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THEME:

Digital Gaming Ecosystems and Emerging Governance Challenges in Eastern Africa

Eastern Africa's rapidly growing digital gaming ecosystem is creating major opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, youth engagement, and creative industry growth. However, the expansion of online gaming, esports, and digital gambling is also exposing the region to emerging risks, including extremist exploitation, cyber fraud, money laundering, and foreign digital influence. Weak regulatory frameworks, low digital literacy, and fragmented cyber governance continue to increase vulnerabilities among young populations. To address these challenges, governments should strengthen cybersecurity laws, data governance frameworks, regional intelligence-sharing, and digital literacy programs. Equally, they should support local game development and African-centered storytelling. This will enhance economic growth, cultural influence, and regional digital resilience.

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Africa's Digital Gaming Boom and Emerging Extremist Risks in Eastern Africa

Africa's rapidly expanding digital gaming ecosystem is reshaping online engagement, social interaction, and youth culture across the continent. Driven by increased smartphone penetration, affordable internet connectivity, expanding mobile money systems, and a rapidly growing youth population, online gaming has become one of the fastest-growing digital sectors in Africa. In Eastern Africa, countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Somalia are witnessing a sharp rise in multiplayer gaming platforms, gaming cafés, mobile gaming communities, and e-sports tournaments. While this growth presents major economic and technological opportunities, it is also creating new vulnerabilities that extremist organizations may exploit for propaganda dissemination, recruitment, and online radicalization.

Evidence from the report "The Level Up: Gaming and Violent Extremism in Africa" highlights how gaming platforms are increasingly functioning as informal digital social spaces where users communicate, form communities, and share content in real time. Unlike traditional social media platforms, gaming environments often have weaker moderation systems, encrypted communication channels, and limited

oversight, particularly in African contexts where regional-language monitoring remains inadequate. These features create opportunities for extremist actors to exploit gaming communities to identify vulnerable youth, normalize extremist narratives, and gradually groom individuals through seemingly harmless interactions.

Eastern Africa remains particularly vulnerable due to a combination of socio-economic and security challenges. Persistent youth unemployment, economic inequalities, political marginalization, and localized conflicts continue to create frustration and social alienation among young populations. Extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab have historically demonstrated adaptability in exploiting emerging digital technologies for recruitment, financing, and propaganda dissemination. As online gaming communities continue to expand across the region, such groups may increasingly view gaming platforms as low-risk environments for covert engagement with youth audiences.

The rise of gaming cafés and community gaming spaces in urban and peri-urban areas further expands these vulnerabilities.



Photo Credit: The Tanzania Times

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Many young people spend significant time in digital gaming environments that are largely unregulated and poorly monitored. In fragile settings, online interactions within gaming platforms can evolve into pathways for exposure to extremist content, identity manipulation, or transnational extremist networks. The absence of strong cyber governance frameworks and limited digital literacy among youth further compounds the challenge.

To mitigate these emerging risks, Eastern African governments should strengthen cyber governance frameworks and invest in multilingual monitoring systems capable of identifying extremist narratives in local languages and coded digital communication. Regional governments should also expand digital literacy programs that educate youth on online manipulation, misinformation, and radicalization tactics. Equally important is enhancing regional intelligence-sharing

and counter-radicalization cooperation among Eastern African states to address the cross-border nature of online extremism. Collaboration between governments, gaming companies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions will be critical in ensuring that Africa's growing gaming ecosystem remains a driver of innovation, creativity, and economic opportunity rather than a gateway for extremist exploitation.



Photo Credit: The Tanzania Times

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Regulating Digital Gaming Economies and Financial Crime Risks in Eastern Africa.

Eastern African governments face critical gaps in regulating online gaming platforms, which are increasingly being exploited as pathways for illicit youth exploitation, financial flows, and money laundering. Against this backdrop, Eastern African governments should strengthen cyber governance, digital literacy, and cross-border intelligence by standardizing cybersecurity laws. This will help prevent cybercriminals from operating in regulatory safe havens.

Due to the rapid expansion of internet adoption, digital gambling, and mobile money integration, digital gaming economies have grown immensely. While this digital transformation has driven unprecedented financial inclusion and growth, it has also opened new avenues for organized criminal groups to engage in cyber fraud. Betting platforms often use aggressive

marketing campaigns and quick financial promises to lure vulnerable youths into online gaming fraud. Furthermore, the gaming ecosystem relies heavily on peer-to-peer mobile transactions, which create opportunities for malicious actors to obscure the origins of illicit funds, bypass compliance checks, and evade law enforcement.

Across Eastern Africa, legal and policy frameworks continue to lag behind technological advancement. This creates loopholes that allow digital gambling platforms to operate under weak oversight and limited cybercrime enforcement. This fragmented environment is exposing vulnerable demographics, especially young and financially inexperienced individuals, to cybersecurity threats, including identity theft, phishing, and involvement in financial scams.

In the absence of stronger safeguards, including effective age-verification systems and transparent transaction monitoring, online gaming platforms can be exploited as channels for transferring funds linked to cyber-enabled and transnational financial crime.

Addressing this challenge requires unified regional action across Eastern Africa, with priority placed on strengthening cross-border cyber governance and harmonizing digital policies within the East African Community (EAC). By establishing consistent standards for online gaming and digital gambling, governments can reduce opportunities for criminal networks to exploit regulatory inconsistencies between countries. Governments should also enforce stricter compliance requirements for gaming platforms and mobile money service providers, including real-time transaction monitoring, stronger Know-Your-Customer (KYC) procedures, and comprehensive anti-money laundering (AML) frameworks.

Governments across Eastern Africa should strengthen intelligence-sharing frameworks among financial intelligence units, telecommu-

nications providers, and national security agencies. Establishing secure cross-border channels for tracking suspicious gaming transactions and cyber activities will enable authorities to disrupt criminal networks before they become entrenched in digital ecosystems. Unified regulatory oversight is no longer optional. Eastern Africa must transform its rapidly growing mobile finance and digital gaming sectors into secure engines of regional growth.



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock



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Rebalancing Soft Power in Online Gaming: Advancing African Digital Narrative Sovereignty

Online gaming has emerged as one of the most influential instruments of modern soft power, shaping how millions of young people interact, communicate, and perceive the world. Beyond entertainment, gaming platforms increasingly function as cultural ecosystems where ideas, identities, political narratives, and social values are subtly transmitted through storylines, characters, aesthetics, and online interactions. Globally dominant gaming companies, largely based in Western countries and parts of Asia, possess significant influence in defining digital cultural norms and youth imaginaries. As online gaming expands rapidly across Eastern Africa, this growing dependence on externally produced digital content raises important concerns about narrative sovereignty, cultural representation, and Africa's role within the evolving global digital order.

Across Eastern African countries increasing smartphone penetration, improved internet connectivity, affordable gaming devices, and a youthful population are accelerating participation in online gaming and esports communities. Multiplayer games, streaming platforms, and competitive esports tournaments are becoming important social spaces where young Africans consume global cultural content daily. However, much of this content often reflects foreign political contexts, historical experiences, languages, and cultural values, while African identities and narratives remain underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed within global gaming ecosystems.

This imbalance contributes to a form of narrative dependency in which African youth

primarily engage with externally constructed representations of culture, governance, conflict, heroism, and social identity. Over time, such dynamics can weaken local cultural visibility and limit Africa's influence in shaping global digital discourse. The absence of African-centered storytelling in mainstream gaming also represents a missed economic and strategic opportunity for the continent's growing creative industries. While Africa possesses rich oral traditions, diverse histories, indigenous knowledge systems, and vibrant cultural expressions, these assets remain insufficiently integrated into the global interactive media space.

To address these challenges, Eastern African governments and regional institutions should invest strategically in local game development ecosystems as part of broader digital economy and cultural diplomacy agendas. Supporting technology incubators, digital innovation hubs, and university-based creative labs can help nurture a new generation of African game developers, animators, designers, and digital storytellers. Public investment in gaming infrastructure and digital creative industries would not only strengthen local innovation but also create employment opportunities for Africa's rapidly expanding youth population.

Equally important is promoting indigenous storytelling through Kiswahili and other African languages within gaming platforms and interactive media. Integrating African folklore and historical experiences into digital games can strengthen cultural preservation while enhancing Africa's global cultural visibility.

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Governments should also support public-private partnerships in esports, gaming startups, and digital content production to position Africa as an active contributor rather than merely a consumer within the global gaming economy.

In conclusion, advancing African digital narrative sovereignty requires moving beyond passive consumption toward

active participation in shaping global digital culture. By investing in locally driven gaming ecosystems and culturally grounded digital storytelling, Eastern Africa can leverage online gaming not only as an economic opportunity but also as a strategic platform for cultural influence, youth empowerment, and soft power projection in the twenty-first century.

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Leveraging Data Governance to Harness Gaming Entrepreneurship in Eastern Africa

Eastern Africa's digital gaming sector is increasingly emerging as a powerful driver of entrepreneurship, innovation, and youth-led economic transformation. Beyond entertainment, gaming ecosystems are generating new opportunities in software development, esports management, digital marketing, livestreaming, animation, graphic design, and content creation. Young

entrepreneurs are increasingly establishing gaming startups, organizing esports competitions, and monetizing gaming-related digital services through online platforms and mobile payment systems. This rapid expansion positions gaming as an important pillar within the broader digital economy and Africa's growing creative industries.

However, as gaming ecosystems become more digitally interconnected and commercially valuable, concerns surrounding data governance, cyber vulnerability, and digital rights are becoming increasingly significant. Gaming platforms collect extensive volumes of personal and behavioural data, including location information, financial transactions, biometric identifiers, communication patterns, and consumer preferences. In poorly regulated environments, such data can be exploited by cybercriminals, third-party advertisers, predatory actors, or foreign technology companies operating with limited accountability. Weak oversight mechanisms also increase the risk of unauthorized data extraction, surveillance abuses, and exploitative digital profiling targeting vulnerable youth populations.

The rapid commercialization of online gaming has further intensified concerns regarding platform transparency and consumer protection. Many gaming applications utilize opaque data collection practices, algorithmic profiling systems, and manipulative monetization techniques that users often fail to fully understand. Young gamers, particularly minors, remain highly exposed to invasive advertising systems, digital scams, and exploitative in-game financial models that encourage excessive spending and risky online behaviour. In the absence of stronger safeguards, data exploitation may undermine trust in the region's growing digital economy and weaken the long-term sustainability of gaming entrepreneurship.

To harness the economic potential of gaming while minimizing digital vulnerabilities, Eastern African governments should prioritize the development of robust and

harmonized data governance frameworks. Establishing enforceable standards on data collection, storage, consent, and cross-border data transfers will be critical in protecting users and strengthening investor confidence within digital markets. Governments should require gaming companies operating within the region to adopt transparent privacy policies, age-appropriate protections, and stronger cybersecurity compliance standards.

Regional cooperation will also be essential in addressing the transnational nature of cyber threats within gaming ecosystems. East African states should strengthen collaboration among cybersecurity agencies, telecommunications regulators, and data protection authorities to improve intelligence-sharing and coordinated responses to emerging digital threats. Developing regional cyber incident response frameworks would help governments react more effectively to data breaches, platform manipulation, and online fraud targeting gaming communities.

Equally important is investing in digital skills and cyber awareness among young entrepreneurs and gamers. Universities, innovation hubs, and technical institutions should integrate cybersecurity training, ethical digital entrepreneurship, and data protection literacy into technology and creative economy programs. Strengthening digital resilience at the grassroots level will empower African youth not only to participate safely in gaming ecosystems but also to become competitive creators, innovators, and owners within the evolving global digital economy.



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