

A Negligible Spark and the Digital Gaming

Scene one: At a shopping mall's bowling center, on a women-only day, I stood behind four teenage girls, waiting for my turn. I overheard them mentioning the names of terrorists to the female employee tasked with registering players on the scoreboard. For a moment, I assumed that the employee had asked them a general question that might give them an advantage in the game. I was even prepared to advise the employee that these sorts of questions might inadvertently draw their attention to ideological deviation phenomena, fueled by the natural curiosity of this critical age.

But I discovered that the most famous names of terrorists globally were a deliberate voluntary choice by the girls to replace their real names with pseudonyms they felt comfortable with. And it wasn't long before the screen displayed the names of the terrorists, and the game began with enthusiasm as the carefully selected names were exchanged.

What raises concern about the source of that admiration and those names, from girls who are the farthest from the context of fighting and wars— that is the ignorance regarding terrorism, in both its form and essence.

Scene two: The Iraqi Ministry of Interior announced the arrest of a 14-year-old teenager after he managed to persuade 30 individuals to end their lives. Director of the Human Trafficking Department at the Ministry stated that the teenager run 16 networks via the Roblox online game, through which he lured his victims. He further explained that the victims were 29 individuals from Arab and Western countries, in addition to one victim from Iraq. The official added that the suspect's proficiency in English language helped him manipulate and lure his victims.

After this news, we are left with layers of astonishment, regret, and sadness: how could a teenager accomplish all of this, unnoticed, through a digital game?

These are only two examples of many that happen on a daily base, all of which lead us to the world of digital gaming and how they can shape the way young people think — without denying some of their positive aspects, such as releasing negative energy and enhancing the ability to think, plan, and execute in the quickest and easiest ways possible.

After years of reflection on the reality of digital games and their impact on everyone—and on teenagers in particular—it is necessary to sound the alarm, to pay closer attention to this world, understand its content, and delve into its inner workings in order to be protected from its dangers and confront it using its own tools.

Among the many publications about the dangers of digital games, their connection to nurturing violence, and providing a safe environment for breeding and promoting terrorism, a study titled “The Exploitation of Electronic Games and Their Platforms by Terrorist Organizations,” published in Turkish language and complied by the researcher Faruk Bebers. The study was released, in February 2024, by the Ankara-based “Center for Research on Counterterrorism and Extremism”.

The study confirms that extremists not only use these games for recruitment, propaganda, and communication; but they also use them as a means to learn about weapons and explosives, plan terrorist attacks, and map out potential scenarios.

The study cites the case of far-right extremist Anders Breivik, who carried out the Utøya Island massacre and the Oslo attack in 2011, claiming the lives of 77 people. Breivik reportedly trained by simulating an attack he had seen in a gaming platform.

Similarly, the study points out that the perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks, which left 432 civilians dead or injured, used electronic gaming platforms to plan and coordinate the attacks. The study further warns that members of extremist organizations establish private “communication groups” linked to certain electronic games, through

which they engage with young people and children. While they claim that these groups focus on mastering the game, the underlying purpose is to recruit youth and encourage violence and the use of weapons.

In light of accounts of young people's attachment to the world of gaming, and the psychological, physical, and social impacts it has on them, the World Health Organization classified "Gaming Disorder" in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) in 2018. It defined the condition as "pattern of gaming behavior characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities"; let alone the games with violent content, which are designed to capture children's attention to the point of shifting from natural state into immersive experiences that blur the line between player and character until the child effectively becomes part of it.

As a result, they experience excitement and tension, and the more they become addicted to gaming, they drift into a world of isolation and detachment from reality, losing their sense of time and place, with diminished desire to eat or engage in beneficial activities. This, in turn, may make it easier to persuade them to move from digital heroism and virtual combat into the real world, after having become stripped of their human and spatial connection to their own reality.

In conclusion, after the digital gaming industry has contributed to the economies of countless individuals, companies, and even countries, it is no longer possible to ignore or slow down its rapid updates. Yet, accepting this reality does not necessarily mean accepting harmful content in all its flaws, nor does it mean rejecting entry into this complex world.

It may be wiser to understand this world—much like understanding an adversary's capabilities in order to assess how to defeat them. This cannot be achieved without full awareness of this adversary's tools and

technologies, followed by confronting them with similar content that promotes alternative values: peace and interactive communication, rather than armed confrontation and manufactured conflicts. Such peaceful content should be capable of elevating the value of humanity and striving to serve it, instead of self-denial and fueling the desire to destroy the other.

May God protect our youth from instruments of physical violence, loopholes of intellectual deviation, and streams of terrorism.