Signs of Radicalisation: Gamer Zak and Zak at University (online simulation resources) by The Centre for Child Protection, University of Kent, 2018, 2014, £199 including the training and teaching pack. Available: https://www.kent.ac.uk/sspssr/ccp/simulationsindex.html

Reviewing a classroom resource is very different from reviewing a book, and much more fun. Gamer Zak and Zak at University are two of the University of Kent's interactive resources to alert school students to the dangers of grooming and radicalisation. They are the result of a partnership between Kent Police, the University of Kent and Kent County Council. Simulations of social media used by young people are deployed to show the protagonist, Zak, over a period of time being drawn into extremist groups. In Gamer Zak, we see his vlogs on the ‘WeTube’ channel; Zak at University uses a Facebook-type format.

Young Zak is a year 7 student, compromising his safety by oversharing private information on a public vlog, and starting to be groomed for race hatred and possible radicalisation via his online gaming contacts. University student Zak is in his first year, studying chemistry. He becomes lonely and starts to go to meetings of an ‘Action Anarchy’ group, who play on his concerns about his uncle suffering from Gulf War syndrome and persuade him to steal chemicals for an explosive device.

While Zak can be used one to one, its main use would be in the classroom with small groups round a computer. Students are asked to respond to vlogs and posts by deciding collaboratively – using green, amber and red traffic lights – what are the warning signs. Who is targeting Zak and why? Students can compare their responses with those of the makers of the simulation.

Overall, there is much to commend Zak. First, the format of simulating social media is highly relevant, and instantly recognisable, to the way in which young people interact, influence each other and are in turn subject to a vast range of influencers. The resource goes directly to the issue of internet safety as well as the particular topic of radicalisation. It is good that the extremist groups in the resource are not directly linked to real-life movements such as ISIS, which might have led to enormous issues of stereotyping and drawn attention away from the grooming process. The process of shifting thinking is not overdone – there are lots of ‘normal’ posts and photos, and Zak at university is still talking to his mum. I think that young people would identify with the characters. However, questions of realism always emerge in simulations – here, would Zak's friend Billy really have suggested contacting his gaming mates to see if any lived nearby when he was lonely? But the usefulness at this point is drawing attention to what friends and family could do at certain points, and raises questions about looking out for each other. The teaching pack gives examples of students radicalised at university – the aim is for school students to think about that before they even go.

Second, it is flexible and non-linear in that students are free to roam around the timelines, investigating the content at will, which addresses the inevitable problem in simulations that some students go too fast just to get to the end to see what happens without engaging in reflection. Here, they can be...
encouraged to return to various points to identify the triggers for behaviour. 

Zak at University has two endings, which encourage the important discussion about ‘What if?’

Third, it is directly relevant to the Prevent duty for safeguarding (see www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance). It can be used in citizenship education or PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) though, like all material and initiatives around extremism, it is important to embed this in the wider curriculum and initiatives on critical thinking. There are links to other sorts of normalisation of violence, such as when racist speech is just seen as ‘banter’. The resource is based on research on the complex vulnerabilities to radicalisation and draws on a number of factors – identity/belonging, excitement/adventure and political/moral motivation.

Fourth, the training pack is excellent – a comprehensive resource around violent extremism and radicalisation in general. It includes ideas for discussion for different age groups, and how to draw attention to ‘red flags’ and ‘amber flags’ that might have been missed. There is a comprehensive reference list, and case studies of six real-life extremists and their backgrounds, with ‘learning points’. These learning points are in fact about the only thing that I would take issue with. The first is that ‘there is no one route into Islamic terrorism’ – which clearly should read ‘Islamist’ terrorism. The spirit of the statement is correct, although the case studies include Anders Breivik, not an Islamist terrorist. The second learning point that ‘the main motive is anger over foreign policy’ can be more complex or actually less complex than that for many terrorists, or those going to Syria to fight. Michael Adebolajo did claim that his actions were about British soldiers killing Muslims – this is indirectly about policy, but more about brainwashing around interpretations of the Koran and duty to kill. The learning points seem to be more about mental health issues and drug taking. However, overall I would say that Zak is an excellent and innovative contribution to the field of building resilience to extremism.

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