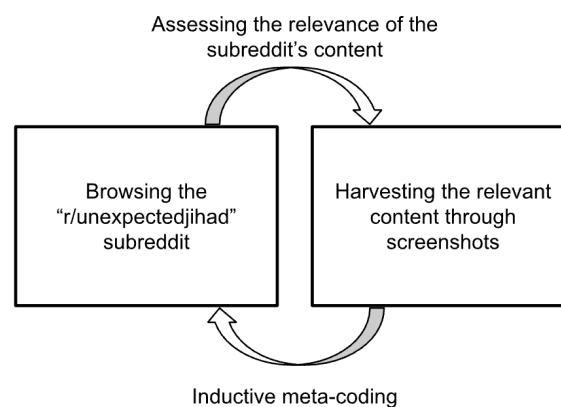

Figure 2

Furthermore, the "r/unexpectedjihad" amassed hundreds of messages. It was neither necessary nor feasible to document them all *individually*. Therefore, data items were harvested with non-probability sampling. Ones deemed relevant to study purposes were extracted based on the researcher's judgment.

The grand total of harvested items amounted to 70. Upon saving, each item was manually assigned one of the following meta-codes, developed *as-needed*, that is, upon encountering a piece of data that called for a specific category.

- ➢ *Fetishizing Terrorism*
- ➢ *Gaming References*
- ➢ *Infantilizing Terrorism*
- ➢ *ISIS References*
- ➢ *Jihad References*
- ➢ *Rulebook & Structures*
- ➢ *Traces of Terrorism*
- ➢ *Limitations*

Drawing on the typology established by Braun & Clarke (2006:79), three levels of harvested data have been identified:

➢ Data *corpus*: All data collected throughout the research process. Here, represented by 70 harvested items, including items depicting limitations[8] of the research, indicated by lowercase Roman numerals.

➢ Data *set*: Data from the corpus used for the analysis. In this case, it consists of 63 items indicated by Hindu-Arabic numerals, dispersed across two themes.

➢ Data *item*[9]: A screenshot containing either a single message, a strain of messages, visual media, or any publicly-available content deemed relevant and saved from the subreddit.

3.4. Thematic Analysis

No other coding processes followed the initial inductive meta-coding. Breaking down the data line by line would disrupt its overall meaning—the harvested items can only be understood if analyzed holistically. This mindset, albeit unorthodox, can be synthesized with the words of Conway (2012:447):

> *Concentrating exclusively on the individual messages (i.e. the content) of contemporary media forms, in other words, risks missing the way in which the form(s) and dimensions of individual mediums contribute to meaning.*

It is to say that data analysis goes beyond the meaning of individual words and messages and is considered in light of an overall impression stemming from other subreddit contents, such as its structure or rulebook.

With that approach in mind, thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and theoretical freedom. Its modus operandi involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) across entire data sets, accompanied by their rich description—a method advantageous while investigating an under-researched area, according to Braun & Clarke (2006:83).

3.5. Limitations

The chosen sampling method might raise suspicion of selection bias, as humans tend to "actively sample evidence to support prior beliefs" (Kaanders et al., 2021:1). It is, therefore, key to highlight that the samples were never meant to reflect the *statistical* significance of the identified meta-codes

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[8] Items attributed to a single meta-code *Limitations* are excluded from the data set and analysis, but included in the data corpus and used for context.
[9] Visual components are divided into two categories: *Figures* and *Items*. *Figures* were generated to aid in the understanding of certain aspects of this thesis, and are not part of the data corpus. *Items* belong to both the data corpus and set.

and themes. This thesis subscribes to the approach of Braun & Clarke (2006:82), who argue that "the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures—but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question." Items were harvested with this approach in mind, trying to grasp the character of the environment, not their statistical representation across the subreddit.

Furthermore, assuming a passive role and observing the subreddit as an unregistered user obstructed access to certain parts of the community. The lack of an account—elucidated in subsection 3.6. Ethical Concerns—triggered multiple messages to confirm legal age (*Item ii*).
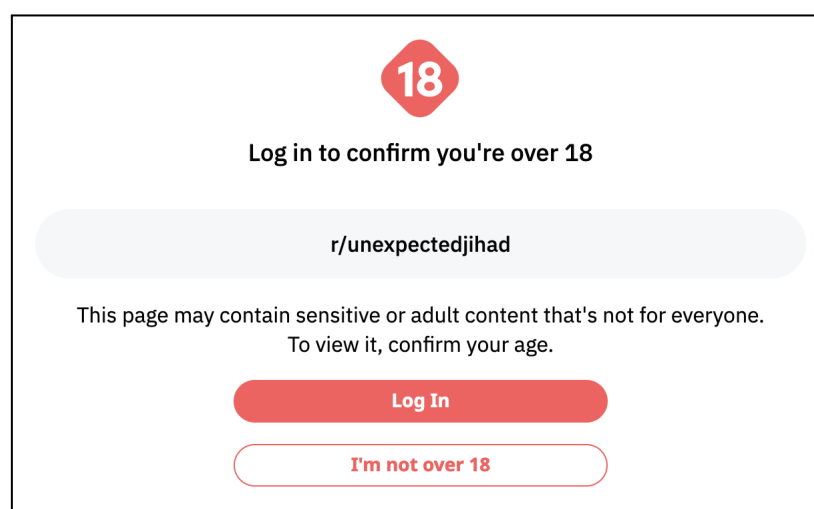
Item ii displays the notification.

Furthermore, some of the embedded videos had originally been posted on YouTube. Despite the subreddit being public, numerous of these clips were private—a clash which is possible due to YouTube's status as an external, fully independent entity. In such cases, a "This video is private" pop-up was displayed (see: *Item 9*, section 4.2. Propaganda), preventing the researcher from watching the content.

3.6. Ethical Concerns

The leading concern lies within the chosen research environment. The principles of researching online communities are not unified, and arguments can be allotted to one of two general schools of thought, as outlined by Fuchs (2018).

The positivist approach to online research asserts that social media is public data—"like data in a newspaper" (Fuchs, 2018:389). It argues that the internet is not a habitat supporting a reasonable expectation of privacy in public (Ibid:388). The British Psychological Society's Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research (2013:7, as cited in Ibid:390) supports this stance, arguing that where there is no such expectation of privacy, utilizing research data sans informed consent can be justifiable. The proponents of the positivist approach also note that acquiring informed consent while working

with a large dataset is virtually impossible due to the scope of the sample, time restrictions, and in some cases, the safety of the researcher (Fuchs, 2018:287).

The opposing line of reasoning argues that for every piece of online-gathered data, one must obtain informed consent (Ibid:388). It insists that posting on a public platform does not equal an intent to disseminate content to the public, but rather assumes it will reach a limited audience (Ibid).

Recognizing the logic of both schools of thought, this research abides by the positivist approach by choosing a subreddit open to the public—a transparent and intentional choice made by its creators and agreed to by its users.

Proferes et al. (2021:10) point out that while Reddit's User Agreement does not prohibit data collection, individual communities are also regulated internally, "often including rules to protect the privacy or safety of their members" (Fiesler et al., 2018, as cited in Ibid:10). The rules of "r/unexpectedjihad," however, were limited to the following:

1. *Don't be racist*
2. *No compilations, playlists or reuploads*
3. *Keep the posts unexpected*
4. *No porn or gore*
5. *Host videos using YouTube or Vimeo*

While inconvenient at times, the lack of an account guaranteed staying safely within the confines of this study, eliminating the off chance of interacting with content that had not been made publicly available.

The name, title and description of the subreddit were public and constituted vital evidence of users' sympathy towards violent jihadi extremism. Thus, in light of their overtness, anonymization was not undertaken.

On another (ethical) note, the aim of this study is by no means to give voice to those supporting ideologically motivated violence. Contrarily, it is to comprehend and counter such beliefs, which cannot be done without facing them to some extent. Despite its utmost precaution, the study does exemplify hate speech. As such, it risks reproducing it among audiences that would otherwise not encounter it. To mitigate its potentially damaging impact, the study self-censored information that could lead the audience to act on or directly access additional, outside sources of violence. It also protected quoted users by cropping items and removing information enabling identification.

Finally, investigating those who justify brutality with religion bears the risk of stereotyping. This study was careful to disjoint Islam from its extremist interpretation by employing adequate vocabulary outlined in subsection 1.2.3. Jihad.

4. Analysis

This chapter paints the picture of "r/unexpectedjihad" through two themes: *Playfulness* and *Propaganda*, which have been developed in an inductive, literature-inspired manner. Each harvested item was assigned one or multiple meta-codes and sorted into one or both themes. *Figure 3* illustrates this distribution process.

Playfulness		Propaganda	
	Fetishizing Terrorism		Fetishizing Terrorism
	Gaming References		Gaming References
	Infantilizing Terrorism		Infantilizing Terrorism
	ISIS References		ISIS References
	Jihad References		Jihad References
	Rulebook & Structures		Rulebook & Structures
	Traces of Terrorism		Traces of Terrorism

Figure 3. Green indicates that at least one item has been meta-coded and categorized under the given theme.

One could perhaps analogize this process to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. If meta-codes were puzzle pieces, and themes were the patterns depicted by them, the complete picture would yield an answer to the research question: "How and to what extent are Reddit users gamifying terror on the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit?" But, of course, one cannot solve this puzzle without a reference image—here represented by the theoretical framework.

4.1. Theme 1: Playfulness

Displays of emojis, memes and videos mocking terrorism, especially 9/11, were common occurrences across the subreddit. Visual content alluding to or outwardly reenacting terrorism in games and platforms was saved and meta-coded as *Gaming References*.

While this study has previously drawn a distinction between the *radicalization of games* and *gamification of radicalization*—noting that it is difficult to disjoin them fully—"r/unexpectedjihad" has embodied them both. Gaming footage exemplifying the radicalization of games was purposefully posted in a non-game context, thus falling into the traditional definition of gamification.

Playfulness is a fusion of concepts. Stemming from Fuchs's "ludic interfaces" (2012), it is illustrated by Li's approach to "gamified interactions" (2017), and extended by Fizek & Dippel's characterization of "liminal spaces" (2020).

However, it is important to stress that the gamification built into Reddit's interface does not directly support this theme. Rather, it is treated as the cornerstone, its starting point. In short, "ludic interfaces" enable and lead to "gamified interactions." In other words, "gamified interactions" encompass, but are not limited to, engaging with "ludic interfaces."

Exemplifying this dynamic is the voting system enabled by Reddit and utilized by its users. In "r/unexpectedjihad," the grand total of votes amounted to 22,661[10]. *Items 1 & 2* yielded particular popularity, garnering the highest number of upvotes witnessed by the researcher. Both utilized the FPS POV, which Lakhani & Wiedlitzka (2022) deem as the hallmark of gamified terrorism.

Item 1 depicts gameplay employing the FPS perspective (887 upvotes).

Item 2 amassed 1.4k upvotes. It also contained a reference to the 2020 videogame "Cyberpunk 2077."

The subreddit users would additionally engage in rating its content outside of the embedded upvote/downvote system.

Actual trash drop. No coherent tone. 2/10, not even worth the explosive ordinance used.

[10] The statistics quoted throughout the thesis were obtained via underlinesubredditstats.com on March 10, 2023.

Quote 1. A comment found under a video posted in "r/unexpectedjihad" (15 upvotes).

Furthermore, contributing to the playfulness of the experience are certain "creative wordplays" which Li also refers to as instances of gamified interactions (2017:24). In "r/unexpectedjihad," a fitting example would be its page title, "You're now on a list," which purportedly mimicked a terrorist watchlist notification. One could interpret it as a linguistic POV, pointing at its users in a mirror-like, first-person manner. As such, the title was a perverse roleplay, subtly—almost subliminally—gamifying the experience of participating in the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit.

Furthermore, the premise of the subreddit can—and should be—understood as a game due to its very nature. A game of a few cardinal rules outlined by the subreddit's "statute."

It primarily focused on providing organizational order and "moral" guidance: *No compilations, playlists or reuploads*; *Host videos using YouTube or Vimeo*; *Don't be racist*; *No porn or gore*. However, one rule undoubtedly stood out: *Keep the posts unexpected*. Its premise was elaborated on in a standalone post that gathered 651 upvotes and was broadcasted by the moderator:

[MOD POST] New rule! Keep the words "jihad", "allah" and other similar terms out of the title to keep the post unexpected.

The best part of these videos is that they are unexpected. When the title gives it away, it can ruin the fun especially while browsing the front page.

Quote 2. An excerpt from the post.

This rule epitomizes the essence of gamification: an incentive to engage. Disobeying would result in, as stated by the moderator, "ruining the fun." It thus paints the premise of "r/unexpectedjihad" as the pursuit of pleasure, an arena where game partakers compete in the quest for the utmost "unexpected jihad."

It gains an added layer of depth upon analyzing it in the context of "ritualized liminal spaces." Fizek & Dippel describe them as computer-mediated communities where "reality is turned upside down, and the lines between fact and fiction become blurred" (2020:80). Not only do such spaces nurture disarray but also turn terror into proverbial *bread and circuses*. They recount their contents as "gamified audio-visual spectacles" that perform "dramatization through weaponization and emotional music" and "visualization through head-mounted cameras" (Ibid).

Depicting such spectacles are data items meta-coded as *Infantilizing* or *Fetishizing Terrorism*. The two names were chosen with care and deliberation, and reflect subtle differences among the narratives captured.

The *infantilized* items cartoonishly juxtapose benign—or even family-friendly—videos with explosions or firearms. *Item 3*, for instance, references the 1965 musical romance film "The Sound of Music," starring Julie Andrews, whose character was edited to hold machine guns and dubbed with the sound of automatic weapon fire—"dramatizing [audio-visuals] through weaponizing."

Redacted upon the request of the examiner
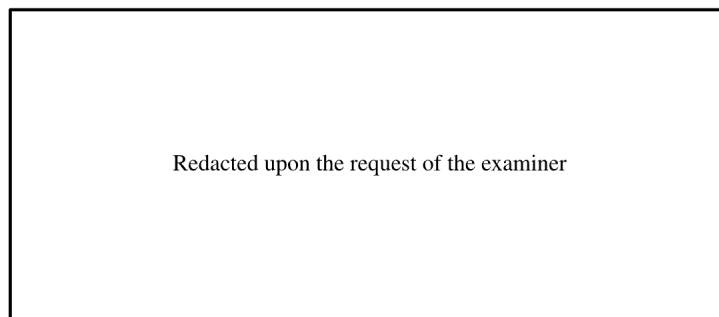
The redacted *Item 3* exhibited a video captioned "Julihad Andrews" (40 upvotes).

Similarly, *Item 4* depicts the gameplay of "Overwatch," rated by the Pan-European Game Information as suitable for ages 12 and up (PlayStation Store, 2023). It features an edited grenade and is dubbed with a *nasheed*, thus leaning into Fizek & Dippel's characterization of gamified spectacles.

Redacted upon the request of the examiner
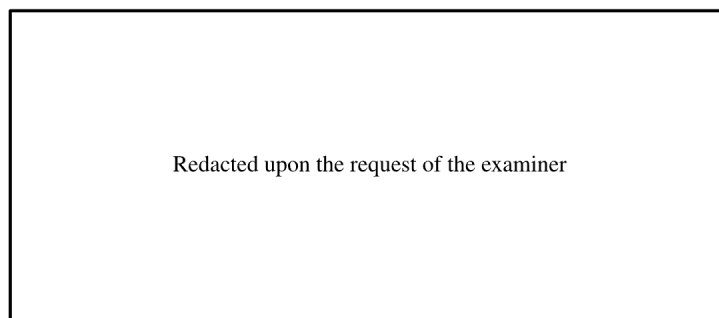
The redacted *Item 4* illustrated a video captioned "Overwatch: Soldier 76 is a hero of Islam" (7 upvotes).

Fetishizing Terrorism represents another mold of the same substance. While its *Infantilizing* counterpart amassed edited videos that paired benign, childsafe content with terror, *Fetishizing Terrorism* accumulates live-action footage and (or) references to real-life events.

Defined by Merriam-Webster as "an object of irrational reverence or obsessive devotion" (2023b), fetish holds a particularly close relevance to 9/11-themed data items, as depicted in *Items 5* and *6*. Videos, memes and gameplays featuring the Twin Towers were some of the most popular pieces of media shared throughout the subreddit. The retained interest and engagement with such content uncannily fits the parameters of an obsession. The fetishization of an object or situation whose real or

fantasized presence "is psychologically necessary for [...] gratification" (Ibid) supports the premise of "r/unexpectedjihad" as a space where one can seek pleasure through gamifying terror.

Redacted upon the request of the examiner
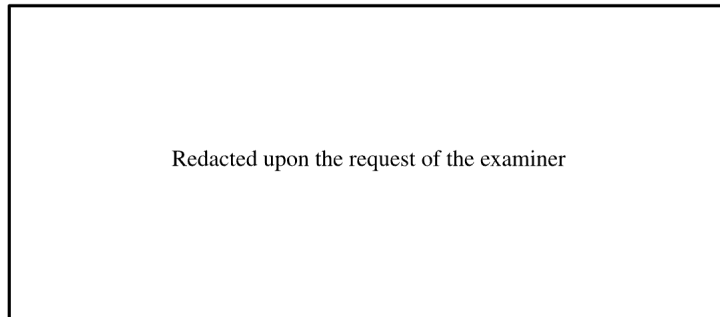
The redacted *Item 5* previewed a montage combining video footage from the September 11 attacks, dubbed with electronic music and a *nasheed* (146 upvotes).

Redacted upon the request of the examiner
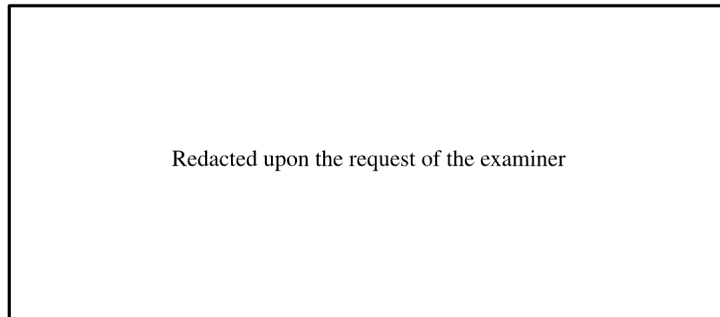
The redacted *Item 6* depicted first-person gameplay captioned "Legit minecraft[11] plane tutorial" (388 upvotes).
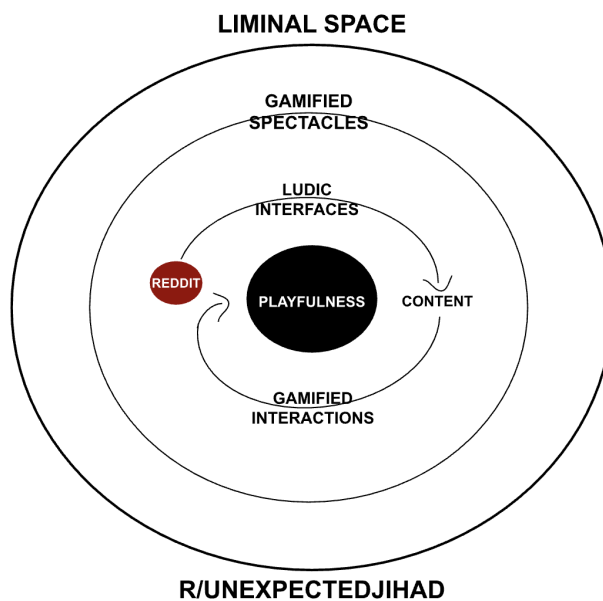

Figure 4 presents a diagram dissecting the layers of Theme 1: *Playfulness*.

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[11] "Minecraft" is a videogame developed by Mojang Studios, where players can build and break anything in open, three-dimensional worlds (Washington Post, n.d.).

4.2. Theme 2: Propaganda

Literature commonly points to chat servers and gaming-adjacent platforms as vehicles of the radicalization process that aid organizations in disseminating propaganda top-down. The bottom-up approach tends to be illustrated as independent, lone wolf attacks, with online audiences engaging in live commentary riddled with references to gaming culture (Schlegel, 2020a:64). The other side of bottom-up gamification occurs in a collaborative online setting, such as the one observed on the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit. No user seemed to disseminate content on behalf of any organized apparatus—instead, the messages and materials circulated from the ground up.

To reiterate, this study employs the definition of propaganda as multimedia proliferating a favorable—heroic, humoristic or romanticized—image of ideologically motivated violence. Much of the subreddit contents could be classified as shitposting, in line with the discoveries of Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan who describe anything and everything from extremist stickers to "memes [...] featuring kittens, and cute babies" (2017:1248).

Others ranged from verbal cues alluding to ISIS to "creation packs" aiding others in creating their own "unexpected" content.

> *Back in early 2014, before ISIS really became "known" to the mainstream media, I had been following the events in Syria and Iraq, and followed the rise of ISIS. After the release of high quality video footage of the war in Syria and Iraq that followed, I ripped sound samples from these videos, cleaned them up, and used them to modify the game Insurgency, to make the terrorists speak Arabic and shout "Allahu Akbar" whenever they threw a grenade/bomb, or when changing magazines. Depending on the intensity of the battle, they would shout louder or softer. I also added nasheed music to the game.*
>
> *Quote 3*

The above-quoted excerpt of 320 upvotes, originates from an announcement made by the moderator of "r/unexpectedjihad," broadcasting a message on behalf of another user.

The second theme builds upon the first. It unfolds yet another layer of the structural blueprint of "r/unexpectedjihad," where propaganda is packed in playfulness.

> *Anyway, I had started to create my own unexpected jihad type videos, and compiled a nice pack of cleaned up audio files of arabic and allahu akbar sounds stripped from ISIS propoganda videos, as well as a good selection of nasheed music, and some video segments that other users have ripped or created (such as the waving ISIS flag) and I have it all in a folder. I have compiled about 400mb of sound files, video files (exploding houses, cars, cities, 911 attacks etc), nasheed music, as well as content created by others like the waving ISIS flags.*
>
> *Quote 4*
> Excerpt from the same post, explicitly propagating bits and pieces of media
> enabling others to create, and consequently, share their own videos.

Virtually all content disseminated on "r/unexpectedjihad" fell within the parameters of propaganda—echoing "links, ISIS news, memes," as described by Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan,

(2017:1247). Its compartmentalization is presented by Lakomy (2017:42), who differentiates between the following four forms of propaganda:

- *audio (radio broadcasts, nasheed music)*
- *visual (memes, pictures, banners, symbols, infographics)*
- *audiovisual (execution recordings, battle footage, "documentaries", interviews, nasheed music videos, short advertisements and reportages, such as mujatweets)*
- *text (websites and social media statements and news, leaders' declarations, bulletins, online magazines)*

"r/unexpectedjihad" amassed examples of visual (e.g. *Item 7*), audiovisual (e.g. *Items 8 & 9*) and audio (e.g. *Quote 8*) propaganda, with text propaganda absent. Lack thereof is somewhat intriguing since one of the very few studies on the nexus of cyber jihad and Reddit explicitly refers to the platform as a host for IS *text* propaganda (Lakomy, 2018:6).

Item 7 (visual propaganda). The meme depicts an individual wearing an IS bandana and carrying missiles (276 upvotes). The top comment (21 upvotes) read: *"What do you mean you don't carry out beheadings against foreign infidels?"*

Item 8 (audiovisual propaganda). It previews a video dubbed with a nasheed, captioned "Jihadists are oviparous," and followed by an exploding egg that morphs into the IS flag (340 upvotes).
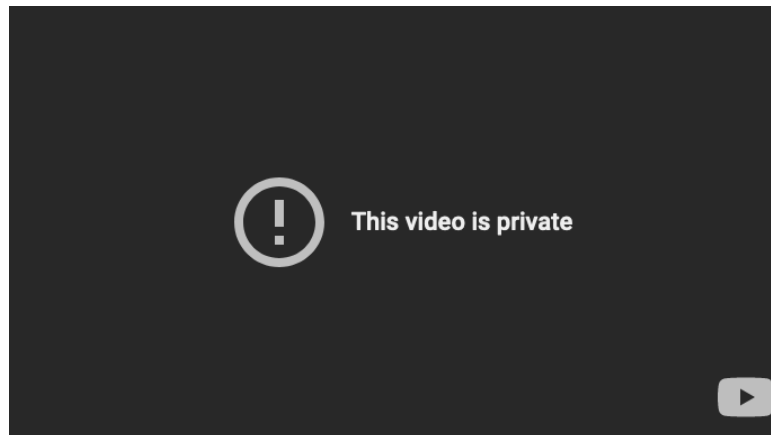
Item 9. The post was deemed audiovisual propaganda by virtue of its comments, debating its audio and visual qualities (*Quote 5* below). It was captioned "Jihad kid beats his mother with sword," but due to the privacy settings, it remains unknown whether the video was of serious or purportedly humoristic nature (170 upvotes).

[User 1] *"Ugh, another ISIS beheading I can't stomach. This is too violent for me."*

[User 2] *The music/editing in this one is way better though.*
In the other one the whole clip just plays like normal and the isis type music comes in after the video pauses at the end like those unexpected thug life videos. The other one is also completely lacking in any crucial "allah akbars".

Quote 5

"r/unexpectedjihad" was also home to a peculiar phenomenon that has not yet been described in academic literature. Thus, this thesis would like to introduce the concept of *autogenous propaganda*, accounting for posts disseminating components of propaganda—often in the form of "creation packs"—meant to aid other users in creating custom content.

Hello

I recently made a allahu akbar pack
[link]

The thing is it is a edited version of the pack that is already stickied. I just cleaned it up, [and] added more explosions [...]

By the way if anyone is wondering i made this pack because there was no pack like this on youtube and i wanted to give the pack more exposure

Quote 6. Another excerpt from the post made by the moderator on behalf of another user.

[User 1] *That title put you on every watch list possible*
[Moderator] *As if I wasn't already*
[User 2] *If you're on this sub, you're on every watchlist possible.*

Quote 7. A thread under the post titled "[META] Download links for 400MB of content for your own unexpected jihad!" Comments gathered 86, 39 and 13 upvotes, respectively.

Just stopping by to drop a big box of nasheeds

Quote 8. A hyperlinked post made by an individual whose username alluded to an explosive. It featured a tag referencing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the first caliph of the Islamic State who was killed after detonating a suicide vest (Fishman, 2021:67). It gathered 7 upvotes.

Autogenous propaganda, however, does not act as a substitute for categories structured by other studies. On the contrary, it is meant to extend their understanding by contextualizing their origin and intent. A symptom of bottom-up gamification, it can be understood as an umbrella term for pieces of propaganda meant to be assembled by the receivers and catered to audiences in the form of "mass-entertainment spectacle[s]" (Fizek & Dippel, 2020:79). The word "autogenous" refers to the self-initiative exhibited by the authors of the "creation packs," recognizable via their usage of first-person pronouns.

While some could point out that top-down propaganda might appear in the guise of a lone actor, this study argues that it holds no significance as long as it convincingly appears to be self-initiated.

Albeit not an *act* of gamification, autogenous propaganda is a means of *facilitating* it, ushering it into cyberspace. Incentivizing to engage, it spurs a grassroots movement whose participants seek thrills through gamifying terror.

5. Conclusion

This study was meant to dissect, discuss and, most importantly, answer the following question: *How and to what extent are Reddit users gamifying terror on the "r/unexpectedjihad" subreddit?*

5.1. Summary, Findings

Through a thematic analysis, a data set of 63 items was scrutinized. The findings, along with selected items, are dispersed among two interconnected themes.

Theme 1: Playfulness paints the picture of "r/unexpectedjihad" as a multidimensional playground. While its character originated in Reddit's ludic interface, it was affirmed and augmented by users who

willingly engaged with these mechanics in the quest for fun. Reddit's interface has created a pond where gamification ripples. In other words, ludic solutions built into the platform extend into a perpetual chain reaction: posting, interacting, repeating.

Content spread on "r/unexpectedjihad" ranged from memes to mashups to gameplays, often reinforced through gaming glossary. Videos were frequently altered to feature explosions and firearms and accompanied by corresponding sounds, e.g. the sound of automatic weapon fire combined with *nasheeds*. As such, they fully embodied the concept of "gamified audio-visual spectacles," dramatized by weaponization and emotional music: the hallmark of "ritualized liminal spaces" (Fizek & Dippel, 2020). The latter was reaffirmed by the obsessive manner in which the users alluded to jihadist and religiously inspired bombings, especially 9/11.

Through gamified interactions, e.g. voting and word playing, users aptly expressed their views towards the contents of "r/unexpectedjihad." Gamification also permeated the user-made structures of the subreddit, with its page title ("You're now on a list") perversely roleplaying a terrorist watchlist notification.

The analysis, however, went beyond individual components of the community and extended into the meta-level, stipulating that the entire subreddit, is, in fact, a game. This argument was backed by the statute stating that thou shalt *Keep the posts unexpected*. Its intent was loud and clear: to prevent the users from spoiling "fun." *Playfulness* was thus the premise and the binding agent of measures and means of gamification, which this study has auspiciously argued.

Theme 2: Propaganda encompassed evidence of the "r/unexpectedjihad" users engaging in bottom-up gamification. The server nurtured audio, visual and audiovisual propaganda *packed* in playfulness.

Theme 1 delved into the *hows* and the *whys* of the gamification of terrorism. *Theme 2* dissected the *whats*. While *Playfulness* dug into the endgame of "r/unexpectedjihad," *Propaganda* dichotomized the means of getting there. It supplied evidence of propaganda along with their upvote counts and descriptions of how the individual items fit into the mold of "gamified spectacles." Not only did the section perform a cross-comparison of propaganda with the literature, but more importantly, focused on conceptualizing *autogenous propaganda* from the ground up.

5.2. Original Contribution

This study is a novel contribution to the field of gamification of terrorism, where the nexus of violent jihadi extremism and Reddit, until now, has remained unclaimed by academia.

It concurs with the findings of other authors, namely Antinori (2017), Bloom, Tiflati & Horgan (2017), Schlegel (2020a, 2020b), Fizek & Dippel (2020), and Lakhani & Wiedlitzka (2022). Carrying on with the jigsaw puzzle analogy, one could say that each author painted a different part of this thesis' reference picture.

However, the puzzle pieces are now assembled. Together, they form a clear picture of the agents and methods used by violent jihadi supporters to gamify terror on Reddit's user-run forum "r/unexpectedjihad," thoroughly analyzed and summarized above.

Furthermore, this study would like to propose an original expression to describe a newly-encountered genre of propaganda. *Autogenous propaganda* captures the essence of bottom-up gamification of terror, spearheaded by the users of "r/unexpectedjihad." Reaping audio files, combat footage, and video clips expressing support for terrorist organizations, they created and disseminated "creation packs" meant to enable others in producing propaganda. As such, it was the individuals and not the organizations that operated on the backstage of its proliferation.

5.3. Future Research Recommendations

"r/unexpectedjihad" achieved its purpose: ultimately, it surprised. To answer the other half of the research question, the subreddit gamified terror to a large, albeit mild extent. As such, perhaps it could most suitably be likened to Schlegel's take on gamification, who, to reiterate, argues that "games and gamification *could*, for *some* individuals, increase the *susceptibility* to radicalization" (2020a:51). This categorization errs on the side of caution.

The level of threat it ushered into the world appears low. In other words, "r/unexpectedjihad" was like a benign tumor. While presumably not life-threatening, it required research and evaluation as well as systematic scrutiny to come to a thorough understanding of its nature. However, the field of gamified terror is filled with malignancies. Keeping them contained requires a steady stream of intelligence, expecting the "unexpected" and nipping them in the bud.

But the realm of Reddit ranges beyond public spaces. This study cautiously recommends expanding the scope of research into closed communities, possibly through covert digital ethnography. Long have terrorism studies suffered a shortage of primary sources. In lieu of defaultly discarding—if not demonizing—covertness on ethical grounds, this study proposes it goes hand in hand with law and ethics: calibrating, comprehending and countering.

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