GDC | March 21-25, 2022 San Francisco, CA

Take this. | 1955 | GAMERSAFER | ADL

Landscape of Extremist Behavior in Games

Rachel Kowert, PhD
Research Director, Take This

Alex Newhouse
CTEC Deputy Director, Middlebury Institute of Intl. Studies at Monterey

#GDC22

CONTENT WARNING

The following presentation contains discussions and images related to: hate speech, terrorism, fascism, alt-right extremism, Nazi symbolism, and anti-Semitism

Overview

- Presence of extremism in games and adjacent spaces
- Vulnerability of gaming spaces for extremism
- Nature of extremism in games
- Potential solutions
- Concluding thoughts & future possibilities

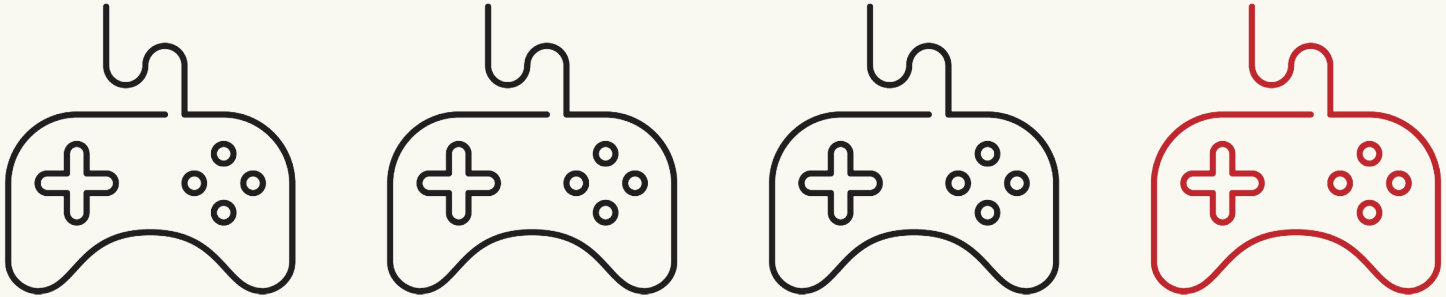
Extremism in Online Spaces

> The internet has a history of being a gateway to communities devoted to extremist movements and spaces (Gaudette et al., 2020)

"Discord primarily acts as a **hub** for extreme right-wing **socialising** and **community building**."

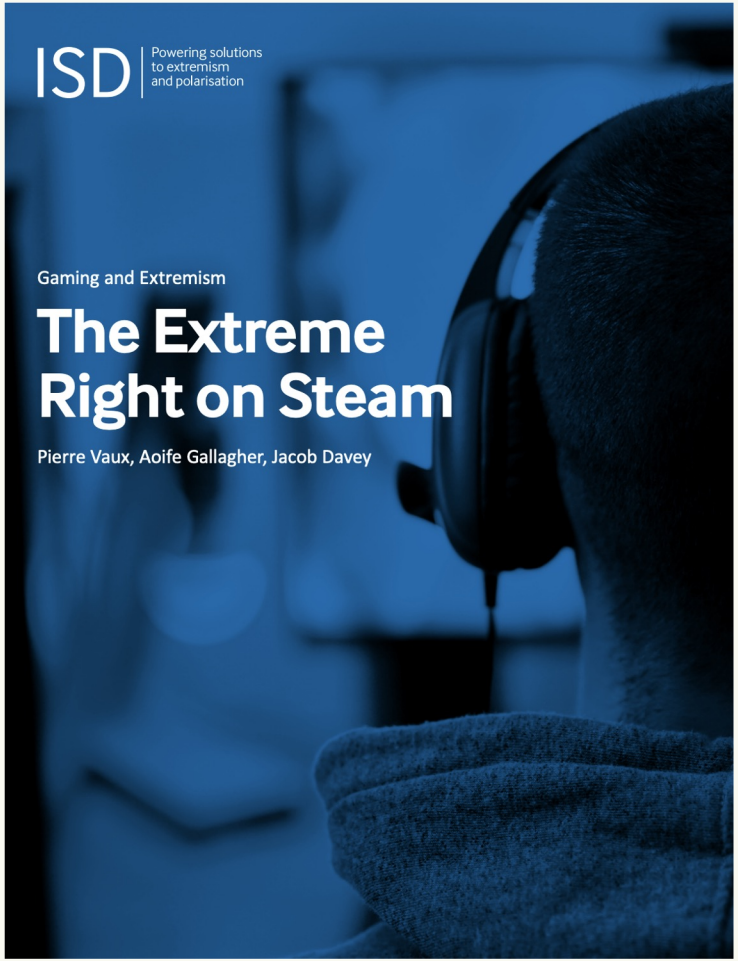
"The co-occurence of *Roblox*, *Minecraft*, and *giveaways* with toxic tags [e.g. Nazi, racist, etc], revealed a worrying connection between tags likely to appeal to young users and hateful discourse."

"...content which expresses support for extreme right wing ideologies can be discovered on Twitch with **relative ease**."



1 in 4 players are exposed to white supremacist ideology in game.

ADL 2019



"Steam seems to have an entrenched and long-lasting extreme right community."

Games created to spread extremist ideology

Games created to spread extremist ideology

WIRED

SUBSCRIBE

ILLUSTRATION: TOMA VAGNER

CECILIA D'ANASTASIO BACKCHANNEL JUN 10, 2021 6:00 AM

How *Roblox* Became a Playground for Virtual Fascists

Thousands of players flocked to a digital world filled with draconian rules, slavery, and anti-Semitism—and tested how far "just a game" can go.

Revealed: The 'Nazi gas chambers' in a metaverse game played by children as young as seven around the world

The Mail on Sunday can reveal that it also offered a vile 'experience' called Camp Concentration – including a room in which players could click 'execute' to release deadly gas from showerheads

BBC Home News Sport More

NEWS Menu

Tech

Extremists using video-game chats to spread hate

By Carl Miller and Shiroma Silva
BBC Click

23 September 2021

A user-built Nazi concentration camp in Minecraft

"These are small and not played by a huge amount of people but what they do is allow extremists to create role-playing experiences... to **live out radicalised fantasies online**."

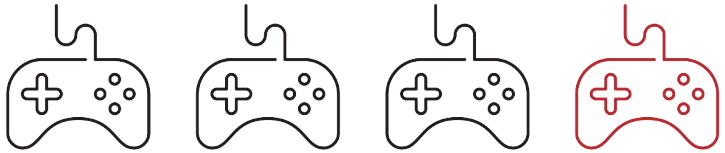
- Jacob Davey

“Discord primarily acts as a **hub** for extreme right-wing **socialising** and **community building**.”

“Steam seems to have an entrenched and long-lasting extreme right community.”

“...content which expresses support for extreme right wing ideologies can be discovered on Twitch with **relative ease**.”

Games created to spread extremist ideology



1 in 4 players are exposed to white supremacist ideology in game.

POTENTIAL VULNERABILITIES OF GAMING SPACES

Potential vulnerabilities of gaming spaces

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Close and long-lasting, friendship bonds

Potential vulnerabilities of gaming spaces

"Online friendships enhance feelings of **belonging**, driven by **trust** and that players feel **a deeper sense of belonging** and feel **more accepted** by the gaming community than they are offline."

“Here is one version of how far-right recruitment is supposed to work: Bobby queues up for a Fortnite match and gets paired with a big, bad skinhead Ryland. Ryland has between two and 20 minutes to make his pitch to Bobby over voice or text chat before enemy player Sally shotguns them both in the face. If Ryland’s vibe is intriguing, maybe Bobby accepts his Fortnite friend request; they catch some more games and continue their friendship on Discord. Over time, weeks or months, Ryland normalizes extremist ideology for Bobby and eventually the kid becomes radicalized.”

Potential vulnerabilities of gaming spaces

1. **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT** → Close and long-lasting friendship bonds
2. **OTHERING** → “Us versus them” mentality

Select difficulty.
Classic
Easy
Normal
Hard

what an idiot girls aren't video games
I've been saying this forever

PC DVD-ROM
18+

Potential vulnerabilities of gaming spaces

1. **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT** → Close and long-lasting friendship bonds
2. **OTHERING** → “Us versus them” mentality
3. **CULTURE AND IDENTITY** → Toxic gamer cultures

Gamer Cultures & Identities

Gamer Cultures & Identities

A gamer is a concept that comprise longtime aspects of **self-construction and self-perception, as well as individual societal and cultural positioning.”**

(Grooten & Kowert, 2015; p. 72-73)

Outlook • Perspective

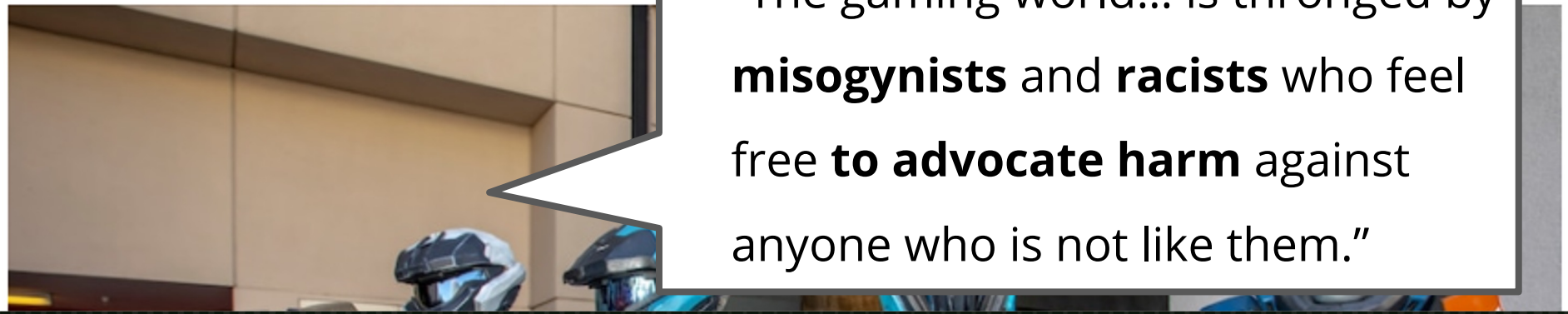
Video games don't cause mass shootings. But gamer culture encourages hate.

For some players, advocating violence became a free-speech virtue

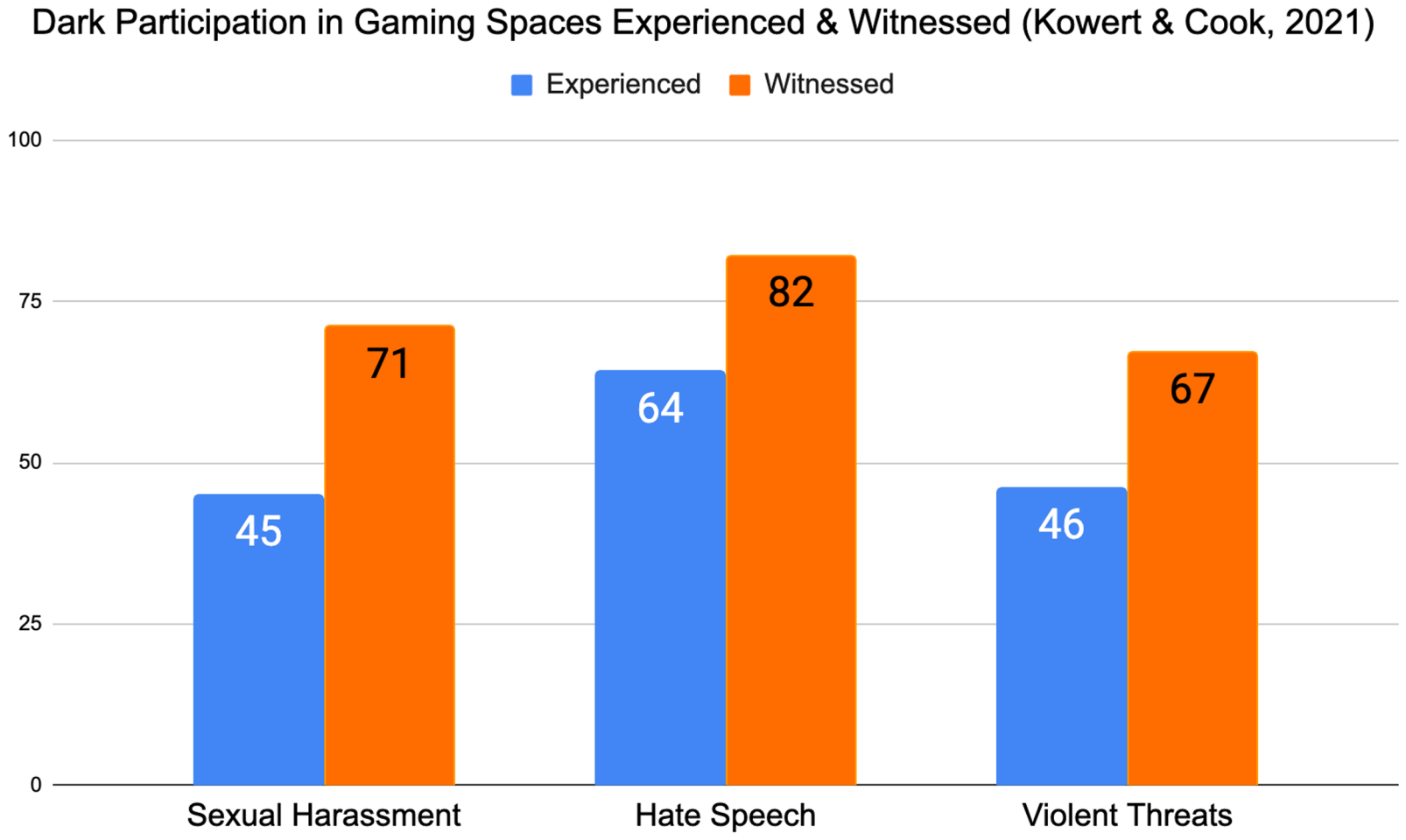
By Brianna Wu

Brianna Wu is a software engineer and a Democratic candidate for U.S. Congress in Massachusetts District 8.

August 9, 2019



"The gaming world… is thronged by **misogynists** and **racists** who feel free **to advocate harm** against anyone who is not like them."


Dark Participation in Gaming Spaces Experienced & Witnessed (Kowert & Cook, 2021)
Experienced
Witnessed
100
75
50
25
0
45
71
64
82
46
67
Sexual Harassment
Hate Speech
Violent Threats

When we allow hate to spread
without consequence,
it normalizes hate in all spaces

Article

Engagement in subversive online activity predicts susceptibility to persuasion by far-right extremist propaganda

new media & society
1–24
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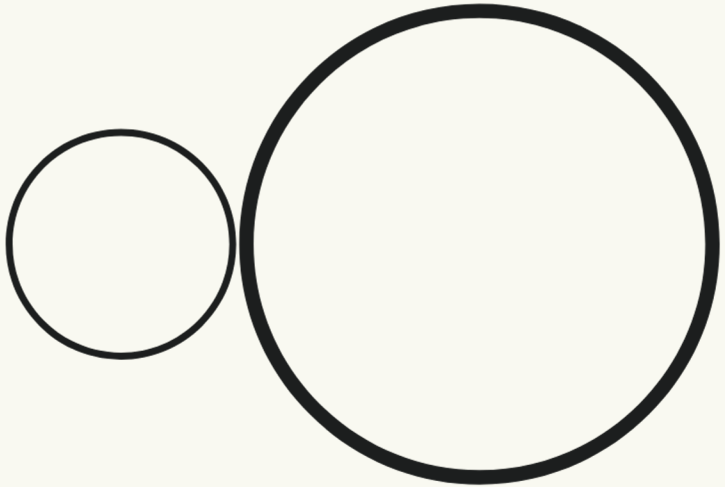
Kurt Braddock
Brian Hughes
American University, USA

Beth Goldberg
Google Inc, USA

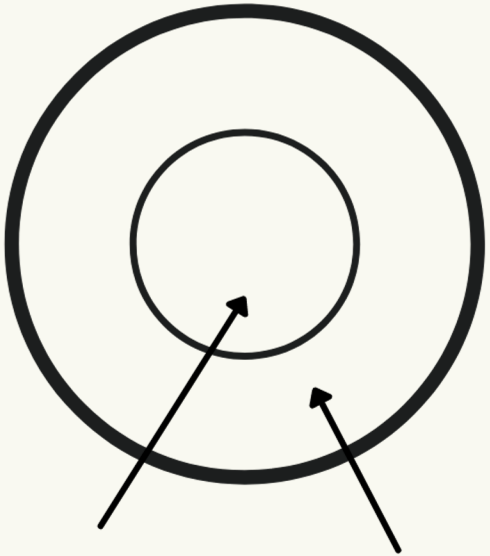
Cynthia Miller-Idriss
American University, USA

Players who engage in trolling, hate speech, or doxxing are more likely to be persuaded by extremist propaganda.

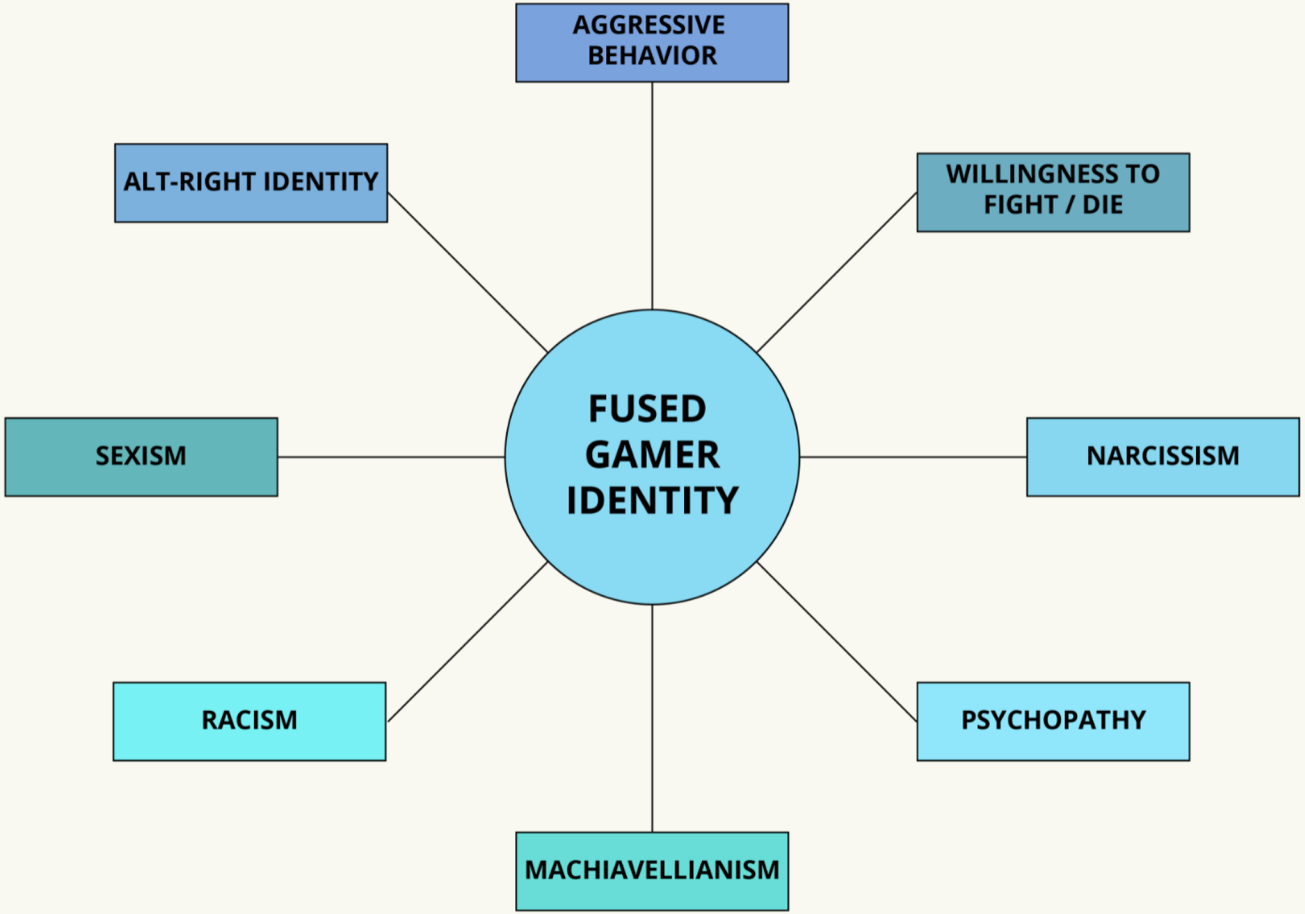
Identity Fusion



self group



self group

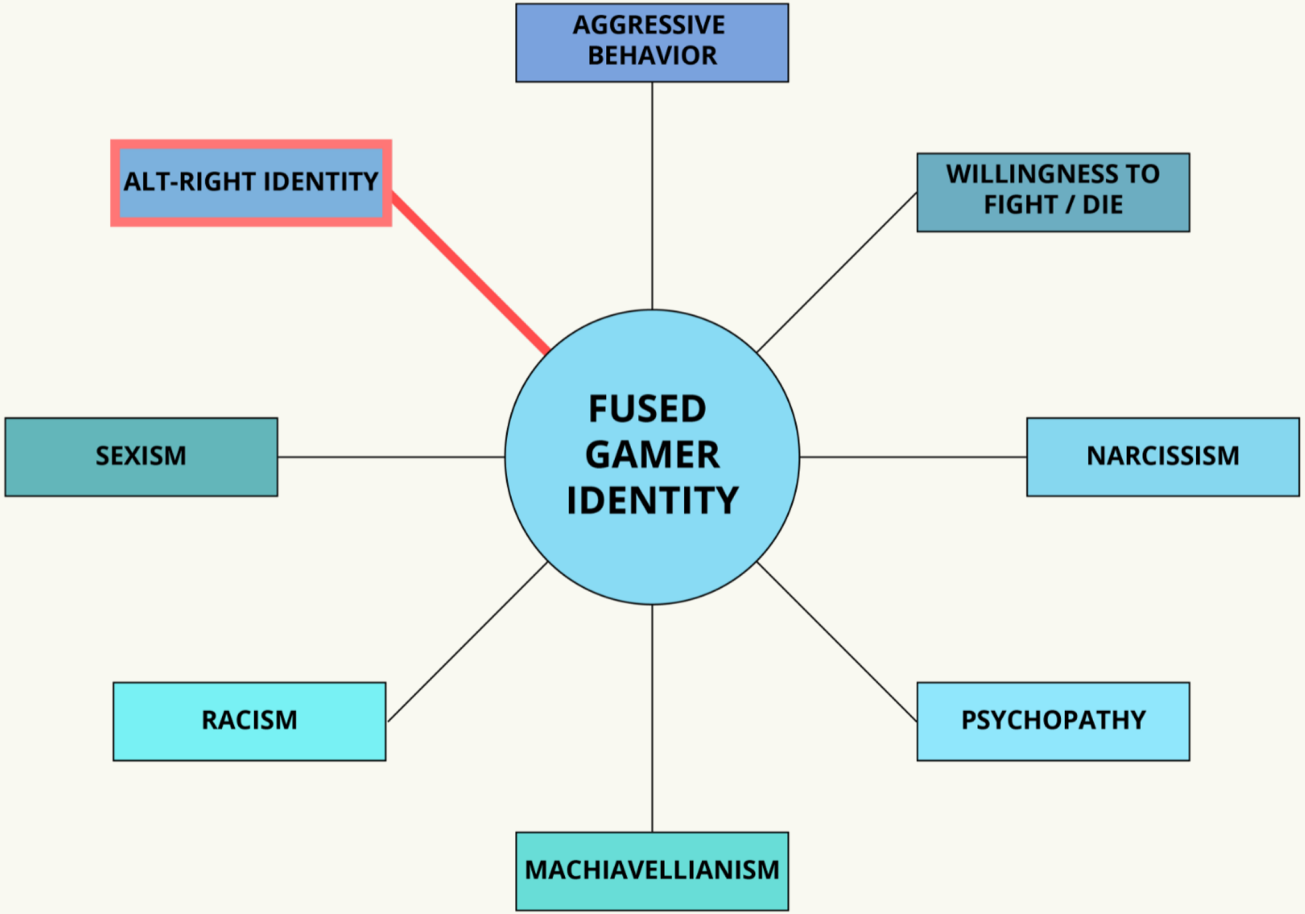


AGE

GENDER

YEARS GAMING

✓ GAMEPLAY TIME



AGE

GENDER

YEARS GAMING

✓ GAMEPLAY TIME

What we know

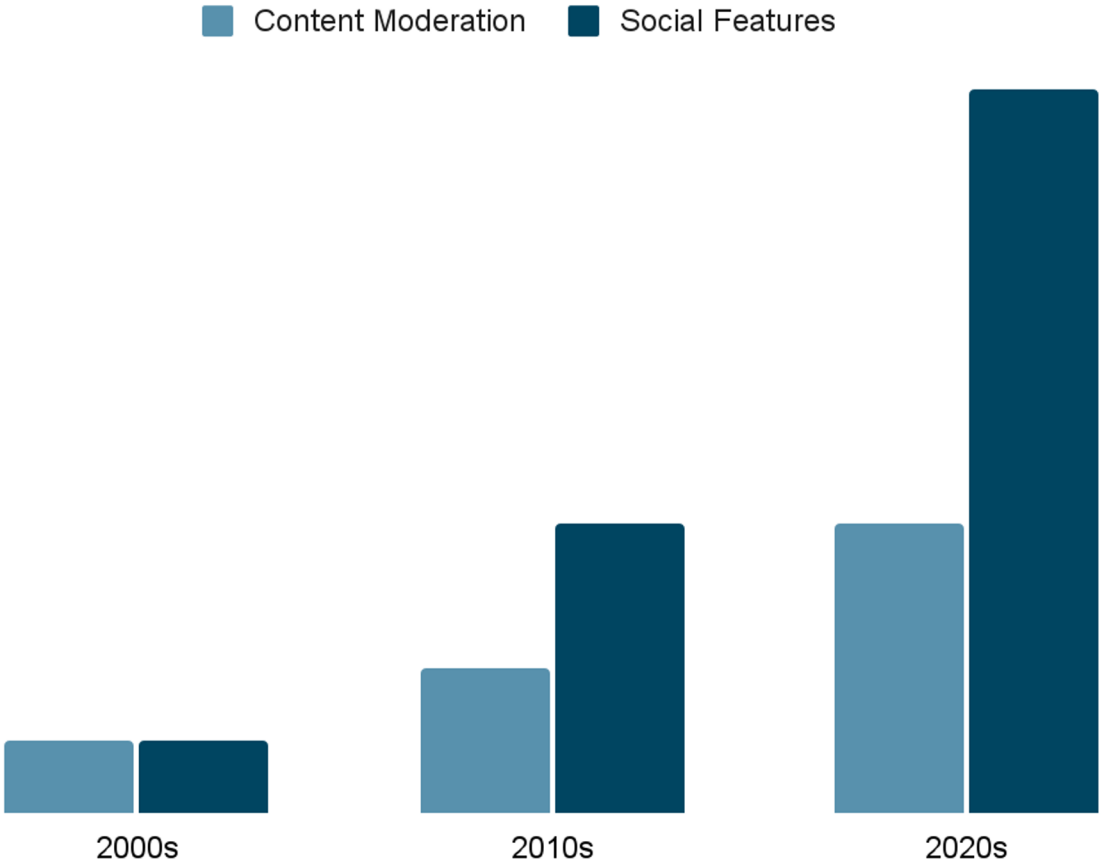
- There is growing concern games are spaces for extremist recruitment
- Extremism and radicalisation exists in gaming and game adjacent spaces
- That games seem to be particularly vulnerable to extremism and recruitment
    - Social reinforcement, “othering,” gamer cultures and identity

What we know

- Extremist networks are actively using game-centric platforms
- Games–across genres and audience sizes–frequently have some hateful or extremist activity
- Games with social hooks seem to have a higher propensity for extremist *organization*

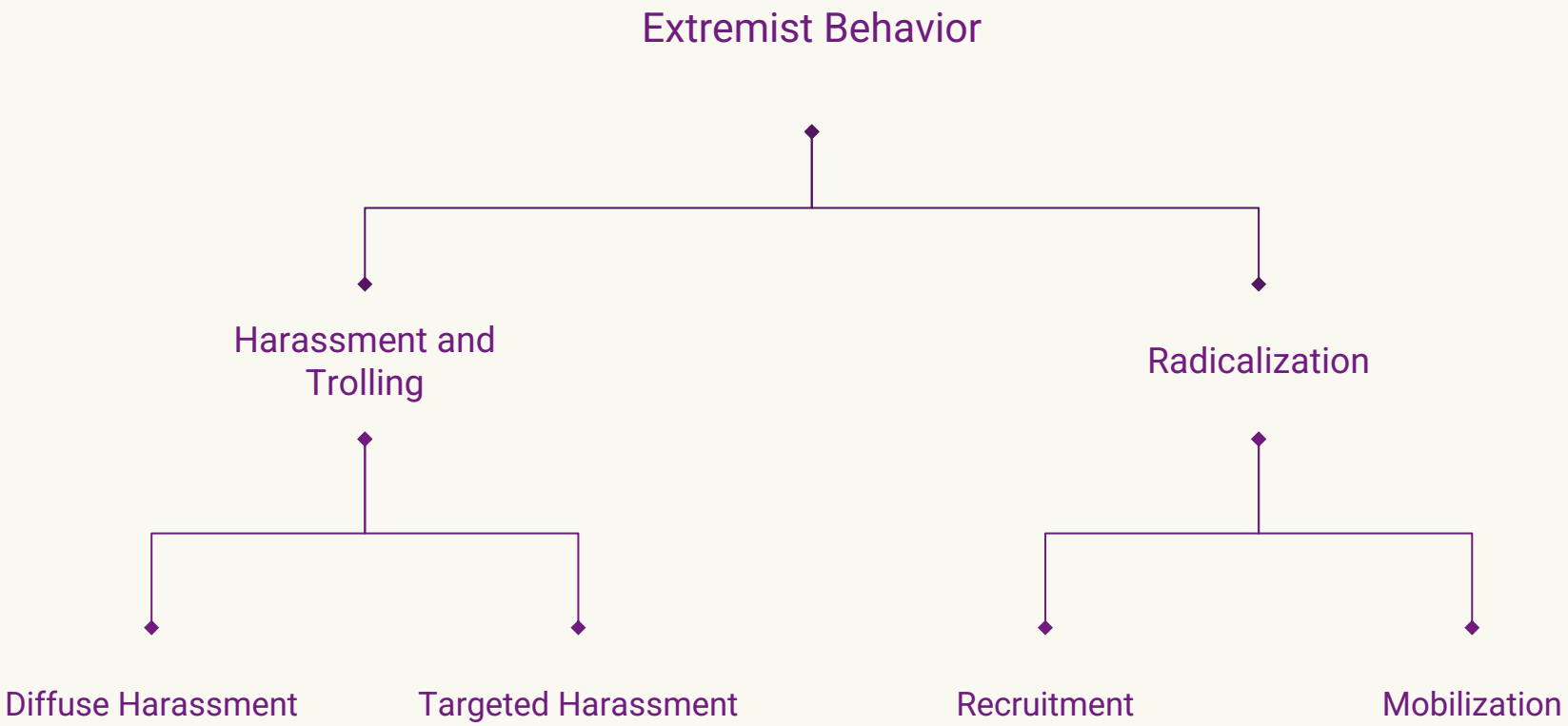
A Growing Threat

1. Social hooks in games are increasing
2. Content moderation in games isn’t as advanced as big social media

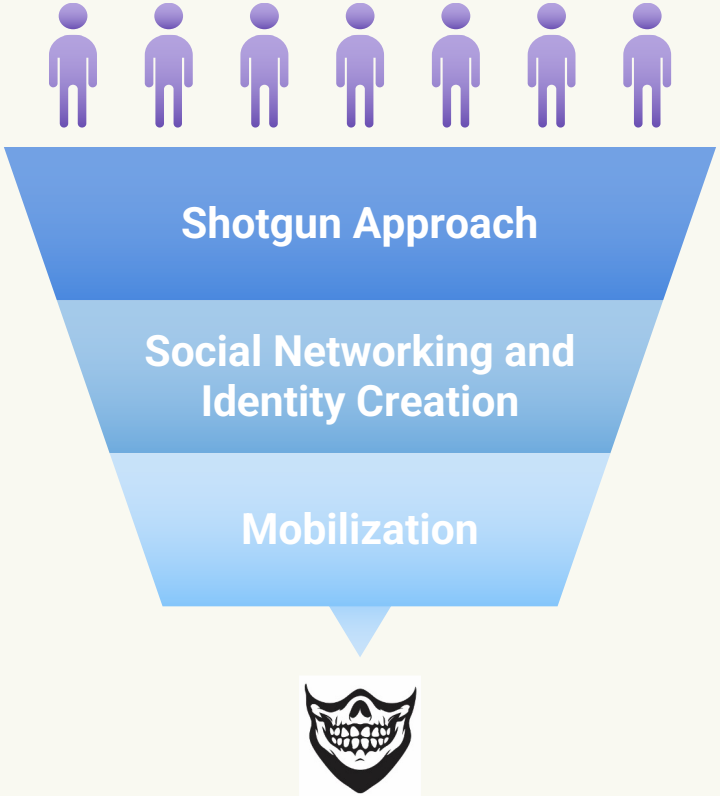

Content Moderation
Social Features
2000s
2010s
2020s

It’s All About the Data

- Extremists use games of all genres and sizes, *but* we cannot know the scope of the problem without access to data
- The few games that provide open access to data *seem* disproportionately messy

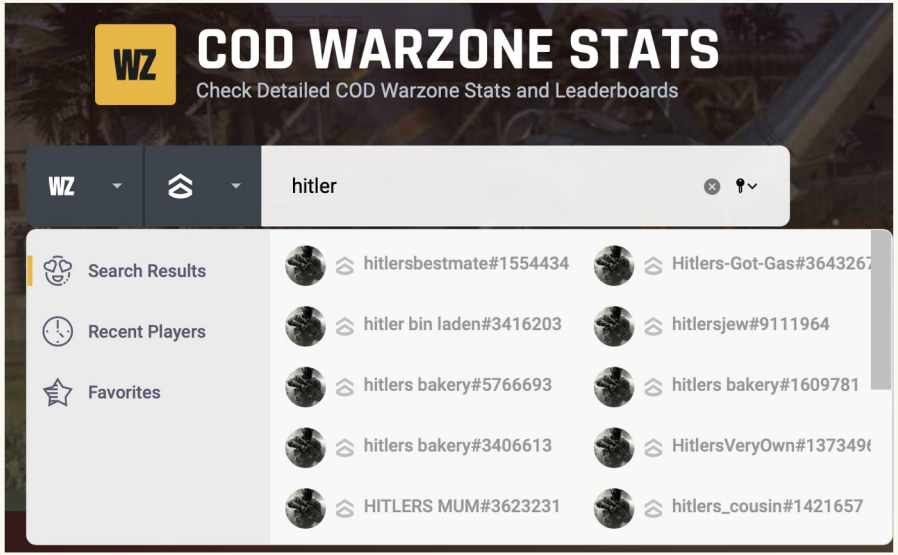

Extremist Behavior
Harassment and Trolling
Radicalization
Diffuse Harassment
Targeted Harassment
Recruitment
Mobilization

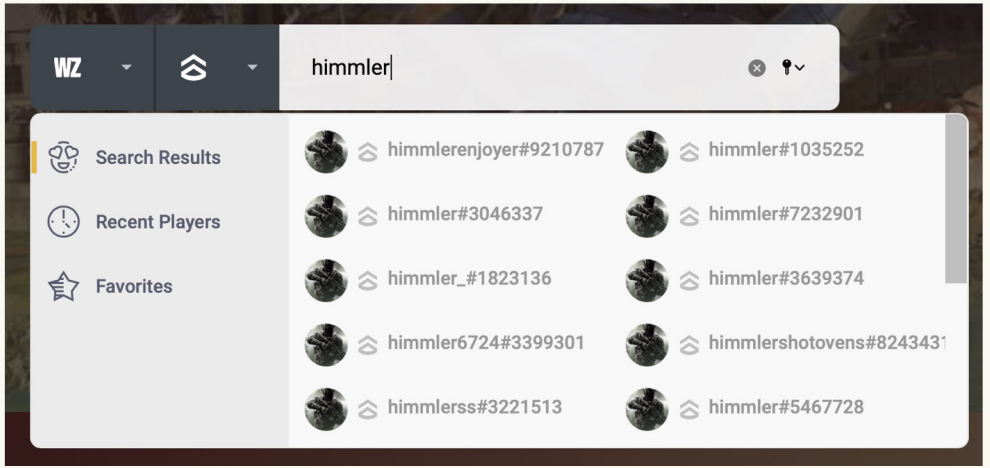
Radicalization Funnel



“Edgelord” Humor or Finding New Recruits?

- Early radicalization can look like cringe/edgy humor





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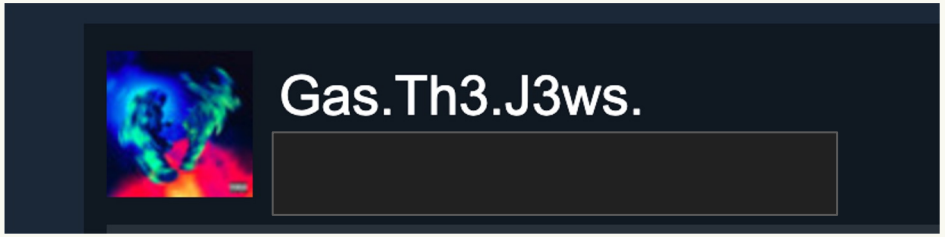
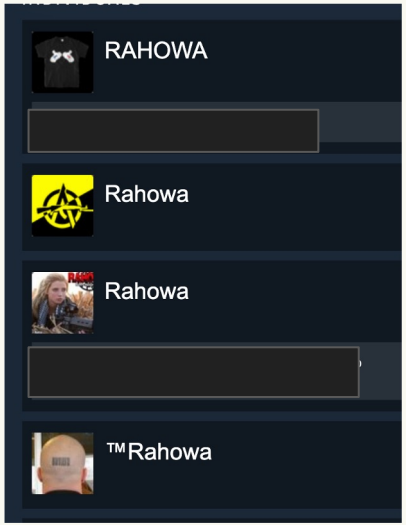
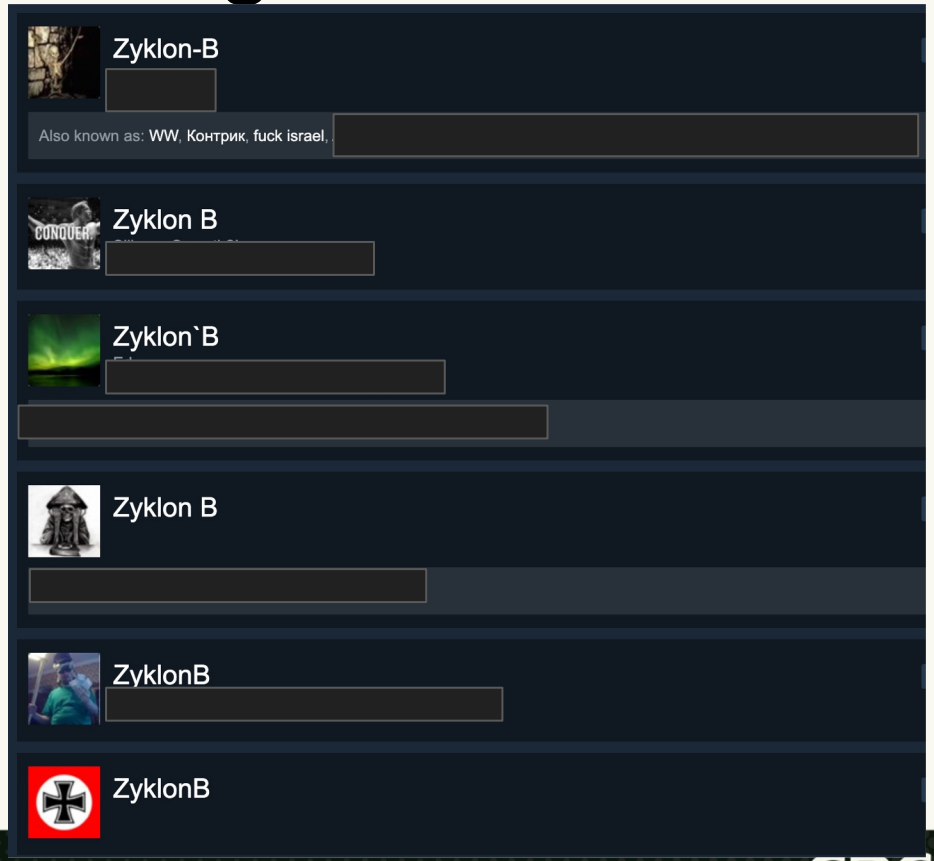
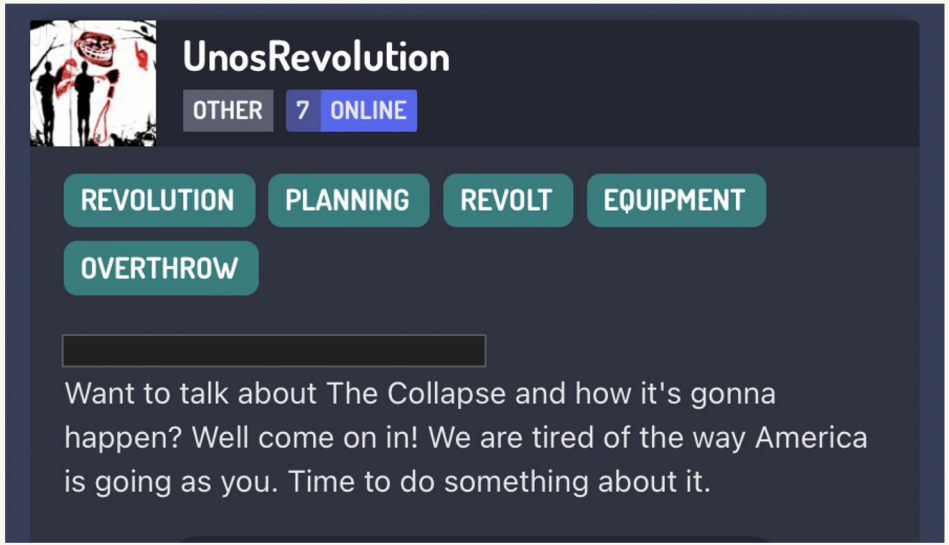


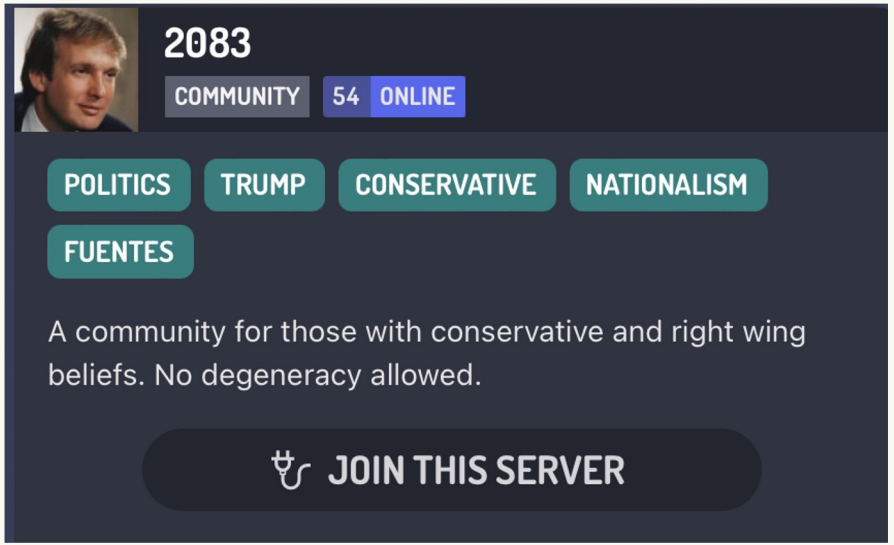




The Discord Funnel

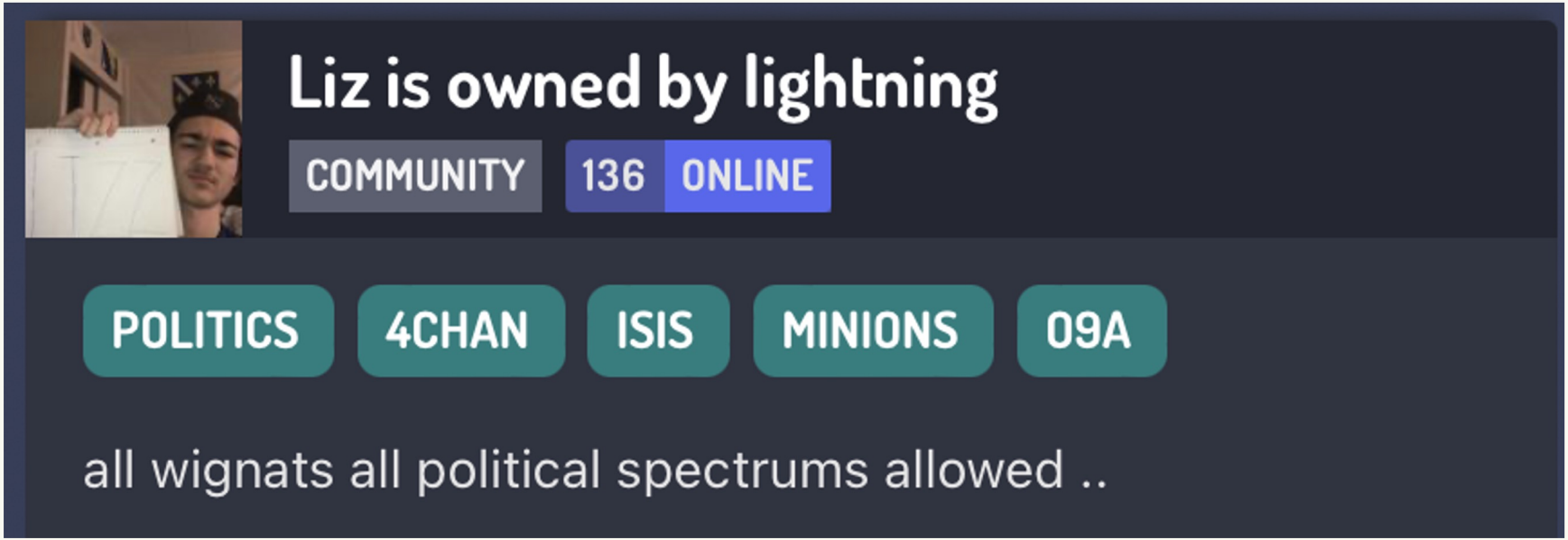
After initial desensitization, new recruits begin to forge social ties.





Forging social connections: Discord

More radicalized individuals organize around explicit violence and hate.



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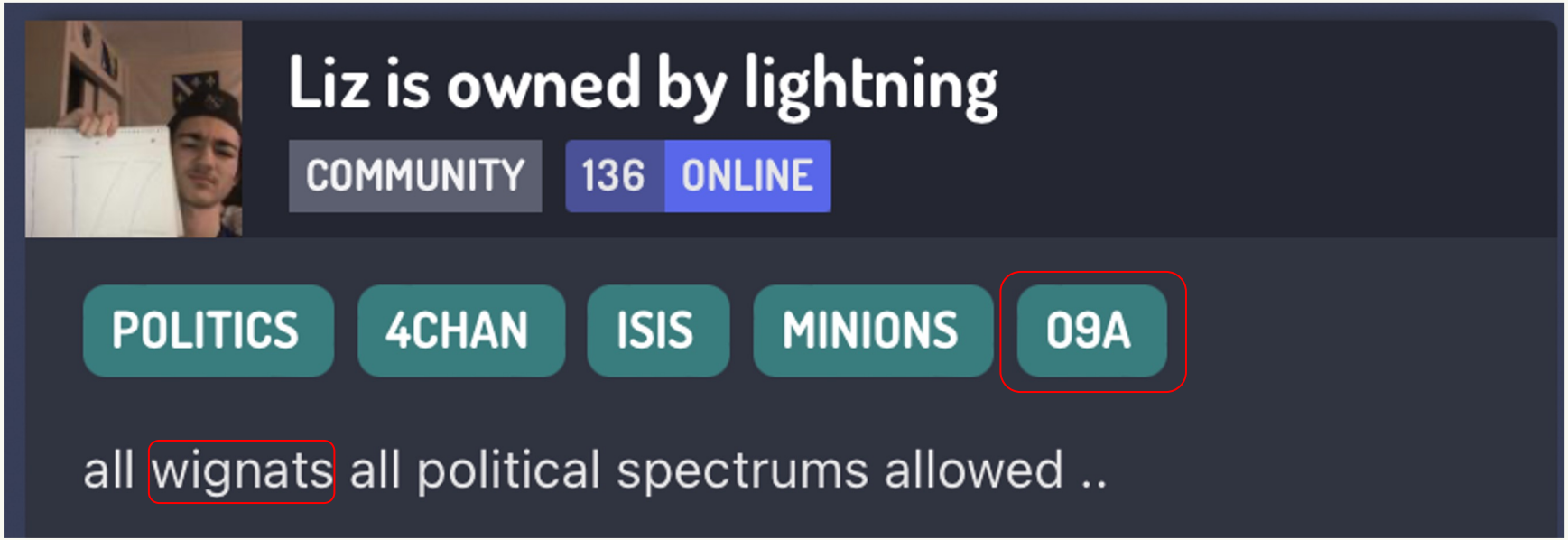

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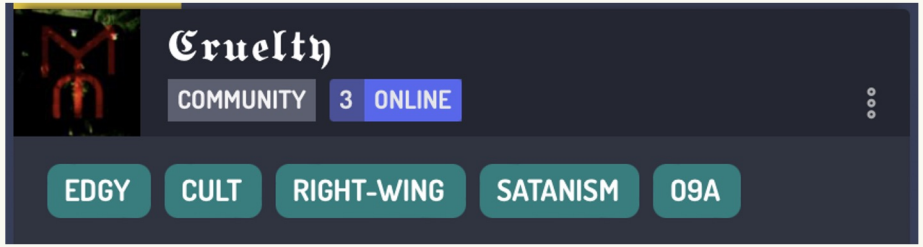
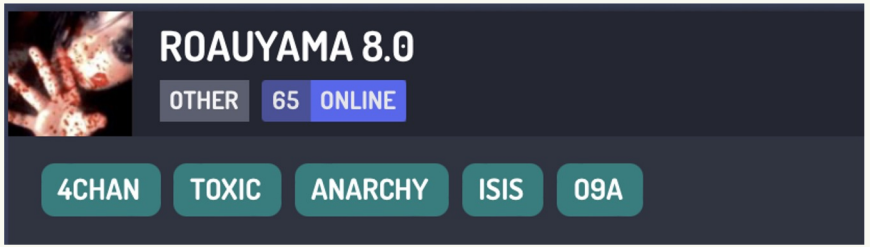
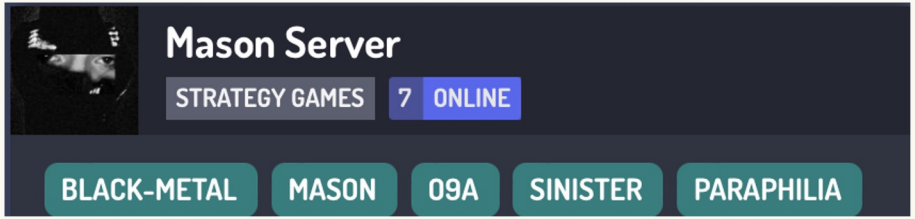
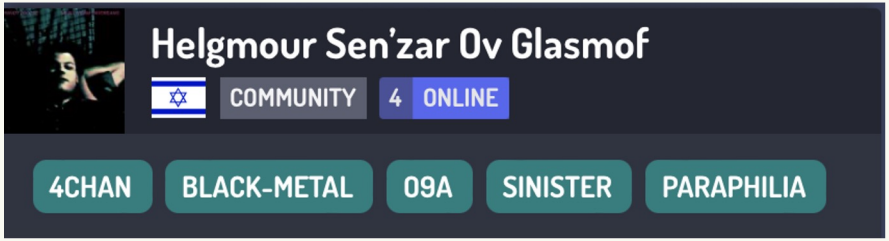
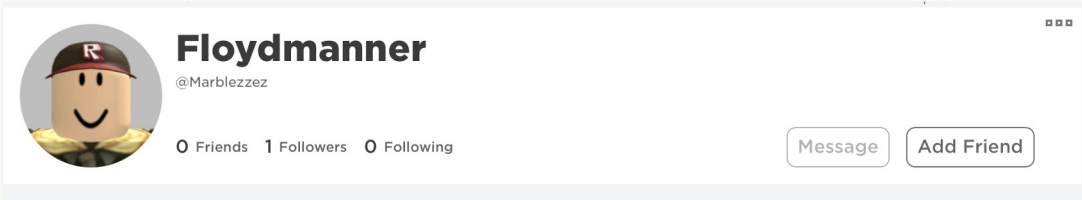








Hardened mobilization networks: Roblox



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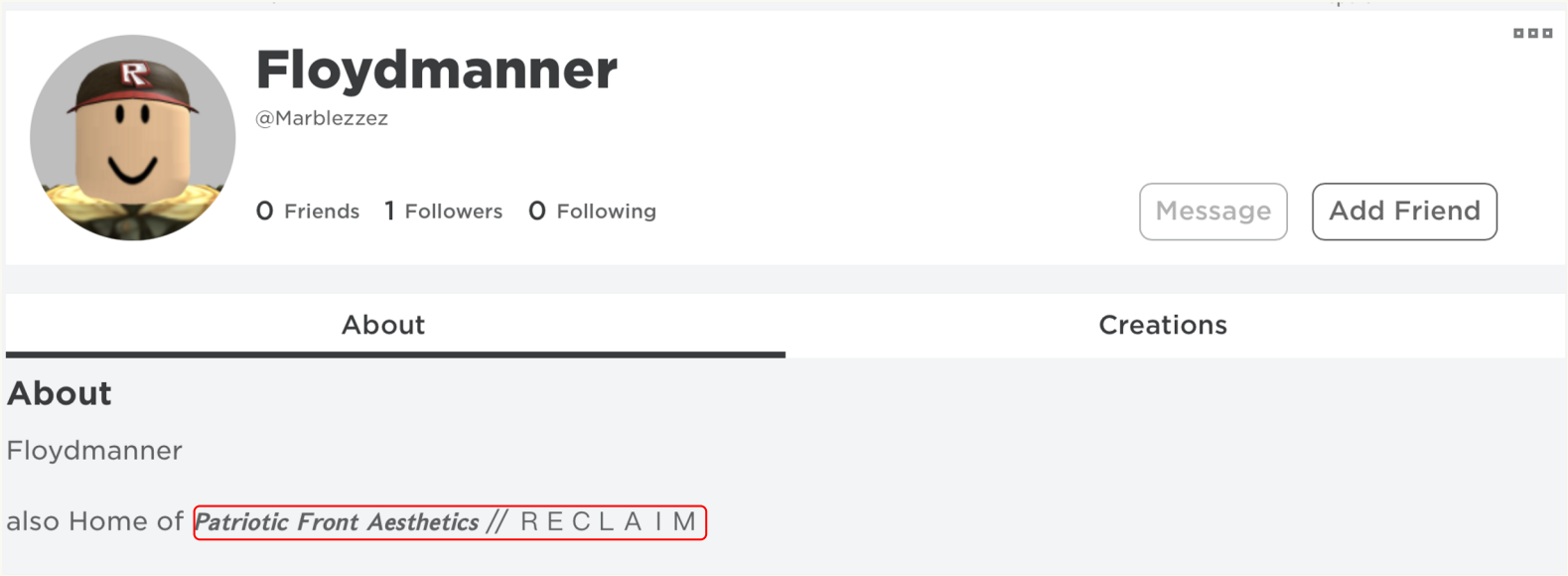

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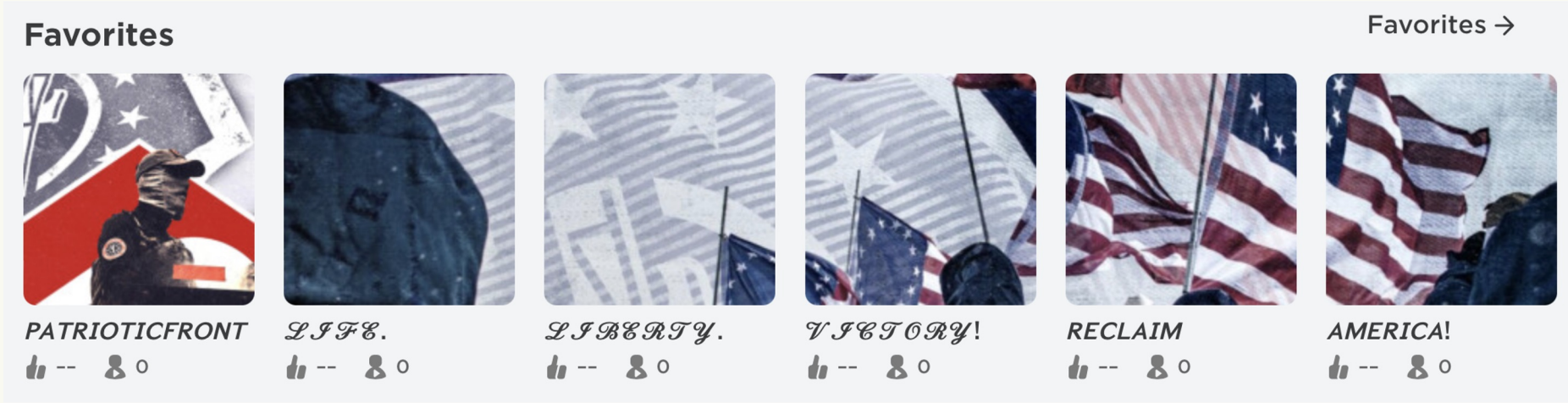


Hardened mobilization networks: Roblox

Groups

JUSTICE 4 FLOYD

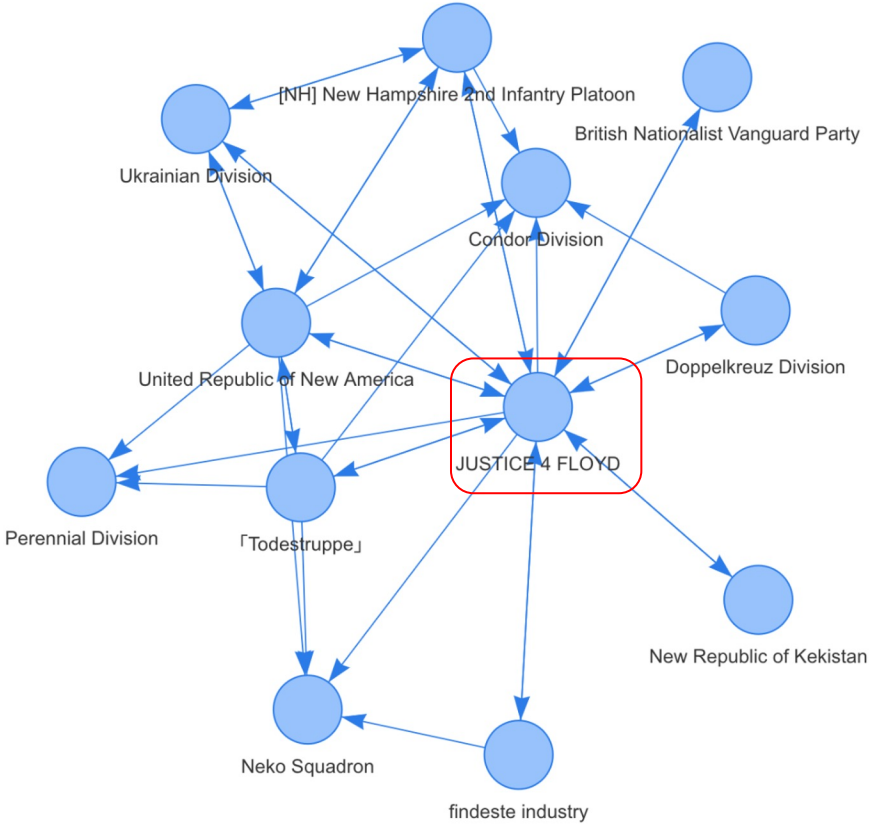
Jörg Floydenmänner "Lehr" Division

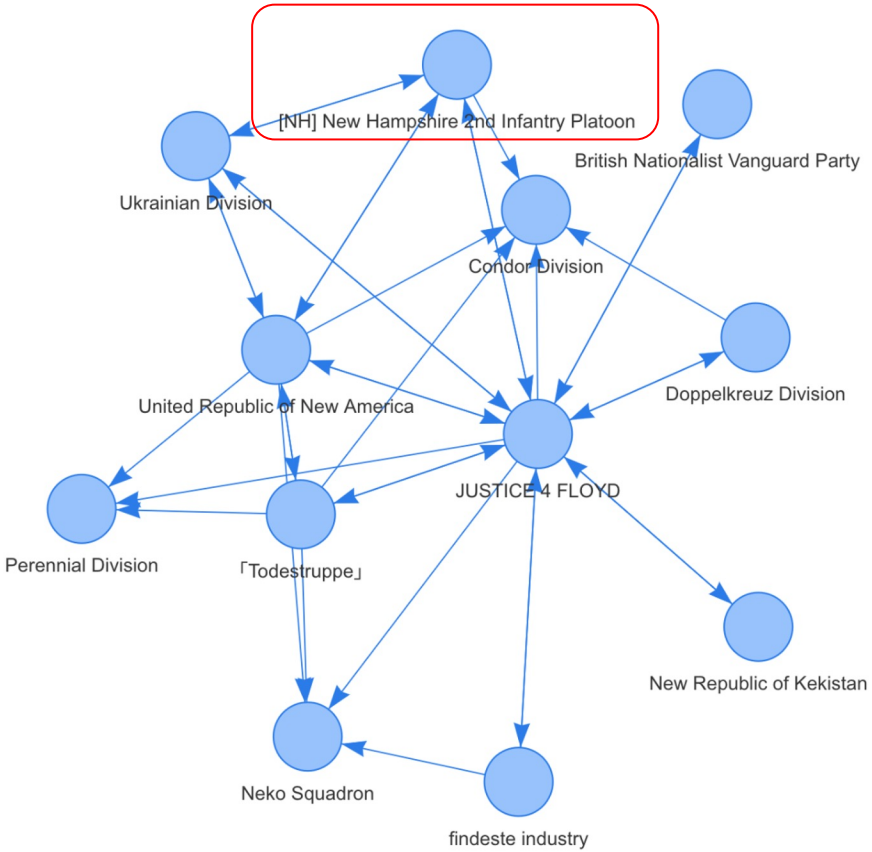
Ideology:

Members
50

Rank
Brownleader

JUSTICE 4 FLOYD


[NH] New Hampshire 2nd Infantry Platoon
British Nationalist Vanguard Party
Ukrainian Division
Condor Division
United Republic of New America
Doppelkreuz Division
JUSTICE 4 FLOYD
Perennial Division
「Todestruppe」
New Republic of Kekistan
Neko Squadron
findeste industry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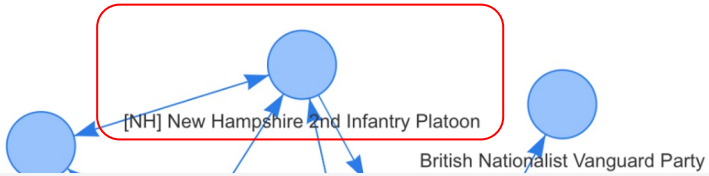


[NH] New Hampshire 2nd Infantry Platoon

By **Floydmanner**

10 Members

Join Group

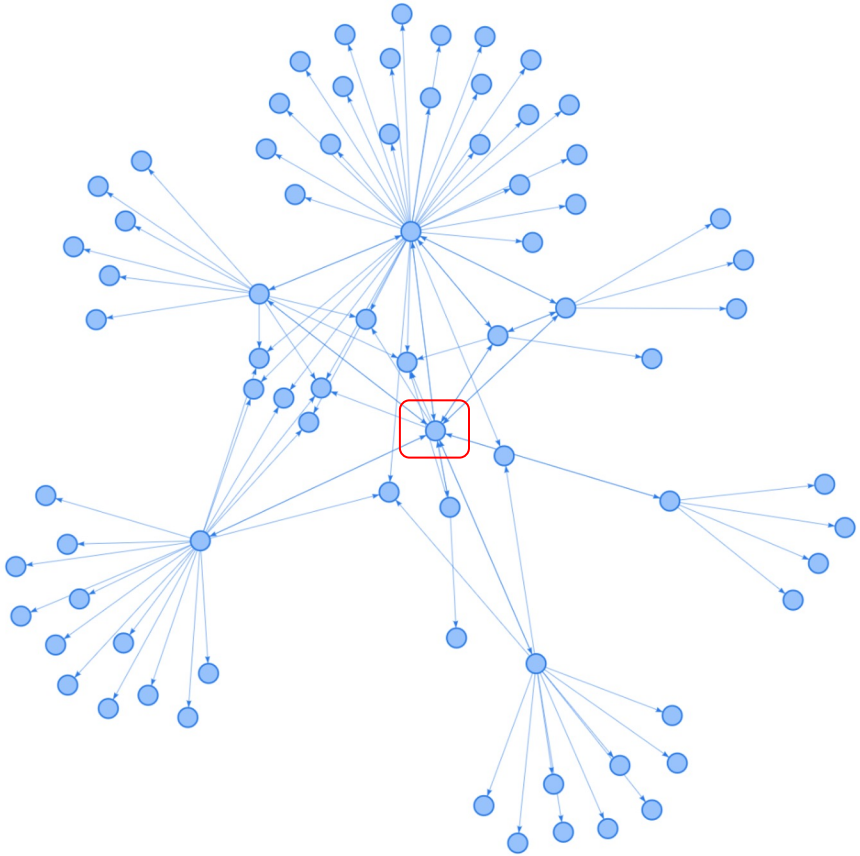
About | Store | Affiliates

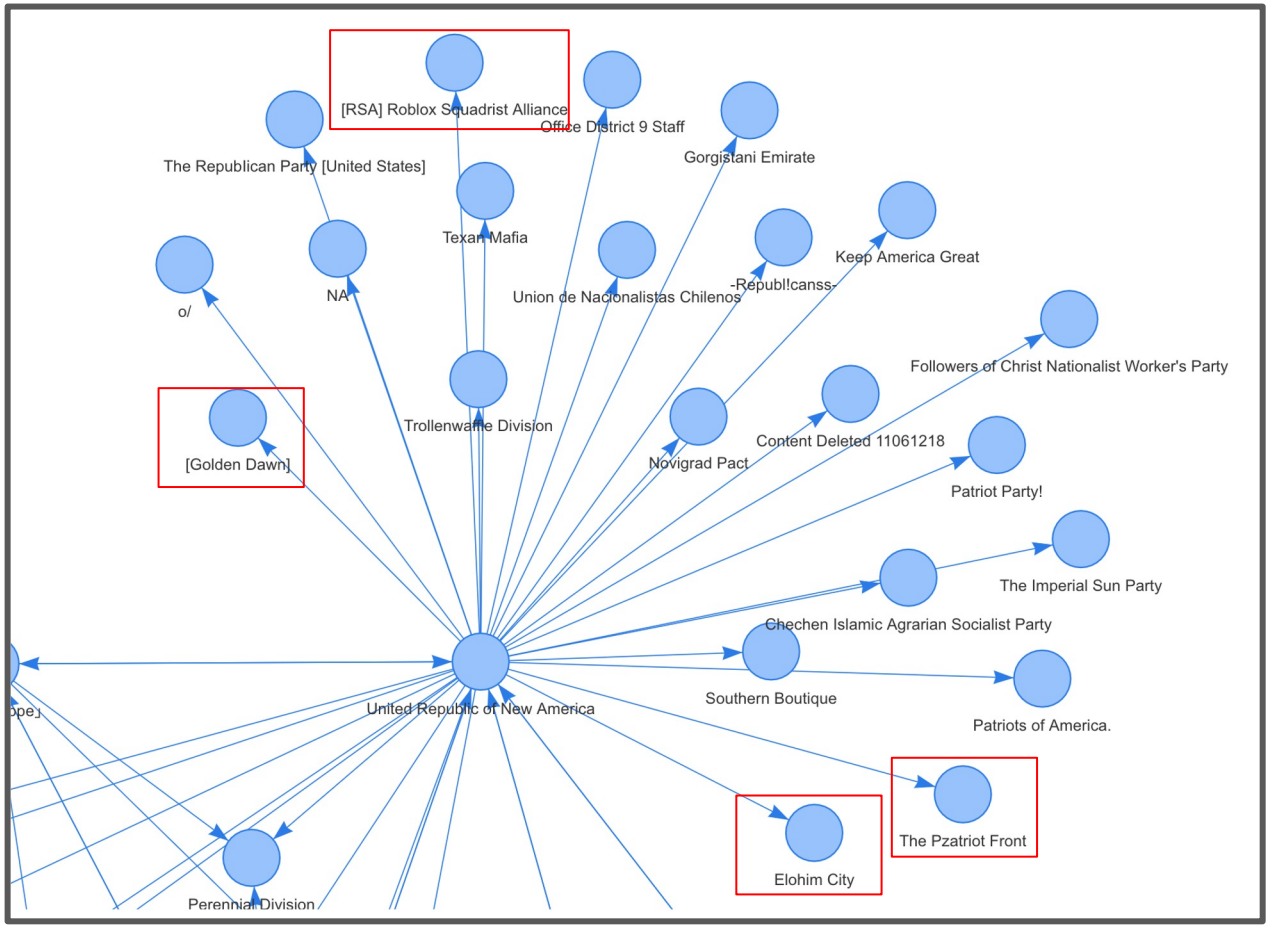
Description

ZONE 131

NSCNE : New England

Striving for a Greater New England, based in New Hampshire.

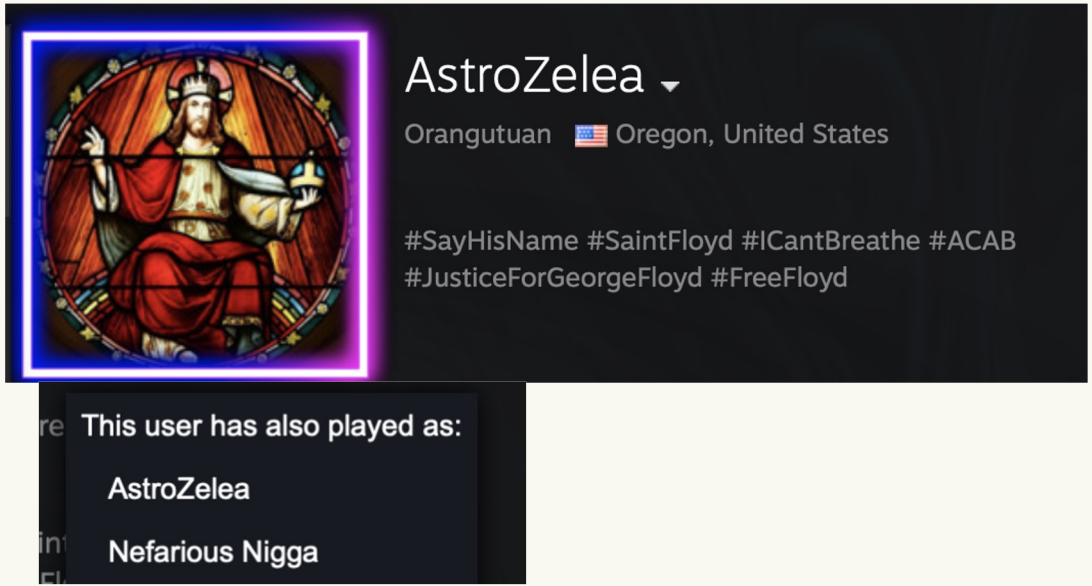



[RSA] Roblox Squadrist Alliance
Office District 9 Staff
The Republican Party [United States]
Gorgistani Emirate
Texan Mafia
Keep America Great
NA
Union de Nacionalistas Chilenos
-Republicanss-
o/
Followers of Christ Nationalist Worker's Party
Trollenwaffe Division
[Golden Dawn]
Content Deleted 11061218
Novigrad Pact
Patriot Party!
The Imperial Sun Party
Chechen Islamic Agrarian Socialist Party
Southern Boutique
Patriots of America.
United Republic of New America
The Pzatriot Front
Elohim City
Perennial Division

Notable users

Username	Description
catjt	Attomwafflez
AlqiaediaSeptemb11	لا إله إلا الله رسول محم
1NotAntifa	𝔚𝔥𝔦𝔱𝔢 𝔞𝔫𝔡 𝔓𝔯𝔬𝔲𝔡
Branton_Tarront	None
monkey507902734	i dont like black[peopeolaw]d[plka
GadssTheJiews	None
Heinrich Himmler	“In any case we must educate our young always to be chivalrous men, men (Menschen) who stand up for women”
NoMorePrideMonth22	FU̸C̸K NI̸G̸GAS

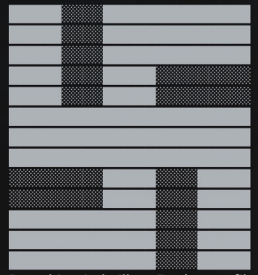
Hardened mobilization networks: Steam



- Ex-leader of Feuerkrieg Division, a UK-, Canada-, and Australia-designated terrorist group
- Currently engaged in propaganda creation for neo-Nazi groups on Telegram

Comments View all 18 comments < 1 2 3 >

Mars Oct 30, 2021 @ 12:04pm



Post this windmill on 5 other profiles to keep Steam properly air conditioned

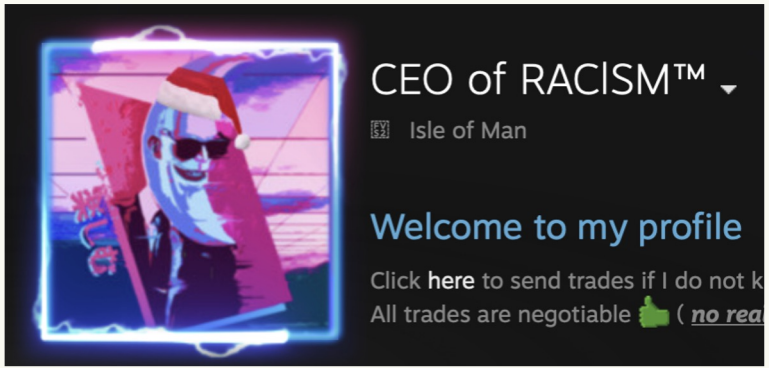
The Gangstalker Jun 23, 2021 @ 2:22pm

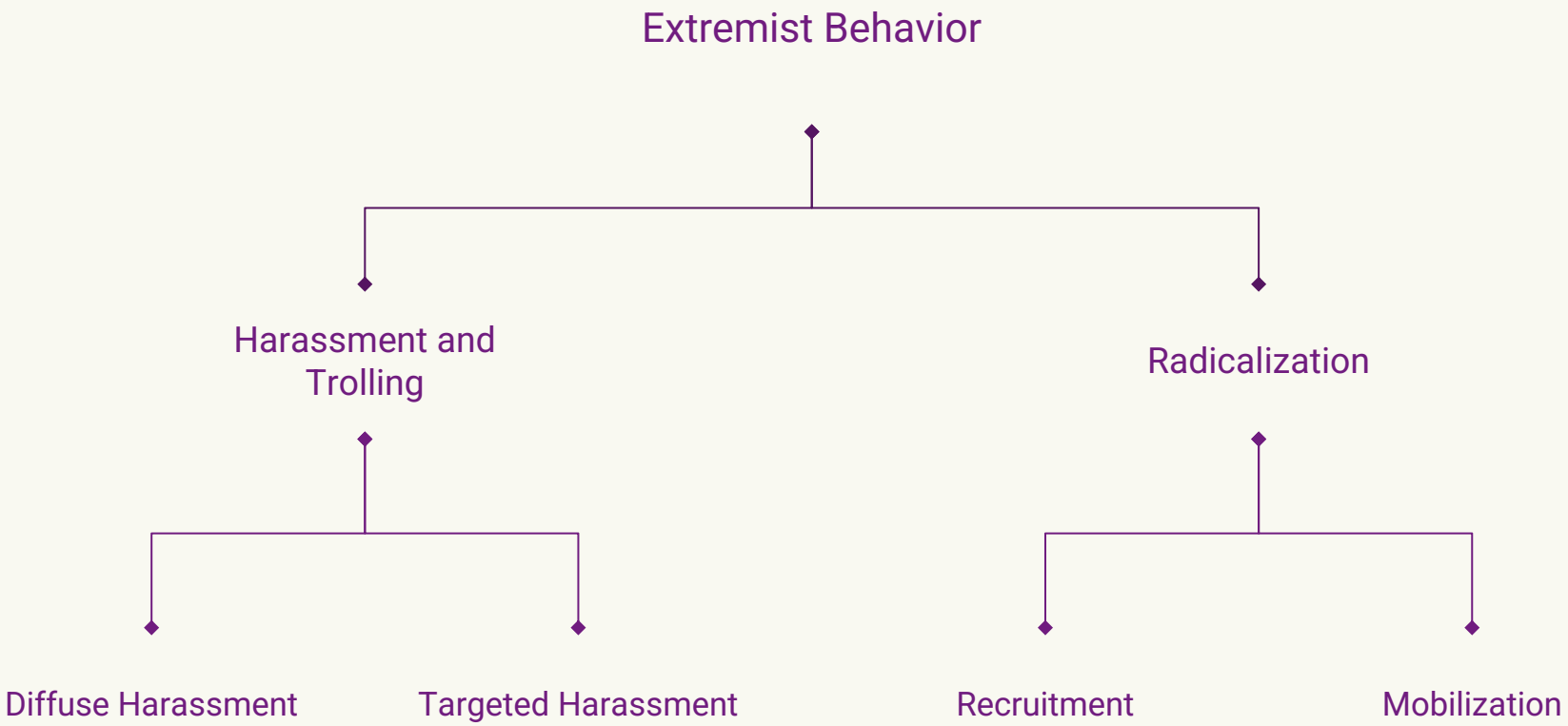
AstroZelea May 7, 2021 @ 5:16pm

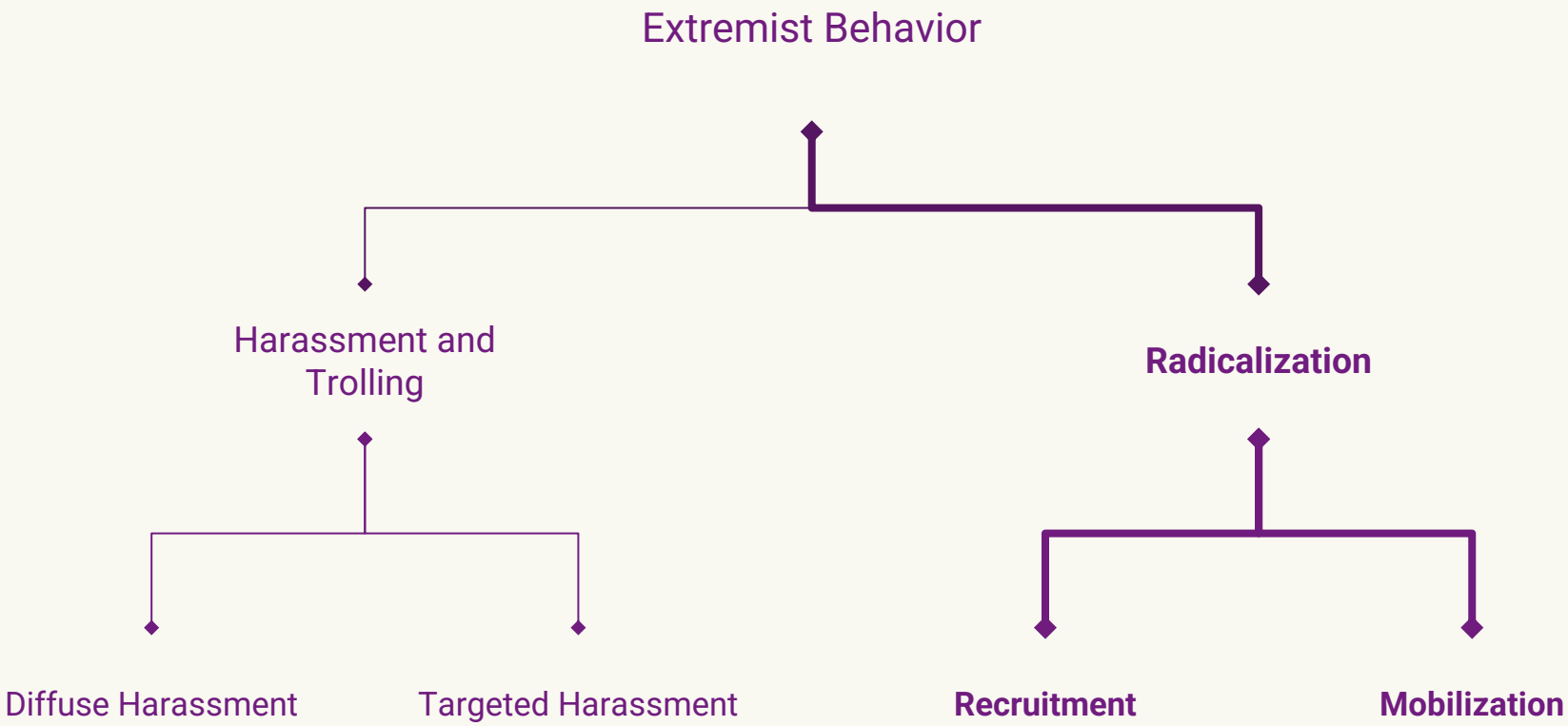
Mars May 5, 2021 @ 1:44pm
Religious schizo

Kazuhira Mar 31, 2021 @ 4:48am
pee nuts OHHHHHH

AstroZelea Mar 29, 2021 @ 12:18pm
ok peanut eater




Extremist Behavior
Harassment and Trolling
Radicalization
Diffuse Harassment
Targeted Harassment
Recruitment
Mobilization


Extremist Behavior
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Mobilization activity is complex

- Niche, obtuse references and meta-irony are generally directed toward already radicalized extremists
- Mobilization and organization is core to extremist sustainability
- Without strong relationships, extremist movements disappear

Identifying extremist activity in the wild

Conventional paradigm:

- Moderation takes a *content*-based approach to discovery
- Posts, user-generated content, usernames, etc. are analyzed in isolation
- Reliance on keyword lists, which can be inflexible and vulnerable to adversarial behavior

Adversarial Behavior Is Commonplace

Real-World Example: Anti-Semitism

> *“Around 100 years ago the Weimar Republic experienced the same things happening in entertainment and ultimately culture. Now Weimerica is experiencing the same. The same cabal of small hatted palm rubbing pedos are still running the same scam as they’ve done for ages”*
>
> *–Comment on social media platform*

Extreme language becomes mainstream

should i make the cuck shed
i built a cuck shed and everything
get in the fucking cuck shed
DROWN IN THE CUCK SHED
how did you escape the cuck shed
get in the cuck shed
get in the cuck shed
you like getting drowned in the cuck shed?
the one weakness of the cuck shed
just kidding get in the cuck shed
GET IN THE CUCK SHED
you've served your sentence in the cuck shed

*Data acquired from real Minecraft Java servers and provided by GamerSafer

We need a network approach to content moderation

Strategy: use a single user as a seed to discover many more

- Any relationship functionality can be leveraged to identify many more relevant individuals, groups, and content
- **Stronger** types of ties generally surface a higher density of dangerous content and users

How to Execute on the Strategy

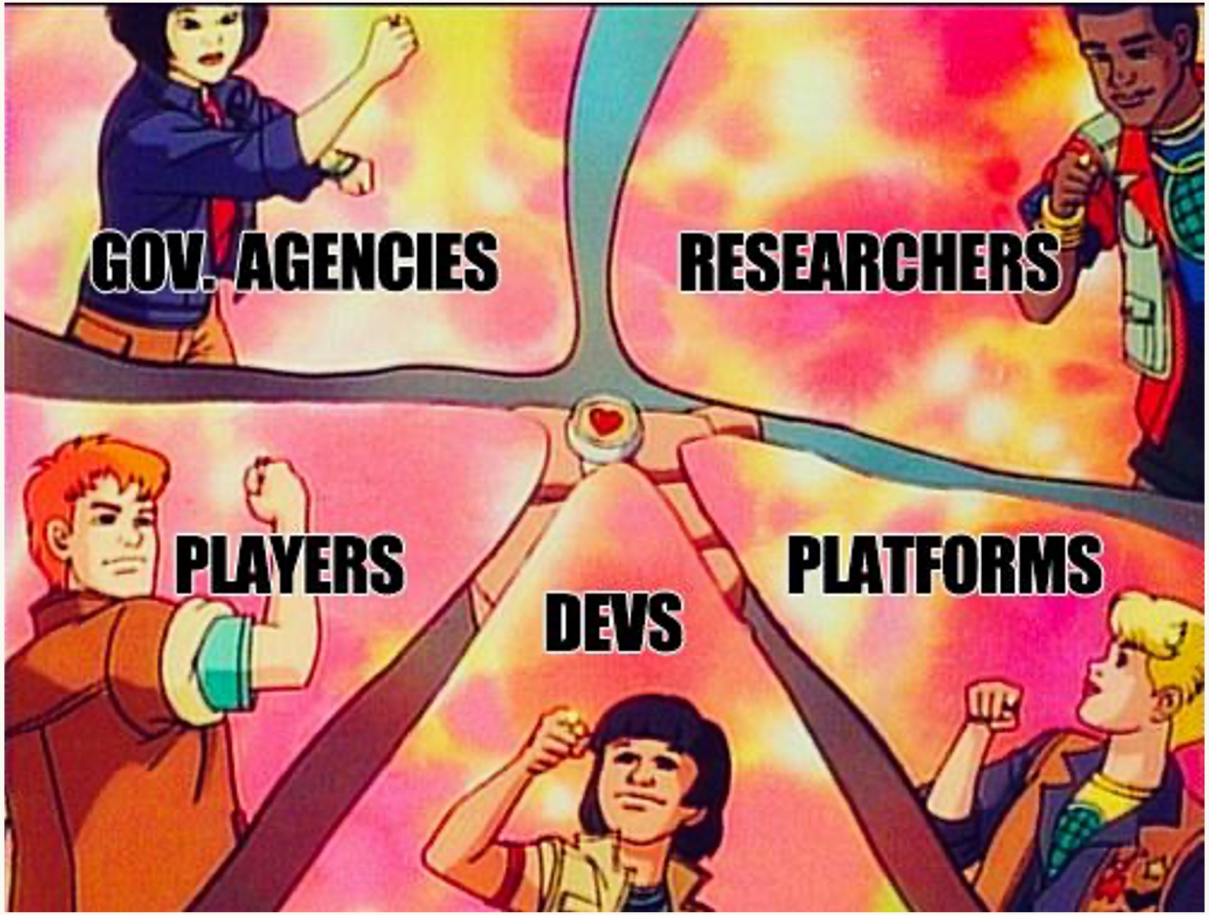
- Engage with subject matter experts to diagnose trends and map networks

- Work with independent scientists to push past current debates and democratize data access to empower scientists to conduct independent and credible research

Concluding Thoughts

DIGITAL GAMES ARE **CULTURAL ASSETS** OF **INFLUENCE**

Future Possibilities



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