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Sommario

Pro-Wagner gaming subculture: how the PMC gamified recruitment and propaganda processes

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Abstract

With the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, several new players have emerged. Among these, PMC Wagner has assumed an ever-increasing role and has been described as a Russian proxy in warfare. Internet and social media have become essential, and the group uses video games to spread propaganda and recruit mercenaries. The gamification of propaganda tools, extremist online communities, and, ultimately, radicalization processes not only move forward but accelerate given the rising popularity of online gaming and the fact that extremists frequently take advantage of new technological advancements first. Also, the PMC Wagner has begun to exploit the use of video games for various purposes, from recruitment to fascination with violence. At the same time, using classic game-based marketing methods, they managed to reach not only the users of gaming platforms but also the citizens who, walking through the streets of the Russian capital, come across the illuminated billboards. More investigations are required into the precise workings and varied gamification strategies used by PMC Wagner and their supporters under various conditions.

Con lo scoppio del conflitto russo-ucraino, sono emersi diversi nuovi attori. Tra questi, la PMC Wagner ha assunto un ruolo sempre più importante ed è stata descritta come una "proxy" russa. Internet e i social media sono diventati essenziali e il gruppo utilizza i videogiochi per diffondere la propaganda e reclutare mercenari. La gamification degli strumenti di propaganda, delle comunità estremiste online e, in ultima analisi, dei processi di radicalizzazione non solo avanza, ma accelera, data la crescente popolarità dei giochi online e il fatto che gli estremisti spesso sfruttano per primi i nuovi progressi tecnologici. Inoltre, la PMC Wagner ha iniziato a sfruttare l'uso dei videogiochi per vari scopi, dal reclutamento alla fascinazione per la violenza. Allo stesso tempo, utilizzando i classici metodi di marketing basati sui giochi, sono riusciti a raggiungere non solo gli utenti delle piattaforme di gioco, ma anche i cittadini che, camminando per le strade della capitale russa, si imbattono nei cartelloni illuminati. Sono necessarie ulteriori indagini sul funzionamento preciso e sulle varie strategie di gamification utilizzate dalla PMC Wagner e dai suoi sostenitori in diverse condizioni.

Keywords

1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, several new players have emerged[1]. Currently, the fighting is spread over different fields, also observed by the presence of private militias. Among these, stands out PMC Wagner, a private military company based in Russia, founded in 2014. Before going to Lugansk in 2014, the PMC Wagner conducted operations in Crimea during special operations of the Russian military. Up to the present, PMC Wagner has continued these deployments, taking part in missions in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Burundi, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and, most recently, Mali and Burkina Faso[2].

They provide intelligence, instruction, logistical assistance, infrastructure security, and financial backing to proxy militias and paramilitary groups operating in strategic hotspots across the world. For this reason, PMC Wagner has frequently been described as a Russian proxy, particularly in Africa, in the context of proxy warfare. Their covert actions, real or imagined, have a big effect on how Moscow handles hostilities with allies as well as enemies[3]. Although this may oversimplify the nuanced relationship between the PMC Wagner and the state, it appears that Russia has, to a certain degree, outsourced its involvement in Africa to Yevgeni Prigozhin and the PMC Wagner. Wagner has official backing and autonomy as a result, but the group is

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[1] Marco Lombardi, 'Russia-Ucraina: Oltre La Guerra Ibrida, Verso Il Techno-Cognitive Warfare', *Sicurezza Terrorismo Società*, 2022.

[2] Kimberly Marten, 'Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (4 May 2019): 181–204; Emmet Foley and Christian Kaunert, 'Russian Private Military and Ukraine: Hybrid Surrogate Warfare and Russian State Policy by Other Means', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (30 July 2022): 172–92; Andreas Heinemann-Grüder and Stephen Aris, 'Russia's State-Sponsored Killers: The Wagner Group', application/pdf, 22 December 2022, 9 p.; Raphael Parens, 'THE WAGNER GROUP'S PLAYBOOK IN AFRICA: MALI' (Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2022); Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer, 'THE GREY ZONE Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa', February 2023.

[3] Candace Rondeaux, 'Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare' (New America, November 2019).

also under pressure to generate revenue and show how it can help Moscow politically[4].

PMC Wagner has been instrumental in reinforcing Russia's troops in Ukraine, but as its own deaths increase, it needs more mercenaries to fight. Although it had been spending months recruiting from Russia's jail system, it abruptly ceased doing it in February 2023. Because of this, online propaganda has grown in importance for the recruiting process. An increasing number of videos on social media make the war look like a video game and trivialize violence against Ukrainians. Given its nature, it is increasingly important to investigate how PMC Wagner moves in the digital world to spread its propaganda using gamification as one of the main communication strategies.

2. PMC Wagner propaganda ecosystem

Similarly to other terrorist organizations, PMC Wagner uses social media to communicate, spread propaganda and recruit new mercenaries. According to the communication channels utilized, the content generated, the language and style, frequency, and dispersion target, users and propaganda have been categorized[5] (figure 1):

– Top-down propaganda highlights, appeals to, and advances the Wagner group's narrative in favour of violence. It is composed of subjects who work directly under Yevgeni Prigozhin direction. An example is the production of movies by Aurum Production, owned by Yevgeni Prigozhin himself.

– Bottom-up propaganda gives recruits a look into the field of war and motivates them. It is characterized by actors who have some connection to the combat field, either directly or indirectly. Frequently, these subjects are the same soldiers who post images of their exploits.

– Users from across the world who follow PMC Wagner's activities make up the spontaneous ecosystem. They create their own content and memes. Telegram is where the spontaneous ecosystem largely spreads materials.

PMC Wagner actions are supported by subjects, not (yet) recruited, who are the object of bottom-up propaganda and a spontaneous ecology. These are the individuals who have a greater chance of being recruited.

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[4] Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, 'THE GREY ZONE Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa'.

[5] Giulia Porrino and Federico Borgonovo, 'PMC Wagner Propaganda Ecosystem', 13 February 2023, https://www.itstime.it/w/pmc-wagner-propaganda-ecosystem-by-giulia-porrino-federico-borgonovo/.

Figure 1 (elaboration of the authors): Wagner Digital Ecosystem framework
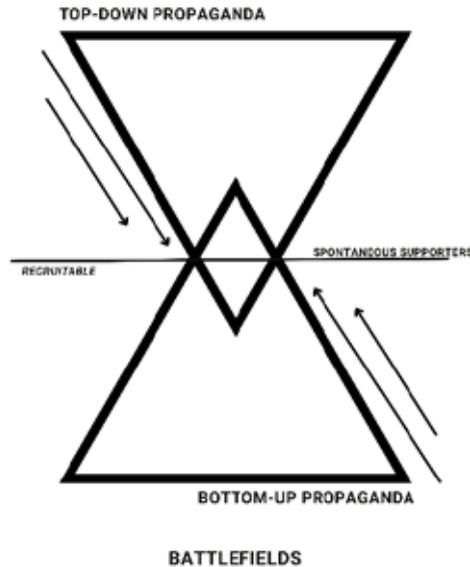
3. Gaming subculture

The term "gamification" was first used in 2010 in relation to research on the structure and usage of digital media[6]. It describes the use of game design elements, such as badges, leaderboards, or points, in circumstances other than games[7]. Extremist groups have been known to use video games as a tool for recruitment and spreading propaganda due to their widespread popularity and accessibility. There have been several cases that pertain to various groups, movements, and ideologies, including jihadists, far-right violent extremists, and ethnonationalist groups, when looking at studies on the overall overlap between violent extremism and video games. Gamification encourages users to take part in activities that will earn them points and advance

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[6] Sebastian Deterding et al., 'From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining Gamification', in *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments, MindTrek 2011*, vol. 11, 2011, 9–15.
[7] Michael Sailer et al., 'How Gamification Motivates: An Experimental Study of the Effects of Specific Game Design Elements on Psychological Need Satisfaction', *Computers in Human Behavior* 69 (2017): 371–80.{\\i{}Computers in Human Behavior} 69 (2017

them on leaderboards to change their desired behaviours[8]. In their efforts to recruit and radicalize new members, extremist organizations are increasingly drawing on themes from videogames, gaming culture, and real games. Some ways in which extremist groups may use video games for these purposes are:

– Recruitment: video games may be used by extremist organizations to find and enlist new members. Through online gaming groups, they may seek out people, especially those who are lonely, disenchanted, or want a feeling of community, and get them to adopt their philosophy. To enlist others in their group, they could start talks, cultivate ties, and gradually convey radical ideologies.

– Ideology promotion: video games can be made or modified by extreme groups to advance their ideologies and views. This could entail making original mods or alterations to already-existing games that feature extreme ideas, symbols, or storylines. To spread their ideologies and find like-minded people, these games may be distributed inside their online networks.

– Propaganda dissemination: video games may serve as a vehicle for the spread of extremist propaganda. This might entail making in-game material, such as unique levels or scenarios, that promote extreme ideologies or behaviors. It could also entail sending players to websites or social media pages that disseminate extremist material by way of links or other methods.

– Radicalization: by propagating violent and extreme views, extremist groups may utilize video games to radicalize people. They could spread hate speech, conspiracies, and extreme rhetoric through in-game conversations and forums, influencing impressionable players and leading them to hold extreme views and take extreme acts.

– Fundraising: extremist organizations could exploit video games as a method of generating money. They may utilize gaming events as a platform to raise money for their endeavors, ask gamers for donations, or offer in-game goods or custom game items.

Daesh was the first organization to employ gamification as a tool for facilitating communication. They create a pathway for the voluntarily engaging in an activity that is acknowledged as pleasurable by transposing ordinary actions on a fun level[9]. Video games have been a revolutionary means by which Daesh has spread its recruitment message, amplifying it exponentially[10].

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[8] Eliza Mackintosh and Gianluca Mezzofiore, 'How the Extreme-Right Gamified Terror', 10 October 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/10/europe/germany-synagogue-attack-extremism-gamified-grm-intl/index.html.

[9] Marco Lombardi, 'IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate's Communication Project', in *Twitter and Jihad: The Communication Strategy of ISIS*, ed. MONICA MAGGIONI and Paolo Magri, 2015, 83–124.

10 *Idem*.

An efficient and convenient technique to address the target audience, which in the case of PMC Wagner comprises persons of recruitable age, mostly men between the ages of twenty and fifty, interested in videogames with a military theme. The visuals and verbiage of the games encourage audience participation. In the context of violent video games, play fosters a familial setting where individuals feel secure and comfortable, fostering the development of networks, groups, and connections.

Based on our observation inside the online pro-Wagner community these are the most quoted and played video games:
– Arma III;
– Player Unknown's BattleGround (PUBG);
– World of Tanks;
– War Thunder;

A large gaming community with nicknames that specifically reference PMC Wagner and the channels connected to it has evolved, *for example*, within Arma III (figure 2).

Figure 2: Arma III community and nicknames associated with PMC Wagner.
RSOTM refers to the PMC Wagner Telegram channel "Reverse Side of The Medal"
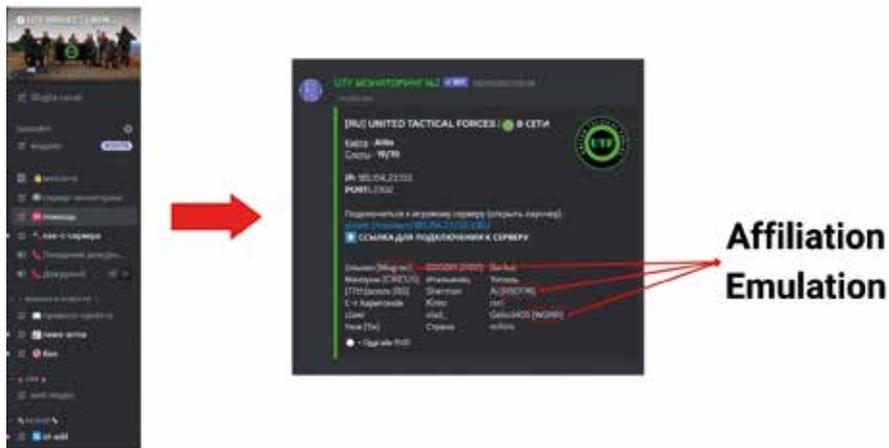
These video games could be used to find new recruits and assess their military front. Recruits could be trained to learn key military strategies, how to handle weapons, and other skills important to PMC Wagner operations. In addition, PMC Wagner can spread propaganda using video games, portraying mercenaries as valiant and patriotic warriors defending Russian interests or fighting enemies. To do so, with in-game information, such as made-up news stories, conversations, or plot points, they can influence players' opinions and beliefs,

promoting a pro-Russian narrative. To spread false information, PMC Wagner could also make fake video games or alter existing ones.

Finally, PMC Wagner could potentially employ psychological warfare using video games. They can design video games that showcase their military might, power, and invincibility in a way that inspires terror in its players or demoralizes their opponents (figure 3). This could be used to demoralize rivals and frighten them.

Figure 3: PMC Wagner channel post on Telegram
(Trad. "When I tried to storm the orchestra")

In this scenario, in addition to the use of video games to encourage online recruitment, PMC Wagner has been using gamification marketing techniques since March 2023. In Moscow, bright billboards have been put up, and PMC Wagner via its bottom-up Telegram profiles is inviting everyone to join the game starting April 1 (figure 3). To accomplish this, individuals need to take a photo with one of the PMC Wagner billboards that have been placed throughout Moscow's streets, post it to social media, and then present the resulting image in the company's recruitment center to receive branded goods as a gift. On the April 7, PMC Wagner provided a reward to the person whose shot of the billboard has the most likes. A brief film of PMC Wagner and recruitment contacts is shown on the billboards. It is a clear tactic using the game to promote PMC Wagner recruitment propaganda online and lure viewers with the promise of prizes.

Figure 4: PMC Wagner billboard for prize game in Moscow (April 2, 2023)

4. Conclusion

Extremist actors appear to be aware of the advantages of gamification and want to take use of them strategically. Video games and related platforms are used daily by extremists and terrorist organizations to spread violent content. Their compelling storylines, ritualistic repetitious mechanics, and community-building possibilities all work together to create a digital ecology that provides a place for extremism to prosper. The gamification of propaganda tools, extremist online communities, and, ultimately, radicalization processes not only move forward but accelerate given the rising popularity of online gaming and the fact that extremists frequently take advantage of new technological advancements first.

Also, the PMC Wagner has begun to exploit the use of video games for various purposes, from recruitment to fascination with violence. At the same time, using classic game-based marketing methods, they managed to reach

not only the users of gaming platforms but also the citizens who, walking through the streets of the Russian capital, come across the illuminated billboards.

More investigations are required for the understanding of gamification strategies used by PMC Wagner and their supporters under various conditions. Furthermore, it will be necessary to focus on the challenges of limiting gamification's effects on digitally mediated radicalization processes.

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