

Understanding the Discursive Influence of Memetic Communication in Game-Adjacent Space

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation investigates how memetic communication facilitates the movement of political ideas within game-adjacent spaces, the digital and physical areas where gaming culture intersects with broader sociocultural discourse. Introducing the concept of game-adjacency, I argue that gaming communities co-create and negotiate cultural and political meaning through memetic exchange, extending their communicative potential far beyond gameplay contexts. Drawing on various critical theorists, such as Michel Foucault's discursive formations and Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of symbolic violence, I applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) to an extensive dataset of over 500 memes captured from six subreddit forums. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 players on how these seemingly playful artifacts actively reinforce identity expectations, shape community norms, and influence political attitudes, in some cases facilitating pathways toward extremism. To connect both analytical phases, I propose the Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication Model (GAMCM), an interdisciplinary framework that allows for systematic decoding of memetic content across diverse media contexts, not just games. Ultimately, this dissertation highlights the role of memetic communication as an ideological gatekeeper in, between, and around gaming spaces and emphasizes the GAMCM's applicability for critical media literacy initiatives, platform moderation strategies, and future digital culture research.

Keywords: game studies, memetic communication, political expression, game-adjacency, critical discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, inductive thematic analysis

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Introduction

Video games have always been political, from their inception to the present day. Developed in the late 1950s by bored American computer scientists commissioned to work on Cold War radar detection technologies, the video game industry is undoubtedly linked to the military-industrial complex (Dyer-Witherford & De Peuter, 2009; Newman, 2018). In this way, video games should be understood as inherently political productions: from their creation to their emergence as a titan of entertainment media, sociopolitical and economic logics have dictated *who* designs and publishes games, *what* is shown in them, *how* they are made, *where* they are made available, and more (Murray, 2021). Despite this, many players believe that video games are apolitical spaces where users go to escape the stressors of everyday life (Condis, 2021). These perceptions of gaming culture are misguided; gaming does not occur in a vacuum, and gamers routinely engage with one another around political topics or may become involved in political actions outside of their usual gameplay habits (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021). However, dismissing games as political media, as well as the misperception that game-adjacent spaces are inherently apolitical arenas, creates (or at least condones) a dangerous oversight regarding the discourse—past, present, and future—situated there.

Political themes in video games may appear as historically influenced narratives. (e.g., first-person shooters [FPS] set amidst the World Wars) or as serious games that hope to impart education on political topics (e.g., 2006's *Darfur is Dying*, meant to inform players about Darfurian refugees and the crisis in western Sudan). In some cases, political connections are clear: war games are commonly set during significant historical moments, real-time strategy games see players enacting diplomacy and trade between real-world or fictitious nations, and fantasy role-playing games may ask players to navigate courtly intrigues or the ethical

conundrums of pitting fictitious nations against one another (Sicart, 2011). In other circumstances, players may not realize that the themes and motifs present in games are political or may overlook them as inconsequential to the gameplay experience. For example, Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption* series each allow players to engage with United States (U.S.) politics, the former via criticism of U.S. consumerism and the latter via portrayals of American westward expansionism (Belmonte-Ávila, 2023; Mayar & Schubert, 2021). Still, some players argue that games should be understood as apolitical because they are not 'real life.' This contention is exacerbated by misguided market logics like "universalism" and "colorblindness," which may leave some feeling as though identity representation, particularly of marginalized identities, is overly tokenized and driven by profit (Mayar & Schubert, 2021). As such, my dissertation takes umbrage with the phrase 'Keep politics out of our games!' for the simple reason that conceptualizing the processes of designing, producing, marketing, consuming, and discussing video games as anything *but* political projects dismisses the various cultural struggles so crucial to gaming's developmental trajectory. Further, such expression overlooks the increasingly dire collisions between gaming culture and sociopolitical movements such as terrorism (Gallagher et al., 2021; Vaux et al., 2021), the manosphere (Vallerga & Zubriggen, 2022), and the wider extreme political fringe (Berger, 2018; Mudde, 2019; Winter, 2019). These intersections are further complicated by the spread of misinformation and disinformation within game-adjacent spaces, where false or deliberately deceptive content can rapidly circulate through memetic communication flows, potentially amplifying harmful political narratives and undermining informed discourse (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

I turn to the ways in which communities espousing extreme political views—particularly of the once-fringe alt-right variety but also extending to other demonstrations of political

extremism—interact with broader gaming culture, not only to better understand their sociopolitical implications but also to examine how their memetic communication shapes cultural discourses *within* and *alongside* gaming. My project differs from existing work in the area through its focus on digital artifacts (primarily Internet memes, but also other forms of memetic communication, like GIFs or cypypastas¹) and paratextual interactions (e.g., upvoting and comment awards) as drivers of political discourse. Others before me have noted that memes possess great messaging potential due to their rapid, viral spreadability (Askanius, 2021; Fleet, 2022; Shifman, 2013), sometimes employing techniques like social network analysis (SNA) or thick description to track the diffusion of a particular meme cluster into the wider Internet ecosystem (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Geertz, 1973). Scholars like Elkhatib and Hill (2021) and Shifman (2013) note that memetic communication in gaming spaces has a reinforcing effect, especially when memetic content emphasizes normalized (culturally hegemonic) expectations about who gamers are and what games should be. I therefore set out to investigate game-adjacent memetic communication for two reasons: (1) to better understand the link between political ideology, expression, action, and video games; and (2) to acknowledge memes as an integral component of the “language of the internet” (Levinson, 2012), thereby seriously considering those exchanged by the hegemonic majority and extremist fringe alike as more than inconsequential, humorous imagery.

The general outline of my dissertation will be as follows: (1) presenting contextual examples of political moments that began in game-adjacent spaces, which I argue contribute to the structuration of contemporary gaming culture; (2) a literature review of scholarship core to my work; (3) my offering and conceptualization of game-adjacency, which I will use to describe

¹ An easily copied block of text that appears across various social media and other Internet spaces. These are often used sarcastically or for provocation.

the a/synchronous co-creation of gaming culture in spaces that exist *beside* and *around* video game environments; (4) a critical discourse analysis of a large memetic dataset drawn from game-adjacent subreddits; (5) an inductive thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with video game players on their perceptions of gaming as a memetically political arena; and (6) concluding thoughts that tie these threads together. Moving forward, I feel it is important to note that this project is firmly rooted in antifascism, antiracism, and intersectional feminism. Given the nature of the contemporary American political climate, this work is of paramount importance, not only because it is counter-hegemonic due to increasing rightward slippage in Western democracies across the globe (e.g., Toscano, 2023), but also because there is a very real need to address the canker of the online extreme right's intersections with assemblages like the manosphere—Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and involuntarily celibate men² (Jones et al., 2020; Vallergera & Zubriggen, 2022)—and how these communities, in turn, influence gaming culture.

Mapping Game & Game-Adjacent Events That Lead to the Present Day

To provide additional context, I have compiled a thematically organized trajectory of gaming and game-adjacent events that situate the present day, particularly regarding the so-called 'culture wars' (e.g., Alfonesca, 2023), which seem to dominate modern politics. While this list is not intended to be exhaustive (a complete timeline and explanations might merit a chapter, or perhaps even a whole dissertation, in itself), I include it here to emphasize how—despite a vocal minority's arguments to the contrary—games, gamers, and gaming culture are influenced by the broader sociocultural milieu, and how they, in turn, reciprocate this influence by projecting politically charged gaming content back into (non-gaming) culture and society. As

² Colloquially known as *incels*.

such, the following examples should be regarded as emblematic of how social, cultural, and political issues are deeply embedded in gaming culture; they are not extraordinary edge cases, but high-visibility manifestations of ‘common sense’ expectations that are anything but.

The Normalization of Digital Harassment Campaigns

Several early digital harassment campaigns in game-adjacent spaces established foundational strategies that are still employed by politically motivated players in gaming culture today. Incidents such as the 2010 Dickwolves controversy, the 2013 Donglegate scandal, and the 2014 Celebgate data breach established a now-familiar networked harassment playbook, wherein humor and irony deflect legitimate concerns about the impacts of such hate-filled messaging, while coordinated online mobs target marginalized communities like women and LGBTQIA+ people. The 2010 Dickwolves incident, sparked by a Penny Arcade comic that trivialized sexual assault, became a discursive flashpoint for debates about rape culture in gaming communities. Instead of engaging with criticism, the comic’s creators doubled down, selling provocative merchandise at Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) and mocking those who rightly deemed this behavior as intensely problematic (Edidin, 2013). Using hypermasculinity theory as a conceptual framework, Salter and Blodgett (2012) argue that the controversy exemplifies a “good ol’ boys” mentality that silenced feminist critiques and reinforced toxic masculinity within gaming. In this case, humor functioned as a mechanism of exclusion and power; this rhetorical strategy would persist and evolve in future harassment campaigns.

The online shaming incident known as Donglegate (2013) intensified this dynamic. During the event, software developer Adria Richards publicly addressed inappropriate comments she believed to have overheard at a tech conference—specifically, sexual innuendos surrounding the word “dongle,” which also refers to a small device that allows personal computers to connect

to an audio/visual display. Richards, a woman of color, faced a wave of identity-based online harassment, including a DDoS attack³ against her employer, which ultimately resulted in her employment being terminated. Researchers Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2021) argue that Donglegate evidences “the utter failure of social media platforms to respond to [Donglegate’s] emerging threat, [allowing] violent energies time and space to fester throughout the information ecosystem” (p. 102). Similar tactics resurfaced during Celebgate⁴ in 2014, when hackers leaked hundreds of private nude photos of primarily female celebrities, disseminating them on 4chan and Reddit forums like r/TheFappening and r/Fappening (Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018). In addition to the serious invasions of privacy and security issues linked to cloud storage services (such as iCloud, from which many private images were stolen), Celebgate underscored how game-adjacent platforms can become venues for illegal activities that intersect with toxic technocultures which exist beside gaming (Massanari, 2017; Phillips & Milner, 2021; Salter, 2018). These events reflect a trend where isolated conflicts that originate in gaming and tech communities evolve into organized harassment efforts that then break out into higher-visibility areas. In each of these examples, strategic deployment of phrases like ‘It’s just a joke,’ paired with online mob mentality, has contributed to a form of digital extremism that blurs the distinction between play and violence. As the following chapters illustrate, these strategies were later deployed for explicit political purposes and continue to be used today.

Gaming’s “Ethics” Crises as Disguised Political Projects

Andrea Braithwaite (2016) observes that the rhetorical framing of declining “ethics in games journalism” operates as a discursive Trojan horse: this so-called apolitical critique

³ A distributed denial-of-service attack (DDoS), which floods a target with web traffic to disrupt it or take it offline completely.

⁴ Also known as “The Fappening” data breach.

provides a platform for antifeminism, racism, and broader reactionary politics, all masked as a concern for greater transparency in games journalism. Debates about a lack of “ethics in games journalism” surfaced prominently during the 2012 Doritogate controversy, a seemingly minor event that nonetheless previewed how ostensibly ‘apolitical’ concerns would become conduits for ideological radicalization (Braithwaite, 2016; Foxman & Nieborg, 2016). Doritogate arose from player backlash against game journalist Geoff Keighley, who was viewed as too closely tied to the gaming industry’s advertising apparatus (Foxman & Nieborg, 2016). This sentiment was particularly fueled by a well-known interview moment where Keighley sat surrounded by Doritos and Mountain Dew, products that have become memetically linked to the “Gamer” stereotype. While some concerns about media ethics were not entirely unfounded, these grievances were quickly repurposed by factions within the gaming community to attack perceived outsiders, particularly women. Two years later, these same framing tactics would manifest more violently during the organized hate campaign known as Gamergate.

While it is essential to acknowledge that misogyny and other forms of identity-based exclusion have existed in gaming culture *long* before the 2010s, and have continued since then, the 2014 Gamergate harassment campaign marked a pivotal moment, not just in gaming, but in Internet history more broadly. Originating from false accusations against indie game developer Zoë Quinn, in which sexual favors were allegedly traded for favorable game reviews, the campaign escalated into a large-scale harassment effort targeting women, LGBTQIA+ people, and people of color under the pretense of combating a supposed ‘liberal agenda’ in the gaming industry that was intentionally sabotaging ‘good’ games with forced diversity and inclusion (Braithwaite, 2016; Massanari, 2017; Nieborg & Foxman, 2023; Salter, 2018). Many studies have shown that Gamergate’s cultural impact extended well beyond gaming, eventually

catalyzing the rise of the alternative right (or *alt-right*), a more ‘online’ wing of the far-right whose efforts aligned with the hate-mongering commonly employed by radical conservatives (Bezio, 2018; Mortensen, 2018). Communicatively, Gamergaters honed strategies—using memetic humor, false equivalency, weaponized anonymity, and whataboutism—that later appeared in more mainstream political discussions, including far-right conspiracy movements (discussed below) like Pizzagate and QAnon (Bleakley, 2023; Condis, 2021). Gamergate’s core demographic of young, mostly white, cisgender, heterosexual men also predated the future alt-right’s primary constituents (Bezio, 2018; Mortensen, 2018). These trends have resurfaced in recent years, such as the 2024 opposition to narrative consulting firm Sweet Baby Inc., labeled by some as “Gamergate 2.0” (Parrish, 2024). In this case, we see similar ‘concerns’ (e.g., reactionary backlash against ‘wokeism,’ social media mobilization, and coordinated harassment) arising in a contemporary media environment marked by heightened platform moderation yet persistent right-wing resistance. This dissertation thus examines how these recurring debates, seemingly framed as apolitical intracultural events, are memetic battlegrounds that can sometimes result in political radicalization.

The Mainstreaming of Digital Extremism via Gaming and Game-Adjacent Platforms

Gaming spaces, such as Steam and Discord, alongside game-adjacent platforms like the news aggregator Reddit and nefarious imageboard 4chan, have emerged as significant channels for spreading extremist content, often veiled as inconsequential memetic humor. Following the fallout from Gamergate, the alt-right cultivated its memetic strategies in these online spaces, utilizing coordinated trolling, intracultural jargon, and curated aesthetics to infuse white nationalist, antifeminist, and anti-immigration narratives into mainstream digital dialogue (Bezio, 2018; Mortensen, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2021). Memes like “God-Emperor Trump,” which

heavily reference Games Workshop's tabletop wargame *Warhammer 40,000*, exemplify how masculinized power fantasies and game-based imagery are exploited to craft idolized portrayals of far-right political leaders (Dafaure, 2020; Hine et al., 2017). Initially limited to 4chan's /pol/ ("Politically Incorrect") board, these memes rapidly spread to more prominent social media platforms, eventually influencing offline gatherings like a 2019 Italian Carnival celebration (Dafaure, 2020; Law, 2019). Like the examples outlined above, irony and innuendo were employed to shield against backlash, often accompanied by the weaponized disingenuity of 'It's just a joke' statements. Such rhetorical strategies lower the threshold for political involvement, allowing individuals to participate in memetic hate without overtly aligning themselves with a named political ideology.

Extremist groups have increasingly recognized the strategic value and recruiting potential of gaming communities and game-adjacent spaces, particularly among disaffected or politically disinclined young men. The Groyper movement, which emerged between 2018 and 2019, exemplifies this convergence. Blending paleoconservative rhetoric with white supremacist memetic communication (like their mascot, a variant of popular meme format Pepe the Frog), Groypers exploit digital culture to advance antisemitic, anti-LGBTQIA+, and nativist ideologies under the banner of Christian nationalism (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022). Likewise, conspiracy theories like Pizzagate and QAnon, both of which originated on 4chan and its even more extreme derivative, 8kun, have twisted gameplay elements to mobilize belief in anti-intellectual narratives about deep state cabals and elite child trafficking rings (Bleakley, 2023; Peterka-Benton et al., 2024; Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023). As Davies (2022) notes, the gamification⁵ of conspiracism helps transform political extremism into a participatory puzzle, inviting users to

⁵ Or the application of game mechanics to non-gaming contexts, such as a spirit of competition, points, and leaderboards.

actively ‘play’ rather than passively believe. As such, memetic communication, insidiously harnessing implication and inference, accelerates the dissemination of extreme political ideologies on online platforms. In other words, this process enables extreme political ideas to infiltrate mainstream conversations via game-oriented language that conceals their radical ideological underpinnings.

Offline Consequences of Game-Adjacent Radicalization

The trajectory of online radicalization in gaming and game-adjacent spaces cannot be fully understood without examining its tangible, often violent offline consequences. While not exclusively tied to gaming, the 2009 Tea Party movement is a conceptual precursor, highlighting how decentralized, digitally coordinated conservative populism laid the groundwork for future right-wing development (i.e., the alt-right) that would then integrate (game-influenced) online culture and communication strategies (Arceneaux & Nicholson, 2012; Boykoff & Laschever, 2011; Doane, 2021). The Tea Party relied heavily on digital media to circulate reactionary narratives about race, identity, and government overreach, many of which have since resurfaced in game-adjacent memetic discourses. Events such as the 2019 Christchurch Mosque terrorist attack illustrate the danger of these intersections. The terrorist perpetrator’s manifesto explicitly referenced Internet meme culture, gaming terminology (e.g., memetically referring to their kill count as a “high score”), and white nationalist rhetoric; they live-streamed the attack via Facebook Live in a manner evocative of FPS games (Fleet, 2022; Moses, 2019; Schlickeisen, 2023). These events show how ‘edgy’ Internet humor or ‘inconsequential’ game forum diatribes, such as those outlined in the previous sections, can quickly escalate into politically motivated violence.

Subsequent incidents reinforce this growing concern. The January 6th, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol involved individuals radicalized through meme-driven political discourse, with Discord servers, Reddit threads, and game chats serving as organizational tools for coordinating protest and amplifying white supremacist rhetoric (Condis, 2021; Petersen et al., 2024; Phillips & Milner, 2021). More recently, the 2022–2023 Pentagon document leaks—distributed via a *Minecraft*-themed Discord server—highlight the ease with which gaming communities can act as hubs for distributing classified or problematic material, drawing renewed scrutiny to these spaces as centers of political activity (Bertrand & Atwood, 2023; Reed, 2023). At the time of writing, the newly established Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) further exemplifies the growing integration between gaming culture and political governance. Named after the famous Shiba Inu “Doge” meme (Know Your Meme, 2013), DOGE—led by billionaire Elon Musk and aimed at dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in federal programs under the guise of misused government funds—represents the absurd yet significant impact of meme culture on U.S. political institutions (Limehouse, 2024; Picchi, 2025). Reports indicate that Musk’s DOGE office includes a gaming computer, which serves as both a literal and metaphorical affirmation of how gaming culture is becoming more closely tied to mechanisms of state authority. As this dissertation illustrates, gaming and game-adjacent spaces are not trivial or peripheral; they have been, and continue to be, channels for ideological exchange and political mobilization, with real and potentially hazardous consequences.

Concluding Thoughts

In response to these troubling developments, I present this dissertation as a contribution to the literature on memetic communication, not just in game studies but in communication and media studies more broadly. It also pays careful attention to the viewpoints of people who may

not identify as gamers but nonetheless engage with memetic discourses while traversing through gaming culture. Again, video games have always been political. I genuinely hope this work helps readers recognize the validity of this assertion and inspires them to join forces with other scholars in critical game studies, as we and our allies work to foster a safer, more inclusive gaming culture for *all* players.

1. On Games, Politics, & Memes

The following literature review synthesizes three scholarly conversations that inform this research: games, politics, and Internet memetics. More specifically, the following pages articulate how cultural hegemony⁶ seeps into these areas, informing attitudes and perceptions about those involved. In turn, these areas reciprocate this influence by projecting ideas (i.e., about games and politics) back into wider society. I begin at a macro level, engaging in conversation with several core works in game studies and Internet studies; I then integrate a review of scholarship on the alt-right, a tech-savvy subculture of the far-right-wing milieu, followed by a more granular examination of how memetic communication is implicated in hate, harassment, and radicalization.

Why a Popular Culture Thesis?

At its core, my dissertation is a popular culture thesis. Games and gaming continue to grow and sit atop the entertainment media hierarchy regarding interest and raw sales, indicating their significant presence in popular culture (Arora, 2023). From a conceptual standpoint, I turn to Stuart Hall's (1981) "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," where he argues that popular culture is not a static construct but an arena continuously in flux, a site of ongoing struggle between the dominant and subordinate. Understood this way, popular culture must be viewed spatiotemporally; necessary nuance is lost when an observer fails to consider the social, historical, and material conditions of any particular instance of popular culture. The power dynamics or cultural order of any given time and place cannot be seen as unique entities but are closely intertwined (Hall, 1981). Building on Antonio Gramsci's (2006) theorization of

⁶ Or the means through which the dominant class maintains control over a subjugated, subaltern class through coercion rather than direct force, by presenting the constructed social, cultural, and economic *status quo* as "common sense" or the ideological norm (Gramsci, 2006).

hegemony, Hall's notes express how the dominant class maintains power through "ruling ideas" (to use a Marxian phrase), establishing cultural consensus through coercion. Popular culture thus can be viewed as a battleground where hegemonic (dominant or "common sense") and counter-hegemonic (resistant/oppositional) ideas clash. Importantly, this means that popular culture not only involves resistance but also entails tensions around *authenticity*, or what counts as legitimate within the realm of popular recognition, along with the affective demands (or emotional pull) surrounding communication in society and culture (Grossberg, 1992). Since much of today's production and consumption of culture is mediated, and because many occurrences in the digital realm have very tangible "felt" effects (Grossberg, 1992), I transpose Hall's notes onto the memetic landscape covered by this dissertation and use them to conceptually support the insights drawn from its in-depth interviews. In other words, I take seriously the memetic communication unfolding in game-adjacent spaces because they impact not only gaming culture but also the sociopolitical currents in popular culture.

On Games

Industry, Identity & Ideology

To understand gaming culture's interactions with alt-right online communities, one must first start by understanding the assumptions and knowledge systems that influence video game design, marketing, and consumption. Scholars such as Ergin Bulut (2021) contend that games are not value-neutral creations; instead, they are shaped by the game workers who design them and the corporations that publish them. In the West, the majority of industry positions are held by white men (Bulut, 2021; Passmore et al., 2018; Weststar & Lentini, 2024), which means many of the knowledge structures associated with whiteness (e.g., hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, etc.) become ingrained in the very fabric of video games as core interfacing

points⁷. Although a significant body of literature examines these ideas through the lens of gender (i.e., focusing on the harassment or objectification of women in the industry and within games, among other aspects; Bulut, 2021; Keogh, 2023; Legault & Weststar, 2024), similar research investigates the interplay of race and ethnicity as identity-based intersections (Passmore et al., 2018; Richard, 2013). Critical game studies have identified “unlevel playing fields” (Richard, 2013) across gender and ethnic lines in all manner of industry sectors. The experiences of white women, while still subordinate to those of white men, do not necessarily incur the same level of harassment or censure as those faced by women of color. This sociocultural bias becomes even more pronounced when one considers similarly marginalized identity markers, such as homosexuality, physical disability, and neurodivergence. Because many of these biases are embedded in the production and consumption cycles of games as “common sense,” players become subjected to the same hegemonic structures that organize offline society, reinforcing my assertion that the very nature of games is political.

During the 1980s and 1990s, cultural dynamics within gaming helped solidify the imagined audience(s) via the assumptions and knowledge systems described above. The emerging video game scene significantly influenced U.S. society through video game arcades, spaces where gender dynamics related to boyhood (and, by extension, masculinity) were constructed and embedded within nascent gaming culture (Kocurek, 2015). Kocurek’s (2015) book, *Coin-Operated Americans*, explores how the arcade emerged as a cultural space that enabled young people (mostly boys) to socialize, shaping their sense of identity and influencing their perspectives on culture and society. At the same time, this socialization contributed to the development of a specific type of masculinity within the arcade (and the fledgling gaming

⁷ I use “interfacing points” in reference to the ways video games allow players to interact with a game. This includes elements such as a game’s story, its characters and character customization options, historical context, and the like.

culture more broadly), where certain arcade games were perceived as feminine (e.g., puzzle games like *Tetris*) while others were viewed as masculine (e.g., fighting games like *Street Fighter*). Further, these spaces fostered a sense of competitiveness and a need for technological literacy that would come to be associated with geek masculinity⁸, and which subsequently began to pervade gaming culture. This is not to suggest that women were absent from arcades (or gaming culture) since their inception; rather, the prominence of boys and young men in these environments started to cultivate a sense of male space, or at least, a masculinization of the arcade's material conditions. Existing alongside the emerging cultural dynamics within U.S. arcades of the 1980s and 1990s, Kirkpatrick (2017) notes gaming culture became codified as a masculine endeavor through the lens of the United Kingdom's (U.K.) gaming magazines of the early 1980s. Initially, these magazines were inclusive of women's participation, but as the culture developed into a more masculinized space, magazine advertisements began to minimize or omit their presence in the community altogether. As pointed out above, technological acumen became seen as an expected virtue within gaming space, and such representations of games and gameplay began to hinge upon masculinity, especially from a designed consumer angle. That is, Kirkpatrick (2017) notes the interplay between gender and media representation in U.K. gaming magazines did not occur organically; it was shaped by economic incentives that positioned white men as the ideal, expected consumer over other groups. Advertisements (magazines, as a particular media form) contributed to this process of masculinization (Cote, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2017).

⁸ Geek masculinity challenges hegemonic masculinity by drawing on other areas, such as technology, intellectualism, and video games. Instead of physical prowess, geek masculinity emphasizes mastery over more technical and nerdy pursuits. Although it challenges hegemonic masculinity, it still perpetuates toxicity in relation to gender expectations and norms (Taylor, 2012).

The designed industrial power inequities outlined above still drive inequality and exclusion in gaming culture via the imagined audience. Large game companies – development studios and publishers – have positioned young, white, straight males as the archetypal consumer (Chess et al., 2017; Cote, 2020; Williams et al., 2009). Despite market research showcasing a growing interest in increased diversity in video games (Passmore et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2024), the industry shows only slow progress in introducing games featuring nonwhite perspectives and nonwhite interfacing points (Waddell et al., 2022). In other words, games have historically been produced through the lens of whiteness because the industry considered (or perhaps strategically positioned) white consumers as the norm. This positioning has, of course, created numerous long-lasting, problematic implications: (1) companies reinforce the notion that white masculinity (along with any other hegemonic structure commonly associated with it) is core to the imagined consumer's identity; (2) the notion that whiteness in games is the best way to ensure generating profit; and (3) the perception that gaming culture itself is a white space. However, grounding an assessment of extreme political discussions in gaming spaces within an understanding of the industry's imagined audience serves two key purposes. First, it becomes clear that white perspectives were historically positioned as preferential, whether economic or cultural. Second, the overrepresentation of whiteness in the games industry (and in video games themselves) has marginalized nonwhite perspectives, reflecting racial and colonial projects in the physical world (Omi & Winant, 2014). Of course, this is not to say that all those who inhabit the extreme political fringe are themselves white. Instead, with whiteness (and other hegemonic structures, like heteronormativity) serving as a dominant organizing logic, the normalized qualifications regarding who 'gets to' participate in gaming culture begin to overlap with many

attitudes and beliefs associated with political conservatism, along with who ‘gets to’ have a say in society and culture (and vice versa).

From a consumer perspective, the multitude of lived experiences connected to each individual player’s social context thus shapes how they interpret and engage with games, affecting their thoughts on gameplay and possibly influencing their worldview. Whether through the lens of identity politics and media representation, such as questioning how identity is portrayed in games, or through a more introspective examination of the themes and messages embedded in game narratives, political expressions are ingrained in the production and consumption processes of games worldwide. Nevertheless, some believe that games should serve as a utopian, apolitical space (Mayar & Schubert, 2021), free from the political stressors that dominate much of everyday life.

(A)political Game Effects?

Despite some players’ hesitancy to concede that games *are* political, many within game studies take seriously their implications in terms of political expression and voting behaviors. Researchers like Akbar and Kusumasari (2021) have explored the interplay between public policy practice and political content in video games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Genshin Impact*, finding that when deployed strategically, video games have substantial potential for political marketing and communications. Further, video games’ use of procedural rhetoric⁹ can “argue for policy purposes [which underlines] the importance of encouraging gamers to think how the unique benefits of specific media can contribute to or reinforce ideas and arguments (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021, p. 12). Others, such as Bacovsky (2021), have shifted

⁹ Defined by games scholar Ian Bogost (2010) as the ways games convey ideas to, and persuade, players through means other than explicit textual information. A game’s mechanisms of play (e.g., resource extraction and control) can make subtle or overt assertions about sociocultural and economic processes (e.g., capitalism, meritocracy).

research angles by measuring levels of “prosocial attitude(s) and political engagement,” particularly among young people in contemporary online culture. In both cases, scholars recognize that video games are “much more than entertainment” (Akbar & Kusumasri, 2021); they enable players to engage with various aesthetic and narrative elements that may or may not reflect the world around them. Accordingly, it is perplexing that some vocal factions within the broader gaming community seek to render gaming culture an apolitical zone, especially when so many games are rooted in politics. Moreover, since people are evidently exposed to—and discuss—political topics in gaming environments, my push to examine the ideological dimensions of gaming memes carries significant weight concerning the highly contentious state of American (and by extension, Western) politics.

Marginalized Identity Representation in Games

Early research on identity representation in video games shows whiteness and masculinity as dominant structural forces. People of color, women, disabled people, and non-adults were found to populate only the most minor proportion of virtual representation, especially regarding playable characters (Williams et al., 2009). Both quantitative and qualitative efforts demonstrate how video game titles prioritize straight, white male protagonists, excluding those on the margins from a place in the limelight (Kukshinov & Shaw, 2022; Lynch et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2009). This scholarship highlights a problematic undercurrent in the gaming community: those with marginal identities must carve out their own space rather than being welcomed (Chess et al., 2017; Fox & Tang, 2014). The ongoing marginalization of non-white, non-male identities contributes to a problematic understanding of gaming culture, wherein video games are presented in a specific manner, showcase only hegemonic identities as central figures, and ultimately regard those who do not conform to the “sellable” or “marketable” image as

insignificant or undesirable (Fron et al., 2007; Shaw, 2014). As I have begun to outline, corporate influence over game development significantly affects why marginal identities appear on gaming's edge. From this perspective, titles created by corporations become commodifiable products that can be widely distributed and sold to maximize profits from their intended (designed) audience (Fox & Tang, 2014; Shaw, 2012, 2014). To large development studios, games that feature marginalized identities are viewed at best as serious financial risks and at worst as an utter waste of resources. Of course, this is a fallacy; current survey data suggest that women comprise roughly 45% (or more) of the gaming community, excluding the intersections of similarly marginalized identities (LGBTQIA+ people, people of color, etc.) engaged in video game play (Jensen & de Castell, 2021). Unfortunately, many development studios continue to cater to young, straight, white male players, despite recent efforts to acknowledge the importance of diverse players, leading to ongoing limitations in game representation. Consequently, these representations reinforce hegemonic understandings of games' target audience in a continuous cycle. The extent to which individuals see themselves represented in the games they play influences their decision to invest in a game and its community, sometimes creating hesitancy and other times leading to a complete withdrawal from involvement altogether (Bergstrom et al., 2016).

The systems described above result in culturally hegemonic assumptions about race (and other identities) becoming embedded in digital games and solidified within gaming culture. The Western portrayal of nonwhite bodies and cultures as subordinate to whiteness has been explored across numerous game genres; when these representations do occur, they often reinforce harmful racial stereotypes (Higgin, 2009; Nakamura, 2009). Early scholars of race and ethnicity in games like Higgin (2009) note that stereotypical representations are problematic because “video games

both model and shape culture, [which means] some games [function] as stewards of White masculine hegemony” (p. 3). Black people, Indigenous communities, and people of color (BIPOC) have frequently been depicted using overtly racialized tropes or omitted entirely, both of which are equally problematic in terms of reinforcing offline hegemony within virtual environments (Higgin, 2009; Williams et al., 2009). Older content analyses of character representation in video games sampled 150 AAA titles, revealing “a systematic overrepresentation of males, whites, and adults and a systematic underrepresentation of females, Hispanics, Native Americans, children and the elderly” (Williams et al., 2009). Contemporary research (Waddell et al., 2022), employing a meta-analytic approach, shows that earlier conclusions remain valid: studies continue to highlight the underrepresentation of women and nonwhite characters in digital games, alongside the regular inclusion of stereotypical and problematic depictions of various marginalized communities.

Feminist and critical/cultural interventions in game discourses highlight the tensions many communities face when engaging with gaming culture. Some examine the scorn directed at so-called “social justice warriors” who seek to disrupt gaming’s established white, cisgender, heteronormative hegemony (Condis, 2018). Others analyze sexism from an industry perspective, identifying instances where gamers navigate power dynamics in production and institutional spaces (Cote, 2020). Additionally, some explore the intersections of race and ethnicity in these conversations, further problematizing the culture’s intertwined social structures (Richard & Gray, 2018). A common thread among these investigations is that gaming spaces are not free of the stratifying forces that shape mainstream society (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). Gaming spaces are often perceived to be sanctuaries from offline stressors; however, the influence of cultural hegemony in these digital spaces can be even more damaging through

‘commonsense’ framing. Hegemonic structures not only alienate and marginalize vulnerable populations but also can lead impressionable groups, such as teenagers, to believe that mistreating marginalized communities is permissible or that negative behavior in gaming environments is not ‘real’ because it occurs ‘within a game.’

On Politics

Contextualizing “Extreme Political Views”

I write this dissertation amid growing concerns about political polarization in the U.S. and abroad (Klinefeld, 2023). As these concerns escalate, political communication studies are increasingly focusing on the surge of extremist rhetoric in public debate. This phrase “extreme political views” is vague and is sometimes used interchangeably with *radicalism* and *populism*, muddying public discourse and causing consternation for academics (Klinger et al., 2023). Political scientists differentiate between these terms; for instance, both the *radical* right and *extreme* right-wing share nationalist and xenophobic tendencies, but the latter advocates anti-democratic government as well. This dissertation operationalizes “extreme political views” to allow interviewees ample room for self-interpretation. However, I am particularly sensitive to talk of far-right politics, which often includes identity-based hate (e.g., anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, misogyny, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism), ultranationalism, and xenophobia, as well as white supremacy. While the far left also endorses anti-elitist and populist rhetoric, the extreme right represents a significantly greater threat in the Western political context due to the number of concerning incidents perpetrated by self-described right-wing or right-leaning actors (Nilsen & Turner, 2021). Thus, while interviewees unpack their own perceptions of extreme political rhetoric in Chapter Four, my analysis pays extra attention to any talk of extreme right-wing politics. As Condis (2022) notes, gaming culture, like U.S. media and history more broadly, has

a white supremacy problem, and it has only been exacerbated since Trumpism became the domineering ideology within the American right-wing milieu. While left extremism in gaming culture is a valid concern, I emphasize right-wing extremism's overlap with cultural hegemony in games and its effects on gaming culture's history and structure.

Redefining the Alt-Right

Fringe far-right communities have increasingly turned to the World Wide Web to facilitate recruitment, form and maintain communities, and coordinate activities, particularly in support of white nationalism and xenophobia (Winter, 2019). The term *far-right* generally refers to attitudes and beliefs associated with fascism, ultra-conservatism, extreme right-wing populism, and the rejection of globalization, immigration, and refugees (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). More broadly, the far-right has come to encompass a push for authoritarian government within Western democracies, ultranationalism, Christian fundamentalism, and militarism (Mudde, 2019). When viewed as a component of this overarching political umbrella, the *alt-right* references a more technologically savvy subset within the far-right milieu.

The label *alt-right* describes a particular segment of the far-right ecosystem emerging before Trump's first presidential campaign, a "phenomenon that has become familiar to many in the wake of [the Trump presidency], having put the far-right in the mainstream public consciousness and mobilized the Internet" (Winter, 2019, p. 49). Scholars like Brooke (2022) characterize the alt-right as "a collection of ethnonationalist, misogynistic men's rights activists who [have] gained notoriety for their technological acumen, especially in the mobilization of the culture logics in online spaces" (p. 3). As I have noted above, the alt-right can be conceptualized as a digitally proficient subset of the far-right, which employs social media logics and tactics for: (1) trolling (harassment of individuals or groups through digital means), (2) hashtag

coordination, and (3) the appropriation, reproduction, and dissemination of existing meme formats for political purposes (Askanius, 2021). Despite a decline in alt-right online presence due to the deplatforming of its conspiracy theorist figureheads (e.g., MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell's removal from Twitter in 2021), the alt-right may once again be gaining steam (Bond, 2022). In any case, I look past the alt-right label and consider the implications of far-right political ideology in gaming spaces more broadly. Deplatformed or not, it is evident that Internet users are increasingly familiar with these terms due to their near-ubiquitous circulation in contemporary news media. Therefore, I reflect on the impact of extreme conservative political positions on gaming culture.

Alt-lite refers to a more “moderate” wing of the alt-right that views itself as separate from the white supremacy that has come to define the alt-right (Moffitt, 2023). Still a loudly misogynistic group, the alt-lite's relatively more subdued (at least regarding race and ethnicity) platform is seen by some as a bridge between the extreme right and Trumpism; this line has blurred over time, as Trumpism and supporters of “Make America Great Again” rhetoric have become, by most accounts, the mainstream of the Republican Party (Hartzell, 2018). Still xenophobic, the alt-lite, like other far-right groups, opposes political correctness (“wokeism”), Islam, feminism, social justice issues (particularly LGBTQIA+ inclusivity), social services such as welfare (or President Obama's 2010 Affordable Care Act), and “illegal immigration” (Moffitt, 2023). Due to the significant overlap between the alt-lite and the alt-right, critics, observers, and even scholars may conflate the rhetoric of both groups, potentially obscuring distinctions and contributing to what some refer to as an ‘alt-right pipeline,’ a trajectory that might lead individuals further down the path of radicalization (Munn, 2019). Together, the alt-lite and alt-right form a political platform that intertwines with various elements of the manosphere (e.g.,

MGTOW and incels, mentioned above), mutually reinforcing each other with bigoted talking points that escalate identitarian sociocultural debates in the public arena.

On Memes

Internet Memes

The term *meme* was introduced to the academy by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe the process of cultural transmission between people (Benaim, 2018; Shifman, 2013). Dawkins applied the term to various phenomena such as fashion, idioms, and abstractions (e.g., belief systems), focusing on how these concepts circulate within large social groups. Initially, this classification was quite simple; today, memes typically refer to digital images and videos that often “go viral,” spreading like infectious diseases (Benaim, 2018; Nicholls, 2020). This contemporary understanding is most important to my work: memes are now a vehicle for contributing to the myriad niche discourses and larger societal conversations that constitute the modern internet ecosystem (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). Thus, a meme is a specific type of rhetorical device that often relies on insinuation, implication, or innuendo to convey its point(s). It is this insinuation that interests me: if alt-right actors adopt video gaming language to spread their beliefs, what becomes of the unknowing (or uncaring) consumers’ perception of gaming culture and those who inhabit it? Moreover, how do these adoptions alter the perceptions of gaming culture within broader society, and vice versa?

Participatory Culture

Scholarship on participatory text-sharing assemblages—historically understood as “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1976)—explores how individuals exchange ideas in their pursuit of meaning-making, communal value judgments, and other relevant interpretations (Jenkins et al., 2013; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). The norms established by these groups help

create patterns for assessing texts, whether they be in cinema, literature, video games, comic books, and so forth (Jenkins et al., 2013). In this manner, people reach an agreement on specific interpretations of media they find significant or collectively appreciate; these then evolve into modes of operation for future discussions of texts, schemas for interpretation (distinguishing correct from incorrect readings), and avenues for cultural production (Jenkins et al., 2013; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). The nuances that interpretive communities assign to “correct” readings do not always align with broader social values; some groups resist perceived identity politics, diverse representation, and related advocacy concerns (Jenkins et al., 2013; Kearny, 2019).

In digital culture, interpretive communities represent one segment of the broader virtual population. These groupings may use memetic communication for intracultural exchange (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Interpretive communities can be considered participatory assemblages because the fans, contributors, and individuals who comprise them frequently develop varied interpretations of the media relevant to their communities and are sites of informal learning (Jenkins et al., 2013). In other words, discussions in these spaces educate participants about community values, preferred textual interpretations, and relationships with other communities (Jenkins et al., 2013; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). When such discussions take on hateful tones, particularly in political discourse, we begin to see potential conceptual overlaps between cultural hegemony and normalized expectations about gaming culture.

Memetic Hate

Internet memes are now so prolific that scholars pay special attention to their capacity for reproducing problematic rhetoric or outright bigotry (Dafaure, 2022). Researchers have begun to

examine memes concerning their potential for spreading misinformation (and, in some cases, disinformation) about far-right politics, extremist ideology, and various hegemonic structures such as sexism, racism, and ableism (Brooke, 2022; Elkhatab & Hill, 2019; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). Because they are easily created using online template generators or smart device applications, anyone can use memes to share their unfiltered thoughts on current events, regardless of spatial and temporal constraints. When this content creation takes on an explicitly political slant, scholars have found that memetic communication can shift cultural discourses about the topics in question; they transport prevailing discursive touchpoints with great speed and can quickly change narratives in ways unintended by the original interlocutors (Shifman, 2013). Further, due to the visual nature of memes and the (often) brief text accompanying each item, much of the “story” embedded in each meme becomes inferential. While coded political messaging (or plausibly deniable *dog whistles*, see Safire, 2008) is not a new concept in political science or communication literature, memes serve as a potent form of ideological dissemination when they effectively co-opt or appropriate the visual language of their target audience(s).

As a user-generated item, we must conceptualize the Internet meme as a rhetorical device, a small cultural unit created at a specific moment to contribute to a broader conversation, ranging from the nonsensical to the explicitly political (Brooke, 2022). Whether these memes are viewed in the context of hackathons (Brooke, 2022), imageboard social networking sites (Askanius, 2021), or video game platforms (Koehler et al., 2023), it is essential to acknowledge that these digital items possess significant discursive power. Ranging from generalized misogyny to extreme political positions like neo-Nazism and the emerging “visual aesthetics of the [online] alt-right,” political memetic communication challenges the common perception of memes’ supposed value-neutrality (Askanius, 2021; Dafaure, 2022; Elkhatab & Hill, 2021). Each time a

meme is created, its creator imparts some of their perspectives into the content. Therefore, it is essential to contextualize how and why memetic communication contributes to the reproduction of hegemony in digital spaces, not just in gaming culture but throughout the Internet more broadly.

Social Networking Sites as Game-Adjacent Space

When not communicating with one another in-game, gamers routinely use social networking sites for community discourse. As game-adjacent spaces, these sites foster conversations that capitalize on each platform's communication affordances. For example, Reddit, a popular content aggregator, offers users long-form text and image-sharing capabilities. Subreddits, niche community subsets of the broader Reddit platform, coalesce around specific game titles or entire genres; thus, gamers unite to form "robust gaming-related communities" centered on their gameplay interests (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021), exchanging news, strategies, reviews, and more. Instagram, primarily an image-based social network, provides similar but more concise communication options through its mobile accessibility. Discord, a voice-over-Internet-protocol (VoIP) platform that has largely supplanted older services like Skype, enables gamers to not only form a community but also communicate in real-time through voice and video chatting (Johnson & Salter, 2022). Finally, video game e-retailers like Steam offer community features that provide similar discussion tools – reviews, tips, replies, and likes – used by social networking sites (Vaux et al., 2021). Irrespective of platform function, gamers of all levels of investment, experience, interest, and skill utilize these game-adjacent spaces to reaffirm existing communities and create new ones.

However, researchers recognize the need to critically examine these areas despite their ability to foster productive communication. Scholars have observed that "online platforms have

become breeding grounds for extremist ideologies... [that the] ‘us vs. them’ exclusionary identities inherent in game content and communities are well-suited for the development and perpetuation of extremist ideologies” (Kowert et al., 2022, p.1). Due to the nature of community formation and in-group/out-group processes that create distinctions between insiders and perceived outsiders, game-adjacent discussions may, in certain circumstances, (re)produce extreme political views. This is particularly evident in communities that promote discussion without moderation; platform governance enables site moderators to regulate the flow of on-site discourse through social contracts, rules, user interfaces, and similar means (Robinson, 2023). However, not all sites employ moderators or use them consistently. In some instances, hate groups exploit on-site community features for outright radicalization and recruitment processes (neo-Nazi recruitment on Steam; see Vaux et al., 2021), while others utilize image-sharing functions to desensitize and propagate extremist beliefs and behaviors (Frischlich, 2020). Although the debate on platform governance and content moderation continues, it is evident that game-adjacent spaces can sometimes enable the dissemination of problematic content, which may harm vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Conceptual Frameworks & Action Invitations

For this work I employ a select number of frameworks and action invitations to scaffold my analyses, the first of which is Zhang and Davis’ (2022) call to action for intervening in cyberhate and cyber-racism, especially regarding contemporary conspiracy theories (QAnon), hate groups (white supremacists and so-called men’s rights activist movements), and coordinated activity on social media platforms. More specifically, this action invitation asks to “curb the spread of far-right discourses in the public domain [to] mitigate the transnational influence of reactionary conservative activism” (Zhang & Davis, 2022, p. 13). The messaging baked into

seemingly nonsensical or humorous memes can have similarly deleterious outcomes as outright hate speech, perhaps even more so, due to audiences needing to understand implied hegemonic logics to ‘get’ a meme. Zhang and Davis (2022) also note that the current iteration of far-right political actors espouses weaponized “digital network repertoires” (e.g., appropriating memes and turning them into hate symbols, hashtag attacks, doxing, etc.) that must be taken seriously (p. 9). I echo this sentiment by attending to how alt-right ideology affects how gamers perceive their cultural contexts, and how such ideologies play an integral role in the cultural sense-making that shapes their view of the world around them.

Discourse

Ruth Wodak (2014) writes that discourse reflects societal power relations, contributing to their (re)production and distribution. Specifically, discourse is “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned; it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people” (Wodak, 2014, p. 303). In simpler terms, discourse reflects how power relations—such as those between social classes, women and men, and racial and ethnic groups—are produced, maintained, or challenged through language. Language and discourse should thus be understood as *not* inherently value-neutral arenas but instead linked to knowledge production economies that exacerbate the distance between social strata. Viewed this way, discourse is tied to the Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony and ideology via ‘common sense’ perceptions or taken-for-grantedness (Wodak, 2014). Similarly, Teun van Dijk (2012) describes the social power of discourse as being indirectly operationalized through linguistic persuasion; people’s attitudes towards sociocultural topics can be leveraged via symbolic production in institutions like mass media, education, religion, and more. Because discourse takes many forms, and because it plays such an essential role in the construction of

identity, my dissertation echoes older contentions (e.g., Levinson, 2012) that memes are an integral component of Internet language, and that they can shape cultural processes and normalized expectations within, and without, gaming culture.

A Communication and Media Studies Perspective on the Sociology of Identity-Based Violence

The sociology of identity-based violence (IBV) argues that *violence* is socially constructed and indicative of normalized power dynamics within culture (Armstrong et al., 2018; Meyer, 2015; Muehlenard & Kimes, 1999). Therefore, a question of legitimacy, or a typology, emerges when a person, group, or institution is asked or compelled to consider the topic: *What counts as violence?* Over time, understanding what constitutes ‘counts as’ has shifted alongside social mores and norms. In the 1970s, for instance, social scientists began to draw attention to domestic violence and issues like date rape, although many of these academics blamed women and other vulnerable populations for “provoking” such behavior (Muehlenard & Kimes, 1999). Definitions have also changed to include acts that are not just displays of extreme physical violence. Continuing with the previous example, emotional abuse, threats, and controlling behavior now fall under contemporary definitions of *domestic violence*. Defining violence is thus an inherently political act, as determining what constitutes violence can trivialize or dismiss experiences that exist in a liminal grey area yet may still entail violence. Likewise, quantitative investigations of violent acts and behaviors often neglect context and motive, which can provide a clearer understanding of events than simply data on their frequency. In this dissertation, I operationalize *violence* in the following way: we must look past only extreme examples of physical force to also account for how cultural processes allow empowered, privileged groups (e.g., straight white men) to enact their will over marginalized communities (e.g., women, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people). While this does leave open some room for interpretation, I

contend it is this interpretation that allows for better sense-making without the pigeonholing of ‘counts as’ definitional debates.

Symbolic Violence (in Memetic Communication)

To continue developing the operationalization of IBV mentioned above, I also refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) and Michel Foucault’s (1977) writings on symbolic violence and knowledge as social control. While Bourdieu (1977) used “symbolic violence” to refer to the often unseen ways in which social coercion occurs to maintain hierarchies, we can extrapolate these “unseen ways” to observe how language (or, to Foucault, discourse) shapes and legitimizes dominant knowledges, attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives over those considered subordinate. Foucault (1977) might not have thought about symbolic violence in this way, but his germinal writing on discourse and disciplinary institutions (e.g., prisons, schools) underscores how specific knowledges and behaviors become normalized; through these control apparatuses, people become subjects to whichever dominant cultural processes are prevalent in a particular space and time.

In the context of Internet memes and the politically charged memetic communication taking place in game-adjacent spaces, I must clarify I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to put these ideas into theoretical conversation. A growing body of emerging media scholarship (e.g., Askanius, 2021; Colley & Moore, 2020; Dafaure, 2021; Hine et al., 2017; Kearney, 2019) notes the symbolically violent potential of memetic communication, especially when such content expressly coincides with extreme right-wing political expression. Others (e.g., Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Recuero, 2015) have argued social media (and more specifically, social networking sites), allow for the mass reproduction of symbolically violent discourses, and due to

the heavily networked conditions of the contemporary clearnet¹⁰, the context collapse and consolidation of audiences invisible to users (boyd, 2010) means identity-based hate, harassment, and other forms of symbolic violence may be normalized through humor, desensitization, overexposure, and the like. As such, I look to the memes traded in gaming spaces not only as a form of Internet language but as media through which (at times violent) cultural ideas are conveyed, specifically as a form of ideological gatekeeping. Given that much of what is exchanged in memes is often dismissed as humorous or nonsensical, my project takes seriously the implicit cultural power of game-adjacent memetic communication that upholds hegemonic expectations about who gamers are, what they believe, and who games are ‘for.’

Guiding Questions and Lines of Inquiry

To describe the connection between the discourse-shaping potential of politically charged, game-adjacent memetic communication, my dissertation is organized into two parts. The first phase employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and uses the following research questions to guide the investigation:

RQ₁: How do meme patterns in game-adjacent space, explicitly or implicitly, promote hegemonic expectations within gaming culture - heteronormativity, whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, able-bodiedness, neurotypicality, etc.?

RQ₂: In what ways do meme patterns in game-adjacent space, explicitly or implicitly, espouse alt-right or politically extremist ideology?

RQ₃: In what ways do meme patterns in game-adjacent space co-opt gaming content (e.g., characters, well-known designers, industry news) for their political messaging?

¹⁰ The publicly accessible parts of the Internet, accessed through everyday web browsers like Google Chrome, Safari, Firefox, and others.

The second phase, which utilizes an interview approach followed by inductive thematic analysis, focuses on how people actually interpret and respond to these memetic discourses:

RQ₄: In what ways does exposure to gaming memes with extreme political views shape perceptions of, attitudes towards, and decisions to participate in, gaming culture?

RQ₅: In what ways do extreme political views influence expectations around who gamers are and what they believe?

RQ₆: In what ways do participants propose addressing the spread of extreme political views through gaming memes or within gaming culture more broadly?

Both studies are interconnected, as the second phase relies on insights from the first. The patterns revealed by the CDA guided the open-ended questions directed at the interviewees (appendix). Collectively, they work to highlight how extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication influence and shape the vernacular understanding of gaming's past, its present, and potential futures.

Methodology

Phase I: Memetic Analysis

Sampling and Platform Justification. I turn to various subreddit communities, forums hosted by Reddit, as spaces where gamers (and non-gaming observers) communicate memetically. Reddit's platform features support longer-form discussions about immersive media and allows for greater text-based navigation compared to platforms that do not primarily facilitate forum-style interaction (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021). I choose Reddit over other sites (e.g., YouTube, Discord, or Facebook) for three reasons: (1) Reddit hosts a variety of niche communities specifically focused on meme-sharing, (2) accessing game-related discussions within subreddits is easily enabled through the platform's keyword search and media sorting

functions, and (3) it includes several subreddits open to contentious political discussions (e.g., the currently-banned r/The_Donald and r/GamersRiseUp, see Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). In this way, I remain aware of how everyday users seek places to engage in memetic discussions and contribute to overall community discourse.

I utilized Caplan and Purser's (2019) framework for conducting qualitative research on Reddit to inform the community selection process. This involved several steps; I started by identifying an initial set of subreddits known for their substantial game-related and politically charged discussions. The initial list is included in the appendix; communities were selected based on their reputation and relevance as gaming or political discourse hubs. After a preliminary review of the entries on this list, I selected six communities— r/KotakuInAction, r/mramemes, r/videogames, r/PCMasterRace, r/Ask_TheDonald, and r/TheLeftCantMeme— as representative of the memetic discourse relevant to this project in terms of overlapping political rhetoric and gaming content. I utilized a third-party subreddit statistics aggregator (subredditstatistics.com, 2023) to verify each research site's size, ranking, subscriber counts, and crossover potential. As a procedural baseline, I used r/KotakuInAction, a self-described hub for Reddit Gamergaters that remains active. Data collection in each subreddit was done manually using screenshots, since the use of application programming interface (API) data scraping is now embargoed by the June 19th, 2023, Reddit Terms of Service (ToS) agreements and is subject to the discretion of each subreddit's moderators. To create a robust pool, I aimed to collect the top 100 memes from each community, utilizing Reddit's media sorting function and organizing posts by "top all-time" as voted by each community. This sampling technique yielded over 500 memes (N=577); at the time of collection, r/KotakuInAction had only 77 memes in its all-time list. Data collection occurred between March 4 and March 11, 2024. I explore this dataset in detail in Chapter Three.

The Memetic Dimensions Lens

Limor Shifman (2013) proposes using an analytical framework to interpret memes, arguing that considering the many dimensions behind their creation is helpful. As “units of imitation”, memes possess cultural *content*, *form*, and *stance*; when viewed through a dimensions perspective, a researcher can better ascertain the various levels of rhetorical content contained within a memetic text. The following is a quick explanation of this perspective’s scaffolded components (Shifman, 2013):

1. *Content*—The idea(s) and/or ideologies inherent to any text/image/video, etc. (p. 369).
2. *Form*—The actual shaping of said message in physical form; perceived through our human senses (p. 369).
3. *Stance*—The position or stance the creator/cultural participant takes relative to the message’s framing, context, and the meme’s place within the broader discourse (p. 369).

Applied to the dimensions perspective framework, I parse units of captured memetic communication through the framework’s scaffolded components (i.e., content, form, and stance). Once parsing is complete, I transition into a more critical-interpretive mode of analysis, specifically critical discourse analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This project employs critical discourse analysis (CDA), recognizing memetic communication as a form of Internet language. Developed in the 1970s through critical linguistics research, CDA focuses on the relationship between language, social institutions, and power inequities; thus, it examines the reproduction of power specifically through language as a tool of domination over the oppressed (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). More specifically, CDA views language as a social practice that enables the reproduction of cultural hegemony through both

text-based and broadcast media, among other modes. A relatively recent analytical development, CDA can be operationalized in a myriad of contexts and adapted to many research agendas (van Dijk, 2012; Wodak, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to demonstrate how I understand CDA in the context of my work: I am interested in how memes function as a specific style of cultural exchange (a form of Internet language) and the extent to which game-adjacent spaces hosting such exchange (i.e., social networking sites) influence the messaging process, if at all¹¹. CDA is sometimes criticized for focusing on “elite texts,” such as political speeches and mass media news copy (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). However, I argue that concentrating on memes, as user-generated content, takes seriously the social power of non-elite individuals to manipulate, perpetuate, or challenge hegemony through mediated interaction. Thus, CDA equips me with the tools to better understand how gaming communities articulate hegemonic ideas, either through explicit or implicit memetic communication, and how these ideas are shaped (and perhaps even influenced) by the rhetoric of political groups.

Phase 2: In-Depth Interviews

The second phase of my project utilizes semi-structured interviews to gain more insight into how gamers perceive the impact of extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication. I employ interviewing to achieve “a detailed level of personal depth and [description of] a smaller, specific group” (Cote & Raz, 2015, p. 93). As I have mentioned above, there are some existing forays into the convergence of political extremism and gaming, particularly via cultural approaches that consider how gaming communities intersect with adjacent toxic technocultures (e.g., involuntary celibates, men’s rights activists). Many of these studies use various forms of critical-interpretive textual analysis to address their research

¹¹ I contemplate the platformized conditions of game-adjacent spaces during my interview phase (below), and the results of this phase are presented in Chapter Four.

questions. This dissertation accompanies and adds to this scholarship by providing qualitative insights on how video game players perceive the effects of memetic communication in gaming (e.g., exacerbating or challenging stereotypical assumptions about games, gamers, and gaming culture), and whether these discourses push some people to disengage or reject altogether participation in gaming culture. My interview technique also aims to build rapport with participants in a way that allows them to share information they might otherwise feel less comfortable sharing in group contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Because interviewing with open-ended questions creates ample opportunity for data points that may not have otherwise occurred during interview guide drafting, it best suits the needs of my research goals by making space for rich co-creation of knowledge.

Interview questions with rapport-building prompts aim to establish the interviewee's gaming history and general perspectives on gaming culture and memes. Next, I pivot to in-depth questions about memetic content that may cross over into, or carry, political rhetoric, and how interviewees view these themes affecting established norms within gaming and game-adjacent spaces. The exit portion of the interview asks whether they believe gaming companies and game-adjacent platforms do enough to moderate content and facilitate the flow of potentially harmful discussion that occurs within their bounds, as well as asks for reflection on what they might suggest to improve current conditions. Interviews were facilitated through Zoom; audio recording transcriptions are cleaned and qualitatively assessed using the program Dedoose.

Selection & Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted through non-funded, in-person solicitation efforts across various undergraduate journalism and media studies seminars at a large research institution in the Pacific Northwest. An open invitation to participate was also extended through a collegiate

esports-focused Discord server affiliated with the same institution. Aside from the requirement to be a legal adult (18 years or older), there were no additional participation criteria, except regular video game play. This method allowed interviewees to self-select, suggesting they had a higher level of motivation and interest in the topic. However, this might have led to an overrepresentation of leftist sociocultural views, reflecting the well-known left-leaning political environment in the Pacific Northwest and previous literature showing greater socially liberal political affiliation on college campuses (Scott, 2024). In Chapter Four, I explore the implications of the “gamer” identity and the political viewpoints of the interviewees. The participant pool consisted of 17 respondents (N=17).

Inductive Thematic Analysis

Analysis and coding of cleaned interview transcriptions took place in the qualitative software Dedoose largely due to its robust capacity to host digital texts (i.e., cleaned transcriptions and memes) and analytical codebooks.

Cleaned interview data were assessed via an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Terry et al., 2017). Thematic analysis has been used in a variety of academic contexts, like sociology and cultural studies, and is useful for its affordance of drawing overarching themes from captured interview data. Since I operate from an inductive orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2022), coding unfolds organically from the bottom up. That is, inductive researchers generate codes based on the content of the transcripts, rather than preexisting hypotheses; they then sort resulting code clusters into themes based on identified patterns in the interview data. Inductive thematic analysis will allow me to illuminate and establish connections between extreme political views and cultural hegemony as it currently exists within gaming memes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Lawless & Chen, 2019). Specifically, I am employing a critical

application of thematic analysis, which overtly examines “the interrelationships between interview discourses, social practices, power relations, and ideologies” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 92). This critical approach to the interview data suits my project’s frame as an antifascist, antiracist, and feminist endeavor.

Concluding Thoughts

The literature collected here speaks to the various action invitations from like minds in critical game studies, fan studies, Internet memetics and visual culture studies, political science, sociology, and related fields. Together, they form my dissertation’s knowledge base, which attends to “combined... ethnographic, informatic, and discourse analytic methods [needed to] better assess the relationship between [digital hate] and sites and services like Gab.ai, Discord, Telegram, Reddit, and 8chan” (Colley & Moore, 2020, p. 25). As Garrison Wells and fellow co-authors’ (2023) recent systemic review on right-wing extremism in mainstream video games shows, the seepage of extreme political views into online gaming communities is currently well underway, potentially fomenting the radicalization of disenfranchised gamers. How I attempt to tie these threads together, then, is by contributing to “a nascent body of [Internet memetics] literature that argues the logics and practices of gaming culture are deeply interwoven with all digital culture, and that gaming supplies affects, concepts, and values for thinking and doing politics” (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023, p. 15). Video games have always been political. It is thus imperative to better understand how the extreme right’s visual communication strategies influence gaming culture, and to what ends.

2. More than a Game: Game-Adjacency as a Methodological Framework

Before addressing the results of my research, I would like to explain a concept I have used ad hoc elsewhere—*game-adjacency*— which is essential for understanding the critical-interpretive work that follows. Drawing on insights from communication, media sociology, and science and technology studies (STS), I conceptualize game-adjacency as the socially constructed participatory dynamics created by gaming communities and the external perceptions held by non-gamers of these spaces. This conceptualization reframes the spaces that orbit games as sites of cultural negotiation, particularly from a political perspective. Game-adjacency challenges the idea that gaming is apolitical or detached from broader sociocultural or political debate; it accounts for paratextual production while also acknowledging that not everyone who engages with a game-adjacent space identifies as part of gaming culture¹². Gaming culture includes the games industry, fans, fandoms, player communities, and even the crossover of gaming into adjacent entertainment media realms like music, literature, television, and film. Attention to games, gamers, and gaming is also observed in non-gaming sectors (e.g., education, see Klopfer et al., 2009; political activism, see Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021) as well as governmental and non-governmental (NGO) organizations (Gallagher et al., 2021; Vaux et al., 2021). Since far-right extremists capitalize on the lacking or absent content and community moderation of gaming platforms for internal communication and external radicalization, concern among legislative bodies and the broader public has grown about the influence of unchecked extreme rhetoric in so-called *game-adjacent spaces*. Ignoring these media flows risks missing new insights into how ideologically motivated groups harness gaming content to further their own political agendas.

¹² Paratexts are “texts or artifacts that surround a central text, lending that central text meaning, framing and shaping how we understand it” (Consalvo, 2017, p. 177).

This chapter explores the complex ways in which gamers and their communities collaboratively create and maintain gaming culture beyond the gameplay itself. These areas encompass various digital and social platforms where players engage in activities that, although not directly related to playing games, are nonetheless integral to gaming culture's continued upkeep. Utilizing in-game language to describe 'real life' objects, gamifying everyday tasks, engaging with preferred or subversive interpretations, and embracing or excluding others from game-adjacent spaces all contribute to gamers' ongoing co-creation of gaming culture. My articulation of game-adjacency expands upon scholars' previous use of 'game-adjacent' solely for social networking sites by also encompassing offline, extra-game environments alongside digital ones. The community-generated artifacts produced in both online and offline spaces—one example, Internet memes, which is the focal point of my dissertation—are vital to the (re)negotiation of gaming culture and should be regarded as cultural products that inherently engage with the power dynamics shaping gaming culture. My articulation of game-adjacency moves beyond its current role as a descriptor to highlight the memetic communication practices inherent to particular game-adjacent spaces and their outcomes. It also examines how the ideas embedded in these discourses influence cultural insiders and outsiders in their perceptions of what games, gamers, and gaming culture signify in today's sociocultural and political context.

This articulation of game-adjacency is pivotal for unpacking and understanding gaming communities' social, cultural, and political influence. Within digital game-adjacent spaces, video game memes have emerged and continue to function as a particularly potent form of cultural production (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). These memes, often humorous and ephemeral, carry an undercurrent of political significance, primarily when the memetic communication is directed at specific individuals or groups, or when it addresses

cultural debates related to identity and politics (Askanius, 2021; Hine et al., 2017; Nicholls, 2020). Video game memes serve as a medium through which gamers articulate and negotiate identity, community values, and ideological stances, even when gaming communities claim not to consciously engage in overtly political discourse or maintain that the content of memes lacks inherent meaning (Phillips & Milner, 2021). In non-digital game-adjacent spaces, discussions surrounding video game memes or offline events that arise from digital rhetoric (Bertrand & Atwood, 2023; Law, 2019; Reed, 2023) likewise contribute to the ongoing co-construction of gaming culture as an amorphous mass, something in flux that remains influenced by the same hegemonic structures impacting wider society. This chapter theorizes the role of game-adjacent memetic communication as a significant contributor to political discourse and outlines how non-digital or offline game-adjacency enhances these phenomena. By examining how memetic communication circulates, resonates within, and extends beyond gaming communities, I aim to uncover how they act as vehicles for political expression and influence. This analytical framing is crucial because many gamers do not view themselves or their communities as political entities (Bacovsky, 2021). Nonetheless, games, and by extension, game-adjacent productions like video game memes, are cultural productions—thereby reflecting and shaping broader societal attitudes and beliefs.

To conceptualize game-adjacency, I draw on Michel Foucault's (1977) theories of discourse and power, which provide a robust framework for understanding how knowledge and meaning are constructed and contested within cultural practices. Additionally, Johan Huizinga's (1955) concept of the "magic circle," which delineates the boundaries between play space and the real world, will be critically examined. Mia Consalvo's (2009) response to this idea, articulated in "There is No Magic Circle," challenges the notion of a clear separation between

game spaces and real-world influences, particularly as explored through cheating. Consalvo argues that while play spaces *may* serve as magical arenas for players to escape the stressors of everyday life, they are still deeply influenced by the broader sociocultural and political contexts in which they exist, reinforcing my argument that game-adjacency allows for, and in some cases encourages, sociocultural and political engagement.

I also consider the social construction of digital spaces, recognizing that virtual environments are neither neutral nor apolitical. Digital spaces are shaped by users' interactions, norms, and power dynamics, marking them as proving grounds for constructing and negotiating meaning (boyd, 2010; Couldry, 2004; Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2002). By integrating these theoretical perspectives (e.g., Foucauldian notes on discourse, magic circles, and the social construction of digital space), I provide a comprehensive understanding of how game-adjacency contributes to the co-creation of gaming culture and its political implications. I thus offer a theoretical foundation for understanding the sociocultural and political significance of video game memes and other forms of game-adjacent cultural production. Game-adjacency will help contextualize the complex interplay between gaming, culture, and politics as they manifest within the memes captured by my CDA. It will emphasize the importance of considering these dynamics as this project's interviewees discuss them.

Limitations of the Current “Game-Adjacent” Descriptor

Currently, the term “game-adjacent” primarily describes social media platforms that facilitate game-related discussions or sites utilized by gaming communities to encourage intragroup dialogue (e.g., Facebook/Meta gaming groups, Reddit's subreddit communities, Discord servers, 4chan boards; see Amarasingam & Kelley, 2024; Davey, 2024). While this definition is accurate, it overlooks how a space's structuration contributes to the ongoing co-

creation of gaming culture, influencing both external and internal perceptions of games, gamers, and gaming in the process. Moreover, “game-adjacent” does not encompass how individuals co-create gaming culture beyond and around games in *physical* or *offline* settings. Both elements are socially constructed and rich with interaction, playing a crucial role in shaping and reflecting political discourse, and exist as political arenas despite some contrary assertions. Below, I examine the conceptual applications of “game-adjacent” as it is currently understood in critical game studies scholarship, along with concepts (such as Huizinga’s magic circle and the social construction of digital space) that bolster the more comprehensive view of *game-adjacency* that I am sketching here.

Digital Game-Adjacency as Social Platforming

Research on the mediated communication practices of gaming communities often focuses on how gamers congregate on social media platforms or proprietary websites of game companies to discuss in-game events, community topics, industry news, current events, and more (Bergstrom, 2021). Studies that emphasize the *gaming* aspects of these communities commonly turn to sites like Reddit (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021) or game-specific forums (Bergstrom, 2017; Condis, 2018) due to their longer text-based affordances. Other studies that emphasize actions occurring *beyond, beside, or around* the confines of games have turned to interactions on Facebook (Fleet, 2022), Discord (Gallagher et al., 2021; Johnson & Salter, 2022), or even digital distribution services like the online retailer Steam (Vaux et al., 2021). Research that takes a critical view of the sociocultural and political implications of game-based media traded in digital political arenas has likewise approached sites like the imageboard 4chan (Colley & Moore, 2022; Hine et al., 2017) or the microblogging platform Twitter (Bleakley, 2023) as valuable research venues. More recently, the term “gaming-adjacent” has emerged in published scholarship to

describe platforms existing specifically alongside video games and housing problematic activities such as extreme-right hate speech (e.g., Amarasingam & Kelley, 2024; Davey, 2024). Although a full meta-analytic review of the term in contemporary literature lies beyond this dissertation's scope, its current usage implies game-adjacency is a more digital than physical descriptor.

Regardless of the investigative context, the studies outlined above highlight several standard features that enable gaming communities to co-create and extend gaming culture: (1) the ability to post and share user-generated content, including memes, videos, fan fiction, etc.; (2) opportunities for interaction and engagement, such as forums, chat rooms, comment threading, and up/down voting; (3) knowledge production and resource sharing, like hyperlinking to community-generated game modifications or guided game walkthroughs; (4) platform moderation, allowing a select few (i.e., moderators) to influence or control the discursive flow; (5) identity construction, enabling members to express both internal and external in-game and social identities through avatars, usernames, linked accounts, or other platform profiling options; and (6) the potential for sociocultural and political expression, which connects the *inward game-based focus* of gaming communities to the extra-game or offline world. While each platform varies slightly based on overall communication affordance (and possibly, clientele), the common thread among them is that, from a critical communication and media studies perspective, these platforms excel in facilitating cultural production, social interaction, and opportunities for political discourse. However, where this description falls short is its focus on the digital instead of phenomena occurring in the physical.

Analog Game-Adjacency as Congregation

Analog gaming communities, such as those involved with tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs like Wizards of the Coast's *Dungeons & Dragons*, Paizo, Inc.'s *Pathfinder*, or Evil Hat Productions' *Blades in the Dark*), tabletop war games (Games Workshop's *Warhammer 40,000* and *Warhammer: Age of Sigmar*), and the competitive trading card games scene (TCGs like The Pokémon Company's¹³ *Pokémon TCG* or Hasbro's *Magic: The Gathering*), also utilize many of the same community functions as previously mentioned. For example, user-generated content in digital form (mods, fan content) can be adapted into custom or house rules, bespoke scenarios, or "one-shot" campaigns, along with personalized character profiles (often referred to as "homebrew content," alluding to the concept of brewing beverages at home). Social interaction and community engagement are similarly supported through physical gatherings; game stores, conventions, restaurants, and private homes can all facilitate community building and enable analog gamers to sustain the communities of play to which they belong. Beyond the gameplay itself, these same physical spaces also promote (and necessitate) interpersonal communication, either regarding the games in question or on non-gaming topics, as an integral part of the analog experience, which provides a tangible demonstration of game-adjacency displayed through human interaction. In other words, the co-creation of gaming culture is likewise brokered in physical spaces through verbal, nonverbal, and symbolic modes of communication. The interaction occurring in these contexts can renegotiate or challenge perceptions about *what* gaming is and can be, *who* gamers are, and *how* game-based communication unfolds. For example, the Charity Gaming Guild, a TTRPG group in the United Kingdom focused on *Dungeons & Dragons*, raises money through member donations and events,

¹³ Itself originally created by joint investment from multimedia franchises Nintendo, Game Freak, and Creatures (The Pokémon Company, n.d.)

which is then donated to charities, including youth hospitals and hospice care centers (Charity Gaming Guild, n.d.). This activity shows how gaming communities can leverage gameplay for altruistic means, using their play as a launchpad for prosocial community initiatives in areas that orbit gaming culture.

A Foucauldian Perspective on Game-Adjacent Discourse & Power

User-generated content created and diffused throughout game-adjacent spaces—digital or physical—serves as a medium through which discourse¹⁴ is constructed and contested; by extension, maintaining, negotiating, or challenging power dynamics through said diffusion. Such creations allow community members to negotiate meanings, identities, and accepted community practices (norms) synchronously and asynchronously. These creations have a significant push/pull effect on keeping community members engaged and maintaining interest among members and outside observers alike. For example, *World of Warcraft*'s add-on system, in which the community designs supplementary software to enhance the game's user interface, has contributed significantly to *World of Warcraft*'s overall longevity. In some cases, add-ons have been so successful that the *World of Warcraft* developers have borrowed (or acquired altogether) community-generated modifications, reintegrating them back into the game and creating a kind of beneficial loop between community-managed add-ons and Activision-Blizzard's design teams (Smith, 2024). Continuing with this example, this power dynamic allows for the production and dissemination of knowledge across game-adjacent *World of Warcraft* spaces (forums, game groups, interpersonal discussions between friends) as a hierarchy around the “best” add-ons for in-game content (e.g., damage and healing output meters, skill cooldown trackers, user-interface

¹⁴ Defined in the previous chapter as the knowledge production economies that exacerbate distance between social strata; accounts for constructed ‘commonsense’ attitudes towards social, cultural, and political topics leveraged via mass media, education, religion, etc. (Foucault, 1977; Wodak, 2014; van Dijk, 2012).

modifications, item-tracking systems) is negotiated and maintained. Chris Paul's 2024 book, *Optimizing Play*, argues that knowledge economies (e.g., player theorycrafting of a game's *meta*¹⁵) may favor specific modes of play while devaluing or completely silencing others. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, this would involve players utilizing add-ons to track class performance data in competitive gameplay. This practice leads to certain classes being viewed as 'meta picks,' resulting in those without these community designations receiving fewer invitations to high-level multiplayer modes, transposing a knowledge-based hierarchy born out of game-adjacent discourse to the game environment.

In some cases, Activision-Blizzard needs to intervene and moderate the influence of add-ons because they provide players with *excessive, unintended* power. Some software has violated *World of Warcraft's* Terms of Service (ToS) due to game-breaking mechanic circumventions or exploitative currency farming (Smith, 2023). Company and community moderation surrounding certain add-on modifications, among many other factors, reflects the power dynamics within any specific *World of Warcraft* community and Activision-Blizzard's oversight of its player communities and fandoms. While these relationships may seem limited to gameplay, it is essential to recognize that they reinforce (at least for some players) neoliberal ideas such as value extraction (Which add-ons are the best?), meritocracy (How can add-ons be used to improve my gameplay, thereby elevating my in-game status?), and other marketplace dynamics (From a design-oriented perspective, will my add-on receive community support through direct donations or attention from Activision-Blizzard themselves?). Although they represent a uniquely creative aspect of community production, the *World of Warcraft* add-on economy illustrates how

¹⁵ "Meta" refers to players' emergent consensus on the best strategies, items, environmental routes, character class choices, and more, to achieve success within a particular game. This consensus is subject to change pending game developer content patching (i.e., live updates) in response to observed player data (i.e., 'balance tuning').

knowledge and cultural production in game-adjacent spaces directly impact gaming environments, and vice versa, in turn influencing perceptions of the game. Indeed, these debates are not strictly relegated to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Enhancing gameplay for a competitive advantage is evident through third-party controllers and cheating software that assist with aiming in FPS games, enable peeking through previously obscured walls, or permit players to conceal themselves in otherwise inaccessible in-game areas (Consalvo, 2009; Gorton & Abiona, 2023). As such, these productions showcase how the industry and players negotiate power, in both design capacities and in hierarchizing permissible modes of play.

Game-Adjacency Beside and Beyond the Magic Circle

Johan Huizinga's (1955) germinal work, "Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture," examines the significance of play in human culture and society, introducing the "magic circle" as a conceptual boundary that separates the world of play from everyday life. This concept suggests that, within such bounds, individuals are free to engage in playful activities that adhere to rules and norms distinct from those governing the ordinary world. In this conceptualization, play is compared to a cultural phenomenon sharing many formal characteristics of ritual; in other words, rituals represent a form of "sacred play," blending playful belief and make-belief in the pursuit of meaning that occurs within any given play context. The magic circle encompassing such activities thus clarifies acceptable or unacceptable behavior, creating an ephemeral spatiotemporal reality where participants can explore and experience the pleasures of play without the consequences (at least, in theory) of real-life actions. Viewed this way, Huizinga contended that play is a fundamental part of human experience, shared across cultures, societies, spaces, and times. With playful and gameful elements evident

in various aspects of human life (e.g., art, language, rituals, social structures), Huizinga argued that the magic circle provides a framework for understanding the symbolic and transformative power of play and its role in shaping human experience.

One of the pivotal ludological theories, Huizinga's magic circle has faced considerable critique throughout the developmental trajectory of game studies. Some, like Mia Consalvo (2009), have critiqued the magic circle framework by examining the influence of tangible external factors on the play experience that, contrary to what the original conceptualization may suggest, have real implications for players' lives. Cheating, as briefly noted above, highlights the limitations of the magic circle; player motivations for winning in playful or gameful environments may lead to tangible results (e.g., monetary or other lucrative rewards), which may compel some to pursue unfair advantages. Whether this cheating occurs in digital contexts (e. g., cheating software that may enhance click time, speed, or automate gameplay functions) or physical contexts (e. g., performance-enhancing drugs, alterations to equipment) is less relevant to critiques of the magic circle than the understanding that cheating reveals the frustrations, limitations, and commitments players make to their games and play. To extend this example, some instances of cheating or other sanctioned behaviors (aggression, bullying) may warrant legal action, destabilizing or completely undermining the notion that actions within a magic circle of play are entirely contained within those spaces. Therefore, I echo Consalvo's (2009) assertion that the magic circle, while still valuable in establishing a framework for understanding the cultural outcomes of play and games, is inadequate for comprehending the complexities of modern gaming, where people from diverse backgrounds and worldviews intersect, overlap, and, in some cases, clash.

The #FreeHongKong online debates that led to protests outside the 2019 BlizzCon convention illustrate how politics directly influence game and game-adjacent spaces. Motivated by Activision-Blizzard's suspension of *Hearthstone* professional player Chung "Blitzchung" Ng Wai, who vocally supported the Hong Kong protests during an official *Hearthstone Grandmasters* event in Taiwan, protestors drew attention to corporate censorship of free expression (Grayson, 2019). Game journalist Nathan Grayson (2019) reported that pro-Hong Kong groups coordinated on a Reddit forum called Protest BlizzCon, showcasing how game-adjacent political activism can cross digital boundaries and manifest in offline spaces, such as Activision-Blizzard's famous BlizzCon convention. I contend that game-adjacent spaces, while at times appearing to exist in silos that isolate them from the real world, are influenced by non-gaming sociocultural discourses that, in turn, affect game-adjacent discourse and interaction.

Social Construction of Game-Adjacent Spaces

Just as Nick Couldry (2004) suggests understanding media as practice—meaning adopting a critical perspective on the social functions of media—rather than solely concentrating on media effects, I also argue that game-adjacency is a systemic process characterized by continuity and constant change. This interpretation of game-adjacency encourages scholars to look beyond the activities *within* game-adjacent arenas and to examine how communication in these spaces influences the social contexts *surrounding* gaming communities. From this perspective, game-adjacent spaces reflect and perpetuate power structures and inequalities both internally and externally; the norms inherent in any game-adjacent space may align with offline hegemonic structures (e.g., whiteness, heteronormativity) while also having the potential to challenge and reshape these systems (e.g., celebrating marginalized identities and offering transgressive readings of media texts). The internal and external processes of game-adjacent

communication thus create feedback loops wherein each process continually influences the other, for better or worse.

In the context of digital game adjacency, the social construction of these areas mirrors the forces that have shaped other non-gaming digital communities, social platforms, and the Internet more broadly. Previous scholarship has positioned the Internet as a virtual sphere hopeful for new multimodal opportunities, democratic participation, and transparent political discourse, yet it shows how it is ultimately shaped by market logic and economics (e.g., commercialization and capitalism) that have stymied its potential (Papacharissi, 2002). Although digital spaces allow for new and innovative forms of cultural production and expression, they remain influenced by offline social constructions (e.g., the social construction of race, racism, and colorism) that become codified into the systems that enable mediated communication (Daniels, 2013). For instance, biases within computer systems (e.g., preexisting biases originating from social institutions, technical biases arising from technical constraints, or emergent biases stemming from real contextual applications) can systematically encourage discrimination against, or obfuscation of, marginalized modes of knowledge production (Friedman & Nissenbaum, 1996). Algorithmic culture studies have shown that information systems design can lead to censorship of community-based organizing and social justice advocacy (e.g., the #occupywallstreet Twitter hashtag coordination not trending on Twitter despite engagement); algorithms and search engines sort, classify, and hierarchize mediated culture based on internal computations informed by stakeholders and contextually collapsed audience engagement, resulting in digitized othering that promotes cultural hegemony and marginalization (Gillespie, 2012; Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Striplas, 2015). Digital game-adjacent spaces, taking on the political implications of these virtual systems, can therefore be understood as arenas that allow

gaming culture to be co-created and platformized, yet still remain subject to the same considerations outlined previously.

In the context of analog game adjacency, the social construction of space is equally diverse. For instance, norms and behaviors deemed acceptable or unacceptable within analog gaming communities reflect social power dynamics concerning race, gender, socioeconomic class, and other identity categories (Deterding & Zagal, 2018). Moreover, the representation or visibility of marginalized identities in physical game-adjacent spaces aligns with the culturally hegemonic structures that impact digital game-adjacent spaces, and vice versa. Cultural production in these spaces (e.g., the “homebrew” examples outlined above) is similarly shaped by common sense or ruling ideas; some homebrew content may reinforce normalized ways of knowing (e.g., assumptions of whiteness as the default character choices), while others may consciously resist and celebrate marginalized identities (Hall, 2022). Likewise, the informal learning processes, community values, and textual interpretations occurring in analog game-adjacent spaces demonstrate the same feedback loops that affect digital game-adjacent communication and its external perceptions: *who* and *what* analog gamers are, *how* they communicate, and so on. Thus, digital and analog game-adjacency fosters sociocultural and political discourse in, around, beside, and beyond gaming, enabling gaming culture to remain in flux.

The Participatory Function(s) of Game-Adjacency

As outlined in the previous chapter, scholarship on text-sharing assemblages, or “interpretive communities,” describes individuals exchanging ideas in pursuit of meaning-making around their media foci (Jenkins et al., 2013; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). The norms established by these communities help create patterns for assessing

texts, whether they exist within cinema, literature, video games, comic books, graphic novels, fan fiction, and so on (Jenkins et al., 2013). Thus, individuals form (dis)agreement on particular media interpretations they find essential or collectively appreciate. These readings then become normalized operational modes that influence or guide future interactions (e.g., textual discussion and debate), schemas for interpretation (correct vs. incorrect reads), and means of cultural production (Jenkins et al., 2013; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015). The perspectives these interpretive communities bestow upon correct or normative readings are not always aligned with broader sociocultural values (e.g., Hermes & Hill, 2018); some groups push back against perceived identity politicking, diverse representation, and related advocacy concerns, while others actively promote and celebrate diversity and inclusion (Jenkins et al., 2013; Kearney, 2019). Context notwithstanding, the social interaction within these communities enables informal learning and the entrenchment of community values between and among their members.

In gaming culture, across both digital and analog sectors, interpretive communities play an integral role concerning the broader player population: they create, distribute, and maintain *game-adjacent communication*. Utilizing core functions such as user-generated content and community moderation, players encourage intracultural exchange that leads to cultural production. The participatory nature of these interpretive gaming groups is facilitated by gamers' diverse interpretations and positions on whether games or game-related media are acceptable based on the established or anticipated norms within any given community. In other words, discussions in these environments can influence the power dynamics within the community, either echoing or contesting broader sociocultural and political contexts. Therefore, understanding game-adjacency through the lens of interpretive communities or participatory culture enhances our comprehension of how gaming culture is co-created and how political

discourse is shaped within these spaces. This perspective highlights the importance of considering gaming communities' sociocultural and political dimensions in contemporary digital media and physical contexts.

Theorizing Game-Adjacency & Its Dimensions

What I call *game-adjacency* describes the socially constructed spaces and practices, both digital and physical, where gaming culture is continuously co-created, negotiated, and contested through various forms of interaction and cultural production. These spaces extend beyond the immediate confines of games, serving as arenas for discourses that reflect and influence broader sociocultural and political dynamics. Game-adjacency can be understood spatially (online vs. offline, or digital vs. analog), through direct or indirect relations to games, levels of interactivity, cultural production, power dynamics, identity constructions, opportunities for sociopolitical expression, boundary fluctuation and permeability. While this initial proposition cannot reasonably account for the myriad idiosyncratic moments of communication that occur between players, gamers, community members, and observers in game-adjacent spaces, I present these dimensions as an initial step toward codifying the multifaceted nature and participatory aspects of gaming culture, along with the sociopolitical implications of these spaces and practices.

Spatial Dimension (Online vs. Offline, or Digital vs. Analog)

Game-adjacency's first dimension is its scaffolding of online (digital) or offline (analog) space. Through digital means, social media platforms, game forums, streaming sites, and even learning management systems can be considered game-adjacent spaces, provided they contain trace elements of communication, cultural production, or related identity work that contribute to gaming culture. Put simply, any digital spaces enabling interactions related to games, gamers, and gaming—such as creating and sharing user-generated content, or political discussions

impacting the daily lives of gaming community members—are considered part of game-adjacent space. Applying this reasoning to the physical realm, game stores, conventions, private gatherings, hackathons, and other offline modes of interaction can also be considered game-adjacent. The key takeaway from game-adjacency’s spatial dimension is that both realms influence one another; events in the digital sphere can and do impact physical interpersonal or intracultural communication, while offline phenomena inspire discussions, debates, or other communicative modes in the digital sphere. Further, this dimension asks researchers to consider how political discourses generated online transition into physical contexts, sometimes manifesting into activism or violence. Offline game-adjacent spaces, like conventions, conversely reinforce or contest digital discourses through identity expression and can influence the ebbs and flows of future mediated communication.

Table 1. Spatial Dimension of Game-Adjacent Space

<i>Digital (Online) Spaces</i>	<i>Analog (Offline) Spaces</i>
Social Media Platforms. Twitter, Reddit, and Discord servers where players discuss games, share memes, and engage in political discourse.	Game Stores. Local game shops where players meet to play TTRPGs or other analog games, discuss game strategies, and purchase game-related merchandise.
Streaming Sites. Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Facebook Live, DLive, Kick, or other platforms where live streaming and recorded content foster community interaction and cultural production.	Conventions. Events like PAX, Gen Con, IGDA, SXSW, or smaller regional gaming conventions, where players gather for panels, gaming sessions, and social interaction.
Game Forums. Official game forums or community boards like Activision-Blizzard’s <i>World of Warcraft</i> forums or Square Enix’s <i>Final Fantasy XIV</i> forums, where players discuss game mechanics, lore, and game and industry news like content patching or downloadable content.	Private Gatherings. Home-based game nights or local area network (LAN) parties where friends and family gather to play games and socialize.
Learning Management Systems. Platforms like Canvas used for educational seminars	Hackathons. Events where developers and players collaborate to create new games or

about game design or game studies; any
course shell that covers gaming culture.

game-related content.

Direct & Indirect Relations to Games

Like the spatial dimension above, game-adjacent spaces can be evaluated through their direct or indirect relationships with games. Direct relationships may involve discussions about specific games, series, entire intellectual properties, gameplay, or industry news. Indirect relationships might encompass identity formation and maintenance (e.g., sharing experiences in a particular community, as commonly seen in MMORPG communities) or political discourse on topics such as employment, immigration, and social justice. Internal and external perceptions, along with ongoing evaluations of how closely a game-adjacent space relates to games, can influence an individual's continued engagement or a non-community member's choice to participate in the space. For instance, a new player who has chosen to engage with a game after watching its transmedia content (e.g., an Amazon television series) might opt not to participate in its related subreddit forums if they perceive the politically charged debates as unappealing. Conversely, some players may seek out game-adjacent spaces to discuss and debate such issues, enhancing their sense of belonging to a particular group, community, or game-adjacent space. From a political perspective, analyzing the directness or indirectness of a game-adjacent space's relationship to games is crucial for determining whether political discussion is overt or subtle, as well as the degree to which ideology is embedded in any particular community's interactions. In other words, this dimension reveals how game-adjacent spaces actively politicize or depoliticize intragroup communication, subsequently shaping insider and outsider perceptions of that space and gaming culture more broadly.

Table 2. Direct & Indirect Relations to Games

<i>Direct Relations</i>	<i>Indirect Relations</i>
Gameplay Discussion. Forums and Discord servers where players discuss strategies, game mechanics, and in-game events.	Identity Formation: MMORPG guild forums where members may discuss their non-gaming lived experiences, fostering a sense of community identity and increasing engagement with the game.
Industry News. Websites and social media accounts dedicated to covering game industry news, releases, and updates.	Political Discourse. Subreddits and forums where gamers discuss social justice, employment, immigration, gun rights, reproductive rights, and other political issues.

Level of Interactivity

Interaction within game-adjacent spaces can be categorized into three subcategories: high, moderate, and low interaction. High degrees of interaction might involve real-time (synchronous) chatting or interpersonal communication, live streaming, or in-person gatherings. Moderate degrees of interaction include asynchronous forum discussions or social media posts; in offline or analog contexts, this might refer to interactions or gatherings that feature prolonged periods of silence or infrequent verbal communication, such as when a university's TTRPG student life club uses a library or classroom quiet space to plan game sessions. A low degree of interaction might consist of static content (e.g., fan art, game mods) that can be installed (or applied) and forgotten, or in-person gatherings that occur only once or twice a year. Importantly, these distinctions are mutable and highly context-dependent; for instance, a game-adjacent space (a gaming convention) might simultaneously exhibit both a high degree (based on factors like attendance and interaction between attendees and event organizers) and a low degree (only an annual meeting) of interaction. It is more helpful to think of a game-adjacent space's level of interactivity in broad strokes rather than forcing an entire space into a singular, fixed

categorization. A game-adjacent space’s level of interactivity indicates how swiftly and intensely political messages spread within and across that area. High-interactivity spaces can rapidly amplify political narratives or misinformation. In contrast, low-interactivity spaces may preserve norms through long-lasting artifacts like well-liked or highly commented memetic artifacts or fan creations.

Table 3. Level of Interactivity

<i>High Interaction</i>	<i>Moderate Interaction</i>	<i>Low Interaction</i>
Live Streaming. Twitch streams with active chat participation and synchronous interactions between streamers and viewers.	Asynchronous Discussions. Reddit threads or forum posts where participants engage in ongoing (albeit asynchronous) interaction.	Static Content. Fan art, game mods, or walkthroughs that are created and shared but do not require ongoing interaction.
In-Person Gatherings. Gaming conventions or regular TTRPG sessions where participants engage in face-to-face interaction.	Quiet Spaces. University TTRPG clubs using library or classroom spaces for planning sessions with infrequent verbal communication.	Annual or Irregular Events. Gaming conventions or related gatherings that occur infrequently, with limited interaction outside those events.

Cultural Production

Cultural production in game-adjacent contexts takes many forms. User-generated content (memes, videos, fan fiction, mods, homebrew/custom rules, and one-shot scenarios) and knowledge sharing (guides and walkthroughs) represent visible modes of cultural production. From an outsider’s or non-academic perspective, less apparent forms of cultural output include the linguistic idiosyncrasies (jargon, insider language) and nonverbal practices (turn-taking, appearance/dress/avatar) unique to specific communities or subcultures. This dimension is vital for examining how political ideas and norms get integrated into artifacts generated by users and communities and in memetic communication flows like memes, videos, and mods. In this way,

the cultural productions of game-adjacent spaces serve as political agents, influencing community values by either challenging or reinforcing wider societal ideologies and power structures as they are created and spread both within and outside their original contexts.

Table 4. Cultural Production

<i>User-Generated Content</i>	<i>Knowledge Sharing</i>
Digital. Internet memes, videos, fan fiction, and mods.	Digital. Guides, walkthroughs, Let's Play(through) videos, strategy and tips shared on forums, wikis, and social media content creation.
Analog. Discussing memes in person, homebrew rules, custom or personalized role-playing performed in person, bespoke one-shot scenarios.	Analog. Guides, play demonstrations, and discussing strategies or game mechanics in person.

Power Dynamics

Like cultural production, power functions in various ways within game-adjacent spaces. In both digital and analog contexts, three main subcategories influence game-adjacent communication processes: community moderation, industry influence, and internal hierarchies; some may be socially constructed, while others may be more automated or impersonal. Each subcategory illustrates the political stakes involved in a specific game-adjacent space, highlighting how political discourses can be amplified or muted. Regarding community moderation, social contracts and guidelines help regulate communication and nominally guard against problematic behaviors. Individual figures, such as group organizers or forum moderators, may assume roles as either recognized or de facto community leaders, potentially delegating moderation tasks to a community council or moderation team. Regardless of the context, however, community moderation is always interwoven with its own politics, supporters, and critics. More egalitarian community moderation techniques may foster positive interactions.

Conversely, authoritarian or laissez-faire strategies might compel members to adjust their communication practices (out of fear of retribution) or withdraw entirely from the game-adjacent space. Much of this reasoning similarly applies to industry influence in game-adjacent environments, instead focusing on how specific companies (or entire sectors) impact communication within these spaces. For instance, a game company might purge a game forum due to low interaction, or a hotel or convention center could cancel a future event because of poor attendance or sales.

Lastly, internal hierarchies (both formal and informal) further influence the flow of communication in game-adjacent spaces. More experienced members may take on mentoring roles, often recognized with badges, ribbons, flairs, or other symbolic means that acknowledge experience and longevity within a particular community. Newer members might similarly receive new member symbols or display their relative inexperience by struggling to follow or misusing jargon. Whether these internal hierarchies are respected or resisted varies by the game-adjacent space. However, it is worth noting—similar to other dimensions of game-adjacency—that a person’s position within a hierarchy might impact their decision to limit or altogether forego continued engagement in a game-adjacent context space.

Table 5. Power Dynamics

<i>Community Moderation</i>	<i>Industry Influence</i>	<i>Internal Hierarchies</i>
Social contracts, guidelines, and moderation teams managing forums and online communities; social mores or norms that affect in-person socialization.	Game companies influencing community spaces through official forums, event sponsorships, and marketing.	Recognition of experienced members with badges or related symbols, and the role of newer members in community dynamics.

Identity Construction

Perhaps the most straightforward aspect of game-adjacency, identity construction occurring within these spaces involves the discussion, demonstration, and ongoing maintenance of in-game identities, the enactment of community roles (e.g., new member facilitator, community moderator, content creator), and the representation of marginalized groups. Identity construction within game-adjacent spaces, like game-adjacency itself, is a continuous process that remains in flux. Identities are not fixed but mutable. Notably, some elements of a person's identity in game-adjacent spaces may be visible or invisible to others depending on context (e.g., hiding one's ethnicity in their profile on a social media platform; identifying oneself as a community leader or representative through ribbons or badges at an in-person convention). The visibility or invisibility of these elements influences game-adjacent communication in various ways, similar to its spatial, relational, and power dynamics dimensions. Thus, identity construction provides insights into how political rhetoric shapes—and is shaped by—community members' expression, negotiation, or concealment of their identities. This dimension demonstrates how tensions surrounding categories like gender, race, and sexuality are performed or contested in game-adjacent spaces, elevating their status from simple sites of game-based congregation to discursive arenas of cultural struggle.

Table 6. Identity Construction

<i>In-Game Identities</i>	<i>Community Roles</i>	<i>Representation</i>
Discussions and demonstrations of in-game characters and roles.	Roles such as new member facilitators, community moderators, and content creators.	Visibility and support for marginalized identities within game-adjacent spaces.

Sociopolitical Expression

Sociopolitical expression in game-adjacent spaces may reflect broader sociocultural issues- such as gun rights, immigration, reproductive rights, war, or armed conflict- challenge or reinforce hegemonic structures like whiteness, heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, and ableism, or call for activism and advocacy through gaming communities aligning with social initiatives, such as LGBTQIA+ gaming groups, or collaborating with groups that advocate for political initiatives, like humanitarian relief efforts in the Ukraine-Russia or Israel-Palestine conflicts. Similar to the dimensions mentioned above, the extent to which internal members and external observers recognize sociopolitical expression within game-adjacent spaces can foster increased intracommunity activity or exacerbate negative out-group perceptions. This dimension links gaming communities to broader political discourses, allowing researchers and observers to trace how game-adjacent spaces transform into arenas for deliberation, activism, or conflict. Furthermore, the sociopolitical expression dimension emphasizes how game-adjacent communication reflects, or perhaps influences, the contemporary debates in which they are situated (e.g., immigration, international relations, domestic politics).

Table 7. Sociopolitical Expression

<i>Broader Sociocultural Issues</i>	<i>Hegemonic Structures</i>	<i>Activism & Advocacy</i>
Discussions on gun rights, immigration, reproductive rights, war, armed conflict, climate activism, etc.	Debates challenging or reinforcing norms such as whiteness, heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, etc.	Gaming communities aligning with social initiatives or political causes.

Boundary Fluctuation and Permeability

Perhaps the most challenging dimension to articulate is the boundaries of game-adjacent spaces and how they fluctuate or may be permeated. For example, it is often difficult to quantify the influence of external factors on gaming culture; sometimes, high-visibility current events (e.g., an election cycle, a pandemic outbreak, the death of a celebrity) can shape internal discourse and, over time, even affect the overall cultural atmosphere within a specific space (and perhaps, in exceptional cases, gaming culture more broadly). In other instances, it may be easier to ascertain the impact of gaming culture on non-gaming spaces by observing and measuring increased frequencies of game-based content (jargon, imagery, memetic ideas, characters, story beats, etc.) in those areas. Therefore, the overall significance of this dimension lies in understanding that game-adjacent spaces *are not* isolated echo chambers solely inhabited by gamers. Instead, these spaces should be viewed as environments that allow for varying degrees of movement and are inevitably influenced by the broader social groups, constructs, and cultural systems surrounding them. This dimension enables a better understanding of how external political events (elections, protests, global crises) influence the intragroup communication of a game-adjacent space, and vice versa, underscoring that these spaces are not ideologically isolated but party to wider discussion about social, cultural, and political events.

Table 8. Boundary Fluctuation & Permeability

<i>External Influences</i>	<i>Internal Impact</i>
High-visibility events influencing internal discourse and cultural atmosphere within game-adjacent spaces.	Game-based content influencing non-gaming spaces, evidenced by the increased presence of gaming-related jargon, imagery, and ideas.

Argumentation & Case Examples

Game-Adjacency Extends Gaming Culture

As I have set forth above, game-adjacency refers to socially constructed spaces and practices, both online and offline (or digital and physical), where gaming culture is continuously co-created, negotiated, and contested through various forms of interaction and cultural production. These spaces extend beyond the confines of games, influencing broader sociocultural and political dynamics. Game-adjacency encompasses multiple dimensions, such as spatiality (online vs. offline), direct or indirect relations to games, levels of interactivity, cultural production, power dynamics, identity construction, sociopolitical expression, and boundary fluctuation and permeability. By charting these dimensions, I have begun to outline how game-adjacency can serve as a framework for understanding the complex interactions within game-adjacent spaces and the broader sociopolitical implications such interactions may carry, especially when they involve social, cultural, or political overtones.

Game-adjacent spaces are pivotal in co-creating gaming culture, where cultural productions such as memes, fan fiction, game mods, and homebrew rules continually shape and redefine what it means to associate with gaming communities and gaming culture more broadly. These spaces allow players to share, negotiate, or otherwise engage with their identities, experiences, and received knowledge, fostering a collaborative environment that extends well beyond the confines of the games. This identity play and social interaction, I argue, lend game-adjacency its importance; without game-adjacent communication, these areas would be mere empty silos where players sit with their experiences in isolation, and the spaces themselves might not even exist at all. In other words, one of the most important aspects of gaming culture is sharing one's sense of playfulness and gamefulness with others, and without game-adjacent

spaces, facilitating these interactions would be much more difficult. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that, while still subject to the hegemonic structures influencing society and culture, game-adjacent spaces also serve as arenas where power dynamics (e.g., whiteness, homophobia) may be challenged and resisted through critical discourse and activism. Game-adjacent spaces that promote inclusive practices and advocate for marginalized groups, for example, establish these areas as critical sites for expression. To illustrate these points, I will now exemplify how digital and physical game-adjacent spaces accommodate the abovementioned dimensions while commenting on their potential for critical resistance.

Twitch and YouTube Gaming: Online/Digital

Perhaps some of the lowest-hanging fruit exemplifying digital game-adjacency is found in live streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube Gaming, highlighting how services closely tied to games and gaming culture have been leveraged for other purposes. This exposure introduces wider audiences not only to their communicative functionality but to gaming culture as a whole. Although a deep dive into the emerging field of creator and live streaming studies lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, the connection in the context of game-adjacency is clear: streaming platforms enable creators (and audiences) to engage in ways not typically afforded by other media forms (e.g., television), creating opportunities for more direct engagement with sociopolitical and cultural issues (Crecente, 2015). Following rapid widespread adoption due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, live streaming platforms have found uses in educational settings (Crecente, 2015), been utilized by politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to connect with younger audiences (Anti-Defamation League, 2021), and been employed by content creators to cover topics (e.g., the ongoing Palestine-Israel conflict) that are soft-censored by mainstream social platforms (Lorenz, 2024). Although there are countless ties to gaming

culture, live streaming platforms act as a central hub. Here, gamers can engage with sociocultural topics, while non-gaming audiences gain insight into gaming as a cultural phenomenon (and vice versa).

Cosplay Events & Conventions: Offline/Physical

Fan studies describe how cosplay events and conventions are another example of game-adjacent spaces because they extend gaming's social and cultural functions beyond the digital realm into the physical (Booth, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2023). For instance, costume design, in-person textual readings, and other forms of cultural production that occur at conventions (e.g., a *World of Warcraft* guild meeting up in-person at Activision-Blizzard's BlizzCon event) foster both direct and indirect relationships to games through the performance of in-game personas, actualizing in-game avatars in physical space, and promoting community through physical interaction. Cosplay also appears in politicized non-gaming contexts (e.g., skits or theatrics), such as pro-Trump Make America Great Again (MAGA) cosplay at the 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Actors combined overtly Christian nationalist imagery with contemporary political issues to provoke discourse and encourage support among far-right conservative voters following the January 6th, 2021, U.S. Capitol insurrection (Kirkpatrick, 2023). Here, cosplay extends playful performance for explicitly political ends; what is usually a recreational practice is employed to drive a political narrative (i.e., dramatizing the plight of January 6th protestors imprisoned for vandalizing the Capitol). Regardless of political affiliations, however, the co-creation of gaming culture that arises from game-adjacent conventions begets what others have described as the "good stuff" of fandom: "creativity, pleasure, transformation, belonging, [and] worldmaking" (Kirkpatrick, 2023, para 19).

Gaming-Inspired Music & Concerts: Blended

Another example of game-adjacent space includes the many gaming-inspired concerts that have taken place both within and outside of video game environments. These concerts bridge the digital and physical by either (1) allowing players to interact with music in an engaging environment or by (2) fostering offline cultural production through gaming-inspired music, remixes, or live performances that evoke gaming culture. Whether these concerts occur within the virtual realms of *Fortnite* and *Roblox* (Regan, 2021) or as in-person orchestral performances of soundtracks for games like *Assassin's Creed* or *Kingdom Hearts* (Muir-Taylor, 2022), they leverage community appreciation of game-based content that extends beyond gameplay itself.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter offers a conceptual scaffolding that encourages communication and media scholars to reevaluate the sociopolitical influence of so-called 'apolitical' game-adjacent spaces, beyond the descriptive labeling or traditional modes of textual analysis in the current scholarship. Game-adjacency underscores how these seemingly innocuous areas—a Steam product review thread, an Instagram fan account, a niche subreddit forum—influence political thought in gaming and mainstream discourse. Explicitly acknowledging the political dimensions of game-adjacent spaces in this way begins cultivating a new mode of critical media literacy, one that directly recognizes the political potential of games, gamers, and gaming, and that brings attention to how these areas contribute to broader conversations around identity, culture, power, and more.

The examples above provide a cursory glance at the myriad ways game-adjacent spaces bridge the digital and physical realms. A more detailed breakdown might also include instances of how technical gaming terms have started to permeate everyday language (among both gamers

and non-gamers), playful word games on platforms like Spotify or Wikipedia (where song titles or hyperlinked pages are utilized to tell stories similar to the word game *Mad Libs*), and how games like *Minecraft* have been used to circumvent state-sponsored censorship of journalistic and media outlets (Huddleston, 2020). Indeed, game-adjacency provides communication and media studies with a comprehensive framework for understanding gaming culture's complex and participatory nature as it extends beyond games and gameplay. By recognizing the socially constructed nature of these areas, we can account for gaming's cultural production practices in a more granular fashion. As the following chapters will demonstrate, game-adjacency is a valuable methodological (and ontological) lens through which to examine the role of memes shared in game-adjacent spaces, reflecting the humor, values, and sociopolitical expressions of gaming communities. Rich with cultural potential, game-adjacent memetic communication illustrates the dimensions outlined earlier, shedding light on the competing tensions within gaming communities and the broader discourses surrounding contemporary digital culture to which they ultimately belong. Therefore, I argue that game-adjacency is essential for future critical explorations to fully understand the complexities that games, gamers, and gaming communities contribute to social, cultural, and political discourses relevant to all segments of contemporary society.

3. Make America Game Again: Examining the Discursive Influence of Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

This chapter builds on my conceptualization of game-adjacency by interrogating how gaming memes are used as intracommunity and cross-cultural rhetorical devices that take stances on matters relating to society, politics, and culture. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) forms the cornerstone of this interrogation due to its express recognition of language as a site of socially constructed knowledge and power (van Dijk, 2012; Wodak, 2014). In discourse, power can be understood as a level of control over the communication and meaning-making process, particularly regarding the group that holds dominant social power (van Dijk, 2012; Wodak, 2014). Through language, power is justified by appealing to authority, tradition, or ‘commonsense’ hegemonic thinking (Wodak, 2014). In the case of games and game-adjacent spaces, power is discursively enacted, negotiated, and contested through assumptions about audiences (e.g., who is present and welcome to participate in gaming spaces or the stereotypical gamer identity), as well as questions of legitimacy regarding specific types of games and play.

Since memes are considered the “language of the Internet” (e.g., Levinson, 2012), gaming memes can also be viewed as a core component of game-adjacent communication. Throughout this analysis, I utilize Limor Shifman’s (2013) memetic dimensions framework to inform the CDA; each meme is filtered through the framework’s tripartite dimensions (*content*, *form*, and *stance*) while simultaneously accounting for the emerging social, cultural, and political topics contained therein. I begin with an overview of each analyzed subreddit community and its level of game-adjacency, followed by the CDA itself. Then, I connect the emergent threads in an in-depth discussion and provide an area for concluding thoughts. While this chapter cannot attest to diffusion, what follows is an acute, social justice-oriented intervention into the at-times

problematic, at-times nonsensical, memetic discourses of contemporary game-adjacent communities.

Before initiating the CDA, it is crucial to (re)ground the analysis in my dissertation's research questions, three of which are integral to interrogating memes as rhetorical devices. The first of these guiding questions (RQ1) asks how meme patterns garnered from my research sites explicitly or implicitly promote 'common sense' ideas within gaming culture, especially assumptions around heteronormativity, whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, able-bodiedness, neurotypicality, etc. The second research question (RQ2) asks to what degree these memes express extreme political views, especially far-right conservatism, which is noted for its deleterious effects in game-adjacent spaces (see Condis, 2021; Schlegel & Kowert, 2024). Lastly, the third research question (RQ3) addresses how gaming content (e.g., characters, industry news, art assets) is co-opted to support political messaging. Together, these questions form the scaffolding for the interview component of my dissertation, which is covered in the next chapter. While this CDA is sensitive to the diverse ways extreme political views can be expressed through gaming memes, it focuses particularly on those of a far-right, conservative bent, as it is vital to intervene in discourses that tacitly or outwardly embrace hate and harassment, especially when such ideas are conveyed alongside political ideology. A common trope suggests that games, gamers, and gaming culture are disinterested, apathetic, or inactive in political matters (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021; Bacovsky, 2021). This CDA indicates how gaming communities and game-adjacent spaces serve as proving grounds for social, cultural, and political debates, even if their occupants claim otherwise.

My sampling process generated a robust dataset (N=577) of memes from the news aggregator and discussion forum Reddit. Using the language laid out in Chapter Two, half of this

dataset bears a direct spatial relation to gaming culture (r/KotakuInAction, r/videogames, and r/PCMasterRace). In contrast, the second half (r/Ask_TheDonald, r/mramemes, and r/TheLeftCantMeme) possesses an indirect relation to games and gaming. R/KotakuInAction, self-described as a Gamergate hub, served as a springboard to compile a more extensive list (see appendix) of subreddits chosen based on their reputation and perceived relevance as hubs for gaming and political discourse. To verify community activity, I utilized an API-powered statistics aggregator (subredditstats.com, 2023) to examine the subreddit's size, subscriber count, overall website ranking, and relevance to this research.

Lastly, I call attention to my application of Shifman's (2013) memetic dimensions framework, which enables moving beyond the somewhat reductive conceptualization of memes as being either resistant to or unaffected by external factors. I echo Shifman's argument that memes must be understood as complex, mutable cultural productions that incorporate multiple convergent and divergent facets (*content, form, and stance*), conveying many messages simultaneously and potentially read differently by the same audiences across different points in time. In other words, gaming memes reflect and shape the social, cultural, and political discussions in contemporary game-adjacent space, and a focused memetic CDA filtered through the dimensions lens provides a valuable scaffolding for analyzing the digital communication processes that mobilize them.

Community Overviews

Below are descriptive statistics on the six subreddits in the dissertation's dataset. I selected these sites because they blend popular culture, technology, gaming culture, and spatial relation (direct vs. indirect) to games. The information presented here is current as of August

2024. Future readers should note that the Internet ecology’s turbulent ebb and flow means these communities may be larger, smaller, or nonexistent at the time of their reading.

Table 9. Research Site(s) Descriptive Overview

<i>Community</i>	<i>Upvotes Mean</i>	<i>Upvotes SD</i>	<i>Comments Mean</i>	<i>Comments SD</i>	<i>Subscriber Count</i>
r/pcmasterrace	82450	13981	2612	8668	12M, Top 1%
r/videogames	8001	7251	3851	3974	320K, Top 1%
r/KotakuInAction	5491	4567	531	378	151K
r/TheLeftCantMeme	1885	765	161	109	56K
r/Ask_TheDonald	1878	302	124	91	136K, Top 2%
r/mramemes	261	112	9	9	3.9K

*All values have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Table organized by mean upvotes. A dividing line separates the game-based subreddits (top) from the right-wing subreddits (bottom).

These subreddit communities illustrate differing spatial and direct versus indirect relations to games. Communities such as r/KotakuInAction, r/pcmasterrace, and r/videogames showcase direct spatial relationships with gaming culture. R/KotakuInAction identifies itself as a Gamergate hub and condones memetic communication that evidences far-right, anti-feminist, and politically incorrect discourse in its ‘cultural critiques’ (Colley & Moore, 2022; Hine et al., 2017). R/pcmasterrace focuses on and promotes the stereotypical gamer identity through its sense of technological elitism (e.g., positioning PC gaming as superior to console or mobile gaming), and is nominally apolitical despite its name playing with problematic Nazi rhetoric surrounding the notion of an Aryan master race. R/videogames directly engages with broader gaming discourses, addressing industry ethics, representation, and consumer rights (e.g., data privacy and content moderation), all of which actively shape perceptions of gaming as a sociocultural phenomenon. Conversely, r/Ask_TheDonald, r/mramemes, and r/TheLeftCantMeme maintain indirect game adjacency through community members’ selective

use of game-based imagery or memetic language as rhetorical tools for political argumentation against perceived ‘woke’ cultural agendas, feminist narratives, or progressive influence in games and other entertainment media more broadly (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Gaudette et al., 2021).

As the following CDA will reveal, the memetic communication and cultural production in each of these subreddit communities also exemplify critical intersections among game-adjacency’s other dimensions: power dynamics, identity construction, sociopolitical expression, and boundary fluctuation and permeability. For example, explicit sociopolitical expression and identity formation occur in communities like r/Ask_TheDonald and r/KotakuInAction, where community moderation and participant engagement reinforce right-wing talking points and ‘anti-woke’ stances, which in turn intersect with communication occurring in adjacent toxic technocultures (e.g., 4chan and 8kun imageboards) or alt-lite platforms (e.g., Parler, Truth Social). Likewise, r/mramemes and r/TheLeftCantMeme engage in clear sociopolitical critiques of feminism and progressive politics, respectively, highlighting similarities to backlash toward progressive shifts in cultural production. R/pcmasterrace and r/videogames engage in sociopolitical expression more implicitly, where political expression often emerges indirectly through memetic communication on consumer rights, industry and labor ethics, and controversies around representation. Collectively, these six subreddits demonstrate how game-adjacent spaces—either directly focused on gaming or only loosely connected—act as arenas for discussing social, cultural, and political issues, which subsequently seep into and impact the mainstream.

Quantitative Descriptives

Overall Presence & Synthetic Coding Statistics

This section presents quantitative foundations that support the subsequent critical qualitative analysis and discussion. I use an assortment of tables to map code distributions across the dataset, encompassing memes from all six research sites, which establishes the empirical scaffolding for the subsequent interpretive component. All coding was generative; thematic patterns derived from these codes were shaped directly by the captured data, rather than preexisting schemas found in previous literature.

During my initial coding, I separated each dimension of Shifman's (2013) memetic dimensions framework (content, form, and stance) across each item in the dataset to help organize subsequent coding passes. Since this initial application was intended to be organizational (i.e., all memes have *content*, *form*, and take a *stance*), I excluded them from Table 10 to streamline my data presentation and instead direct attention to information that receives greater critical scrutiny below. Similarly, I removed my Subreddit Community code memo, which helped keep track of which community the meme was pulled from and served to indicate coding co-occurrences during later assessments.

I also draw attention to my separation of specific codes (e.g., Misogyny) from associated codes, such as the Alt-Right Themes subcode; it became clear that some memes employed misogynistic 'humor' without any discernible connection to alt-right politics as a defined political platform. Although I subscribe to the notion that *all* memetic communication exists on a political spectrum, I coded these items from the perspective that the alt-right is a distinct, albeit disjointed, political movement and that some prejudices (however unsavory) exist beyond and despite political affiliations and labels.

Table 10. CONTENT Code Distributions

<i>Subcode</i>	<i>Code Description</i>	<i>Total Excerpts & Percentage</i>
Alt-Right Themes	Any indication, mention, or nod to alt-right themes as they are described in the research literature (e.g., anti-immigration, anti-social justice, white supremacy, etc.).	401 (69%)
Game Hardware	Meme references gaming hardware, such as consoles, monitors, chairs, and headsets.	103 (18%)
Gamer Identity	Emphasis on the gamer identity, either via mention of the stereotypical gaming audience (young, straight, white, male, able-bodied, cisgender) or the implication that the reader will understand the meme's contents due to a requisite level of gaming capital/fluency.	188 (33%)
Gamergate	Meme alludes to, or directly mentions, the Gamergate controversy; anti-feminist sentiments related to gaming culture.	13 (2%)
Humor Style	Meme takes on a humorous tone.	325 (56%)
Misogyny	Misogynistic content, language, ideas, or the like.	119 (21%)
Nostalgia	Meme draws attention to gaming culture's past; uses nostalgic elements or yearns for the "golden age of gaming."	43 (7%)
Political (Not Explicitly Alt-Right)	Meme appears to showcase political content that may not be explicitly associated with any of the Alt-Right Themes subcodes, such as libertarian support of government deregulation, sans alt-right affiliation.	55 (10%)
Political Figures OR Celebrities	References to specific political or celebrity figures (e.g., Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Jordan Peterson); parody of political or celebrity figures.	114 (20%)
Political OR Economic Systems	Specific mentions of political ideologies or economic systems.	94 (16%)
Popular Culture References	Incorporation of pop culture references that exist beside gaming culture (e.g., film, television, anime, literature, music); adaptation of mainstream references for politically motivated messaging.	74 (13%)

Video Game	Meme references video game content.	127 (22%)
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*Percentages are based on the total number of excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers. Table

Perhaps the most interesting result of CONTENT coding is that nearly 70% of *all* memes in the dataset contained at least a passing reference to alt-right themes described in the literature, meaning that far-right, conservative talking points and dog whistles (e.g., debates around ‘wokeism,’ ‘culture war’ references, anti-LGBTQIA rhetoric) have infiltrated each of these communities. Whether in jest, in support, or critiqued, this suggests that memetic political discussion often occurs in game-adjacent spaces, regardless of whether they are proclaimed to be politically neutral.

Table 11. FORM Code Distributions

<i>Subcode</i>	<i>Code Description</i>	<i>Total Excerpts & Percentage</i>
Bespoke	Meme is not presented using any of the other child nodes to the FORM code.	242 (42%)
Impact Font (Image Macros)	Bold font (image macro) meme with text on top, bottom, or some combination thereof.	108 (19%)
Pepe the Frog	Any use of Pepe the Frog (or derivative, like the right-wing Groyper).	6 (1%)
Social Media Platform Post	Meme is a portion (or entire replication) of a social media platform post that is not a Tweet, including platforms like Facebook/Meta, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr, Discord, etc.	104 (18%)
Tweet/X	Meme is a portion (or entire replication) of a tweet from Twitter/X.	122 (21%)
Video Game Image	Meme is a still image from a video game; uses video game assets.	44 (8%)
Wojak (NPC)	Any use of the Wojak (or derivative) drawing; features a bald man with a smug expression on his face that resembles Wojak, inspired by Smug Frog images.	27 (5%)

*Percentages are based on the total number of excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers.

Notably, specific meme formats that have been documented by previous research (Askanius, 2021; Dafaure, 2022; Elkhatib & Hill, 2021; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Hine et al., 2017; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022) as being associated with the alt-right and other online fringe communities (e.g., hate symbol edits¹⁶, the Kekistan flag¹⁷, and weaponized autism¹⁸) are absent, suggesting these research sites either (1) actively prune them from their discussions, which in turn indicates a certain level of political attentiveness, or (2) that these items *are* present and not popular enough to achieve an all-time top-rated community designation. Even so, deleterious political discussion does not need to be conveyed with an already-observed meme format; as the discussion will show, cultural hegemony can be levied in both inconspicuous and explicit ways, and the use of things like video game imagery or nominally politically neutral formats (e.g., the popular Pepe Silvia format from the television series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*) do as much to drive divisive political debates as might overt hate speech.

Table 12. STANCE Code Distributions

<i>Subcode</i>	<i>Code Description</i>	<i>Total Excerpts & Percentage</i>
Negative/Critical	Meme appears critical of the content it conveys	225 (39%)
Neutral/Indifferent	Meme appears neutral or indifferent to the content it conveys	108 (19%)
Positive/Supportive	Meme appears to support the content it conveys	245 (42%)

*Percentages are based on the total number of excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers.

¹⁶ In which hate symbols (e.g., white supremacist iconography like Nazi Hakenkreuzes) are surreptitiously overlaid onto popular images, catching audiences off-guard while exposing them to hateful imagery and rhetoric.

¹⁷ A fictitious nation created by 4chan trolls; a green and black banner featuring white supremacist and neo-Nazi symbols (Neiwert, 2017).

¹⁸ Used in reference to the technical savvy of the chronically online; typically 4chan users.

Overall, the STANCE code distributions indicate a nearly equal split between negative/critical and positive/supportive stance-taking across the researched game-adjacent communities, with the latter taking a slight edge. In some cases, memes were assigned more than one STANCE subcode due to my perception of contradictory or concurrent expression within the same meme. I detail how these sentiments were spread across the subreddits in the discussion.

Memetic Attention to Current Events

The dataset highlighted selective attention towards current events, referencing political figures and celebrities across all research sites. Among these, American political leaders dominated, with Presidents Donald Trump (31 references) and Joe Biden (22) attracting the majority of memetic focus. Other politicians, like Nancy Pelosi (3), Hillary Clinton (4), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (2), were mentioned alongside celebrities involved in high-profile controversies, such as Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, who received 6 and 5 references, respectively. Tech industry moguls, including Elon Musk (9) and Bill Gates (1), appeared alongside media figures and gaming content creators like Joe Rogan (1) and PewDiePie (2). Notable legal controversies and criminal allegations were also included, featuring right-wing vigilante Kyle Rittenhouse (6) and human traffickers Jeffrey Epstein (2) and Ghislaine Maxwell (4), as well as whistleblowers Edward Snowden and Julian Assange (1 each). Attention to public health was apparent, particularly regarding Anthony Fauci (4), the former chief medical advisor to the U.S. president. Thus, the varied focus on current events through memetic references spans a political spectrum and engages in multiple cultural debates, from health and economics to what Alfonesca (2023) describes as the ‘identitarian culture wars.’ However, most references received only a single mention throughout the dataset and are not presented here to ensure a streamlined

presentation of findings. Together, these references illustrate how the research sites negotiate their relationship with mainstream discourses through memetic communication.

Cross-Community Analyses & Findings

In the tables below, game-based communities (r/KotakuInAction, r/pcmasterrace, and r/videogames) and right-wing communities (r/Ask_TheDonald, r/mramemes, and r/TheLeftCantMeme) are abbreviated to GB and RW, respectively.

Alt-Right Rhetoric

Elements of alt-right and broader far-right rhetoric are evident across various communities in the dataset, appearing in both explicit and subtle ways. Table 10 (above) displays the prevalence of inductively generated Alt-Right Themes across the entire dataset; Table 13 (below) lists Alt-Right Themes subcodes, all aligning with the current literature. The prevalence of Alt-Right Themes between game-based and right-wing communities is included in Table 14 (below).

Table 13. Alt-Right Themes Subcodes

<i>Subcode</i>	<i>Code Description</i>	<i>Total Excerpts & Percentage</i>
Anti-Big Business	Expresses criticism of major industrial monopolies, such as Big Pharma, the automotive industry, Big Tobacco, and the alcohol industry, among others.	52 (9%)
Anti-Globalism	Opposition to international organizations; critique of global governance	23 (4%)
Anti-Immigration	Critique of immigration policies; fear of cultural dilution	5 (1%)
Anti-Mainstream Media	Distrust of mainstream media; accusations of leftist or progressive bias	72 (12%)
Anti-Social Justice (Anti-Woke)	Meme expresses some level of discontent, criticism, or outright disdain for social justice or social justice topics	233 (40%)

Anti-Vaccine	Meme is critical of vaccine mandates, particularly the COVID-19 vaccine	17 (3%)
Conspiracy Theories OR Conspiracism	Reference to conspiracy theories or movements (e.g., QAnon or the “Deep State”); anti-establishment narratives	46 (8%)
Homophobia	Meme features homophobia in its messaging	24 (4%)
Identity Politics	Emphasis on race, ethnicity, gender, or related sociocultural identity; critique of progressive/leftist identity politics	318 (55%)
Internet Slang	Use of specific terms or phrases popular within alt-right circles (e.g., NPC, chud, soys, soyboys, snowflake); alt-right jargon	4 (1%)
Moral Values	Emphasis on traditionally conservative values (e.g., cisheteronormative relationships or hegemonic gender norms); critique of perceived moral decline in society	98 (17%)
Online Communities	Mentions adjacent online communities with ideological overlap (e.g., incels, MGTOW, or related hate groups); influence from specific online communities	153 (27%)
Religion	Incorporation of religious symbols or themes (e.g., Christian nationalist symbolism)	13 (2%)
Social Commentary	Commentary (neutral or negative) on societal issues; critique of social movements, especially Antifa or Black Lives Matter (BLM), or negativity towards things like feminism (anti-feminism)	321 (56%)
Transphobia	Meme features transphobia in its messaging	29 (5%)
White Erasure	Meme expresses concern around white erasure or suggests “white culture” is threatened by “wokeism” or advocates of social justice (or minorities)	38 (7%)

*Percentages are based on the total number of excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers.

For instance, r/Ask_TheDonald exhibits the clearest alignment, characterized by memetic communication that heavily focuses on conspiracies, a fixation on the so-called culture wars, critiques of ‘woke’ identity politics, misogyny, criticism of mainstream media, and skepticism towards social elites (see Figures 1 and 2, below).

Figure 1. *r/Ask_TheDonald* - Biden Big Industries



Figure 1 employs a dual-impact font and the Awkward Look Away Monkey Puppet format (Know Your Meme, 2019), which aims to redirect attention away from the American gun lobby's industrial power to other prominent industries, including Big Pharma, Big Automotive, Big Tobacco, and Big Alcohol. Implicit in this example is *r/Ask_TheDonald*'s support of gun rights and disdain for Democratic President Joe Biden, who is ostensibly addressing the reader about the gun lobby's power.

Figure 2. *r/Ask_TheDonald* - Star Wars Antifa

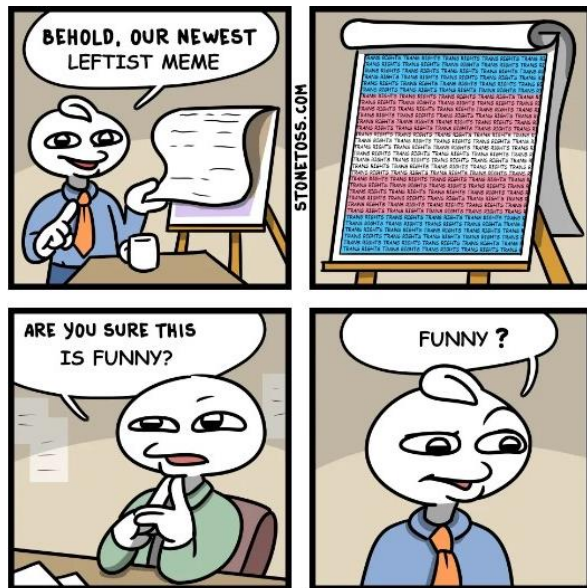


Figure 2 once again employs an impact font image macro, this time featuring Jabba the Hutt and Salacious B. Crumb, both characters in the 1983 film *Return of the Jedi* and the Star Wars Expanded Universe (Lucasfilm Ltd., n.d.). With a clearer message, Figure 2 features body

shaming of anti-fascist (Antifa) supporters, implying that fatness is a characteristic of Antifa women while skinniness is a trait of Antifa men. This example invokes gendered expectations related to body image and size, insinuating disdain for the anti-fascist movement while also ridiculing supporters through body shaming and visual stereotypes. Additionally, Figure 2's choice of these specific Star Wars characters relies on their framing as intentionally revolting figures, indicating a similar framing of Antifa supporters.

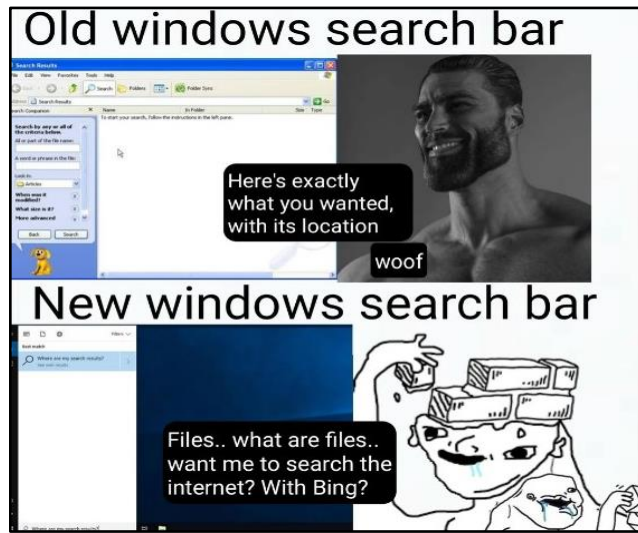
Meanwhile, r/TheLeftCantMeme integrates right-wing elements through comparatively better-known meme formats, including StoneToss comics (created by a neo-Nazi cartoonist), which seek to portray far-right rhetoric as innocuous while potentially serving as an entry point into more extreme viewpoints. Figure 3 (below) is one such example; in the web comic, the reader is encouraged to view leftist support of the transgender community as ridiculous, insofar as the meme implies leftist memes are not funny, and that humor is (ostensibly) the point of memetic communication. Figure 3 also trivializes the plight of trans people (and the LGBTQIA+ community more broadly) in one panel, implying that support of trans rights is not worth memetic attention. I argue this example showcases the dangers of entryism; Figure 3 does not appear to feature outright hostility towards the trans community, and one can imagine how repeated exposure to the subtle disdain in such examples, over time, might lead audiences to disregard trans and LGBTQIA+-inclusive activism as unworthy of memetic attention.

Figure 3. *r/TheLeftCantMeme - StoneToss Transphobia*



Even the game-based communities showcase elements of alt-right memetic communication patterns (Tables 10 and 13). R/pcmasterrace's very name plays with Nazi Germany's racist supposition of an Aryan master race, suggesting the possibility of politically flavored memetic communication despite its gaming focus. Although less common than other formats (Table 11), the presence of Wojak NPC and Gigachad memes in r/pcmasterrace's top all-time posts, containing ableist or ableist-leaning innuendos, demonstrates how political stances surface in game-adjacent spaces. For example, Figure 4 below stitches together a composite image featuring Wojak and GigaChad panels; this meme suggests that older versions of Windows search are more powerful (GigaChad), while newer iterations are 'dumb as bricks' (a drooling, ableist Wojak). Such examples blend implied assumptions about gender and intelligence or neurotypicality, particularly regarding the drooling presentation in the Wojak panel.

Figure 4. r/pcmasterrace - Windows Search Bar



More subtly, right-wing themes are present within r/videogames through references to red pilling (Figure 5) and the GigaChad template. This suggests an openness to meme patterns derived from gender-focused discourses (i.e., misogynistic) prevalent in the manosphere, particularly within incel communities. For instance, Figure 5 below illustrates how red pilling¹⁹ has gained acceptance as a popular format in r/videogames. Although this example does not directly feature misogyny or anti-feminist language, its presence in the community's top all-time list implies that the audience recognizes this memetic format and accepts it as a worthwhile template. The choice between a dreamlike illusion (the blue pill) or 'waking up' to the world's inconvenient truths (the red pill) is a familiar theme in manosphere discussions around the so-called gender order (Know Your Meme, 2019; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022), indicating a level of memetic crossover or cross-pollination.

¹⁹ Referencing the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which "taking the red pill" allows one to 'awaken' to harsh truths about social and cultural order. In the manosphere, this emphasizes that men are victims of feminism (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022).

Figure 5. r/videogames - Red Pill Gaming Experience



R/KotakuInAction, a right-wing game-focused community, heavily features anti-social justice (‘anti-woke’) sentiments, critiques of political correctness, and alludes to alt-right themes like white victimhood or erasure. Figure 6 illustrates r/KotakuInAction's focus on culture war issues beyond gaming. This example critiques journalistic platforms, specifically Salon, a politically progressive American news outlet, while suggesting a perception of white victimization and mocking critiques of patriarchy through juxtaposed, conflicting headlines. The aim of Figure 6 is to highlight leftist contradictions (“Time to give up on identity politics: It’s dragging the progressive agenda down”) while memetically undermining the social justice framework as self-defeating. Without direct reference to gaming or its culture, Figure 6 highlights the involvement of gaming communities in social, cultural, and political conversations, sidestepping a memetic focus on games in a game-based community.

Figure 6. r/KotakuInAction - Salon Articles



Gaming and the Gamer Identity

Gaming culture and stereotypical assumptions around the gamer identity are constructed and maintained differently across these research sites. For example, r/pcmasterrace centers its identity on technological and material elitism (e.g., positioning PC gaming as superior to console, mobile, or analog gaming), fostering a hierarchical conception of what constitutes a ‘real’ gamer. Figure 7 showcases how these debates over legitimacy extend beyond player expectations to encompass game developers and the game industry. In this example, Wojak NPCs are operationalized to persuade readers how older modes of game development are perceived as superior to contemporary game development (e.g., physically fit ‘alpha male’ developers *then* versus disheveled and inept developers *now*). Once again falling back on gendered and ableist tropes to articulate its message, Figure 7 exemplifies how hegemonic expectations about masculinity, appearance, and mental ability can be crystallized into a single cultural unit that not only serves as a form of critique but also intragroup maintenance vis-a-vis

its focus on technical acumen and what ‘counts as’ proper gameplay hardware and product quality (i.e., singleplayer vs. multiplayer experiences and online vs. offline play).

Figure 7. *r/pcmasterrace - Game Developer Wojaks*



R/videogames presents a somewhat broader view of the gamer identity, featuring content on a plethora of video games, feelings associated with the gaming experience (i.e., memes heavily focused on nostalgia for older gaming eras or the ‘golden age of gaming’), discussions of fans and fandoms, and memetic industry commentary. R/KotakuInAction, despite positioning itself as the Reddit Gamergate hub, surprisingly features less direct video game imagery and references to the stereotypical gamer identity than it evidences memetic communication targeted at ‘woke’ activists.

Memetic references to the stereotypical gamer identity notably intersect with culturally hegemonic structures. For instance, some examples from r/videogames connect to seemingly innocuous systems, such as chivalry, which reinforces gender norms about protector masculinity (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8. r/videogames - Chivalry



Similarly, r/mramemes sometimes highlights gaming creators such as PewDiePie or alludes to ‘woke agendas’ in the media industries, if these references advance the community’s narrative.

Figure 9. r/mramemes - International Women’s Day



For example, Figure 9 combines both a reference to PewDiePie and criticism of Big Tech, while simultaneously framing Google’s support of International Women’s Day as performative or even

misandrist (*simp* is a pejorative slang term for a person perceived as desperate for the attention of a crush). More explicit misogynistic examples, like Figure 10 (below), show how video game assets (in this case, the Super Mario Brothers character Princess Daisy) are used to convey crass, gendered rhetoric that positions heterosexual romantic relationships as transactional and falls back on stereotypical assumptions wherein expect men to be stoic or emotionally inexpressive.

Figure 10. r/mramemes - Princess Daisy

A man: cries or expresses his weakness to his wife or girlfriend

His wife or girlfriend:

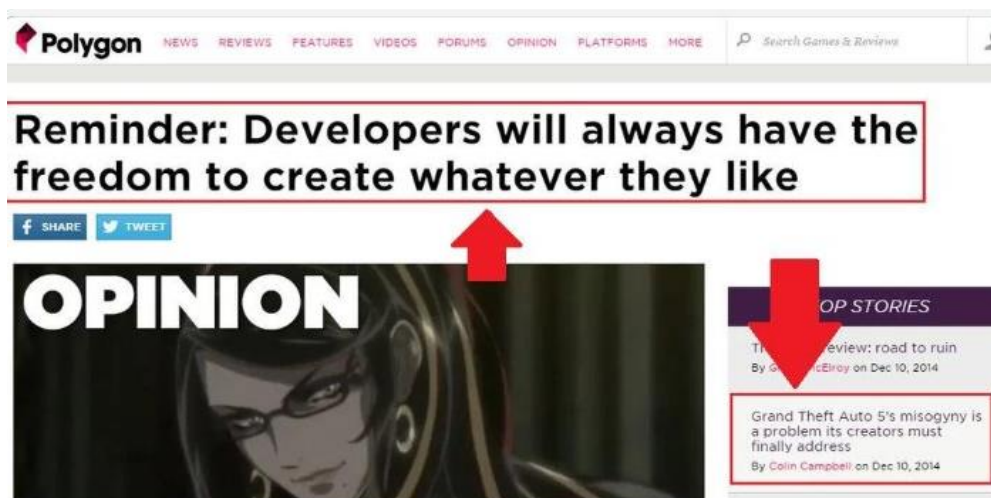


While these examples are less frequent in right-wing circles (at least among the top all-time memes contained in this dataset), the fact that they exist at all indicates that stereotypical views of the gamer identity permeate game-adjacent communities, serving as conduits for broader social, cultural, and political discussions. As is the case with Figures 9 and 10, culturally hegemonic structures, like stereotypical gender norms, are often framed ‘humorously’ to advance their positions. In some instances, these references may serve as pathways to more extreme political views (see Koehler et al., 2023; Kowert et al., 2022; Schlegel & Kowert, 2024), though this CDA cannot reliably link exposure to outright radicalization, nor has it found any evidence of gaming memes with direct entreaties to join politically extremist groups.

Social Media and Journalistic Coverage

Social media content (e.g., screenshots of tweets or comment sections on YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram) and reactions to journalistic coverage form significant components of memetic communication across various communities. R/Ask_TheDonald and r/KotakuInAction both prominently feature tweets or other social media platform posts (Table 11) rather than bespoke or identified meme formats covered in the literature (Askanius, 2021; Dafaure, 2022; Elkhatib & Hill, 2021; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Hine et al., 2017; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Vallerger & Zurbriggen, 2022). In the case of r/KotakuInAction specifically, screenshots of games journalism articles (or social media posts linking to such articles) constitute a substantial portion of its memetic discourse, strongly reflecting its genesis as an anti-games journalism Gamergater nexus. Figure 11, for example, frames the so-called ‘leftist agenda’ in the game development industry as contradictory, attempting to persuade readers that such efforts are misguided or fruitless.

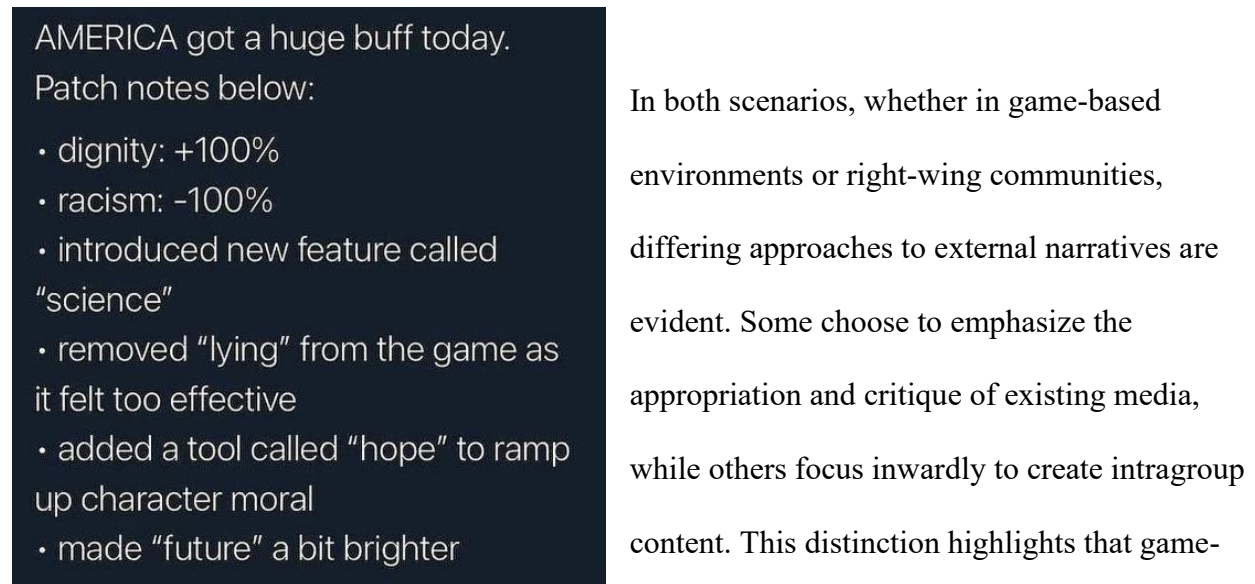
Figure 11. r/KotakuInAction - Polygon



Similarly, right-wing communities like r/TheLeftCantMeme may invoke game mechanics to drive their memetic communication. For example, Figure 12 (below) references *buffing* and

patch notes, or live-service developer updates to game content, which change in-game item values or mechanics difficulty in response to player data, within a sociocultural context. Since this specific community explicitly employs memetic communication to critique the political left, Figure 12 is an example of right-wing sarcasm or a perceived cringeworthy moment of performative allyship.

Figure 12. *r/TheLeftCantMeme - Patch Notes*



adjacent spaces recognize the value of game-based memetic communication as an effective means of discussing social, cultural, and political issues.

Looking Through the Memetic Dimensions Lens

Content

Cross-community analyses reveal the following inductively generated code patterns (Table 14). First, the presence of alt-right themes among the combined game-based and right-wing subreddits suggests that they *are* also present in game-oriented communities. However, they are—understandably—more common in the self-designated right-wing subreddits. Between the two broad classifications, humor plays a substantial role in the messaging process. Right-

wing communities exhibit a slight humorous edge, with 31% of posts across right-wing subreddits evidencing irony, sarcasm, or a sardonic tone. Both game-based and right-wing communities engage in social commentary, in which anti-woke sentiments may be expressed; however, critiques are far more common in right-wing subreddits, suggesting that they are more engaged when critiquing perceived societal issues and the so-called culture wars than more inward-facing game-based communities. Likewise, debates around identity politics are more common in right-wing communities. However, they are also present in game-based subreddits, indicating that both broad classifications are attentive to social, cultural, and political issues. Lastly, references to other online communities (e.g., the manosphere, incels), while not significantly appearing in game-based communities, do surface among and across the right-wing subreddits, indicating a certain level of introspection or self-reference relative to the discourses taking place within them. Stated differently, this does not mean that individuals who visit right-wing subreddits automatically engage with manosphere communities. However, it *does* indicate, to some degree, a recognition of related toxic technocultures that inevitably intersect because of similar topics and ideologies.

Table 14. CONTENT in Game-Based vs. Right-Wing Communities

<i>Themes/Communities</i>	<i>KIA</i>	<i>PCM</i>	<i>VG</i>	<i>GB Total</i>	<i>ADT</i>	<i>MRA</i>	<i>TLCM</i>	<i>RW Total</i>
Alt-Right Themes	76	14	12	102 (18%)	99	100	100	299 (52%)
Anti-Social Justice (Anti-Woke)	68	1	0	69 (12%)	41	75	48	164 (28%)
Gamer Identity	9	79	99	187 (32%)	0	0	1	1 (0%)
Humor Style	35	59	51	145 (25%)	36	60	84	180 (31%)

Identity Politics	66	3	0	69 (12%)	56	98	95	249 (43%)
Misogyny	31	2	2	35 (6%)	0	75	9	84 (15%)
Online Communities	9	1	4	14 (2%)	0	100	39	139 (24%)
Social Commentary	65	2	0	67 (12%)	83	100	71	254 (44%)
Video Game	9	17	98	124 (21%)	0	2	1	3 (1%)

*Percentages are based on the total excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers.

Form

As discussed previously, bespoke formats refer to those not directly linked to the alt-right in the research literature (e.g., Pepe the Frog/Groypers, Wojak NPCs, red pill memes). In some cases, I applied this code to examples that are not necessarily tied to the alt-right but are still far-right-wing in nature (i.e., neo-Nazi StoneToss creations, discussed above). Impact font (image macros) is currently the most common and well-documented meme format among both community types. However, image macros are quite diverse; impact fonts serve as typographical overlays and are not based on a static background image. It would thus be more accurate to say that image macros are the most popular *style* of memetic communication in the dataset. Intriguingly, popular formats like Pepe the Frog are significantly underrepresented among the all-time top-rated posts across all communities, suggesting that this type of symbolic exchange has fallen out of favor, at least among the data presented here. While informative, I contend that, of Shifman's three memetic dimensions, this is the least important regarding tracking extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication. In other words, identifying antifeminist or white supremacist rhetoric is of the utmost importance; whether such messaging occurs through a Pepe the Frog meme or a decontextualized screenshot of a web article headline

is less important than examining the overarching political slant of the item in question. I push this contention further in the dissertation's fifth and final chapter.

Table 15. FORM in Game-Based vs. Right-Wing Communities

<i>Subcode</i>	<i>Game-Based Communities</i>	<i>Right-Wing Communities</i>	<i>Total Excerpts & Percentage of Overall Dataset</i>
Bespoke	132 (23%)	110 (19%)	242 (42%)
Impact Font (Image Macro)	61 (11%)	47 (8%)	108 (19%)
Pepe the Frog	2 (0%)	4 (1%)	6 (1%)
Social Media Platform Posts	44 (8%)	60 (10%)	104 (18%)
Tweet/X	37 (6%)	85 (15%)	122 (21%)
Video Game Image	41 (7%)	3 (1%)	44 (8%)
Wojak (NPC)	9 (2%)	18 (3%)	27 (5%)

*Percentages are based on the total number of excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers.

Stance

Positive/supportive stance-taking occurs at relatively equal rates between game-based and right-wing subreddits; negative/critical sentiments occur more frequently within the right-wing communities, while neutral/indifferent tonality surfaces more frequently in game-based communities. To clarify, a positive/supportive code was applied irrespective of the political slant of (e.g., sexist versus anti-sexist) so long as it was clear that the meme was framed supportively. Likewise, negative/critical codes were applied, irrespective of political slant, so long as it was clear that the meme was framed critically. Neutral/indifferent codes were used when it was impossible to ascertain whether a meme was framed positively or negatively. Again, in some cases, memes were assigned more than one STANCE subcode due to my perception of

contradictory or concurrent expression within the same meme. Overall, positive/supportive stance-taking is more prevalent within the combined dataset.

Table 16. STANCE in Game-Based vs. Right-Wing Communities

<i>Subcode</i>	<i>Game-Based Communities</i>	<i>Right-Wing Communities</i>	<i>Total Excerpts & Percentage of Overall Dataset</i>
Positive/Supportive	124 (21%)	121 (21%)	245 (42%)
Negative/Critical	84 (15%)	141 (24%)	225 (39%)
Neutral/Indifferent	70 (12%)	38 (7%)	108 (19%)

*Percentages are based on the total number of excerpts (N=577). All values are rounded to whole numbers.

The Discursive Power of Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

CDA positions language as a socially constructed site of tension, in which culturally hegemonic structures and ideologies are reinforced or contested (van Dijk, 2012; Van Leeuwen, 2007; Wodak, 2014). The following subsections synthesize my examination of CDA's interest areas—power, ideology, de/legitimation, and identity— concerning the six subreddit communities.

Power Relations

In r/KotakuInAction, memes often reproduce right-wing power dynamics by positioning progressive activism as irrational, contradictory, or self-defeating, explicitly attacking *wokeness* or its earlier iteration, *social justice warriors*, as a matter of course (Figure 6). In r/videogames, while overt political expression is rarer, memes heavily featuring nostalgia or red pilling references (Figure 5) subtly assert generational and cultural authority, implying that older (i.e., traditional) iterations of gaming—ostensibly before recent diversity and inclusion efforts— associated with hegemonic masculinity are superior to contemporary gaming culture.

Meanwhile, r/pcmasterrace's emphasis on technological elitism (i.e., PC gaming constituting a

‘master gaming race’) discursively upholds a material hierarchy in gaming culture, where expensive hardware and technical acumen become symbolic markers of legitimacy as a ‘proper’ gamer.

In right-wing communities like r/Ask_TheDonald, power relations manifest more aggressively through memetic communication that ridicules progressive figures or social justice advocates, or that lionizes stereotypical conservative identity, often through humor (e.g., the defense of the gun lobby in Figure 1). R/mramemes also reinforces patriarchy, using memes like those disparaging International Women’s Day as a *simp* celebration (Figure 9) to reassert hegemonic masculinity and delegitimize gender equity as a fruitless endeavor. R/TheLeftCantMeme blends humor and ideological critique by portraying progressive activism, especially around LGBTQIA+ rights, as not only foolish but potentially dangerous, framing leftist politics as threats to the so-called natural social order (Figure 3). While there are fewer obvious references to games and gaming across the right-wing subreddits, the level of conceptual crossover between these memetic discourses indicates that these communities broadly discuss the same topics and are receptive to these ideas, if not necessarily doing so in precisely the same ways (Table 14).

Across all communities, memetic communication thus functions as a tool for defending cultural hegemony. Even in spaces viewed as ‘apolitical’ (i.e., the game-based subreddits), the subject position of the stereotypical gamer—a person who is straight, white, cisgender, male, and technologically literate—is thrust into a space of authority and legitimacy. In more overtly political spaces (i.e., right-wing subreddits), power relations are reinforced and actively weaponized against perceived adversaries, such as progressives, social justice activists, and their allies; anyone who is considered *woke*. This weaponization illustrates how memetic

communication bolsters existing power structures through implicit and explicit references to socially and politically constructed others, thereby emphasizing the rhetorical power of game-adjacent memetic communication.

Ideological Formation and Reinforcement

The ideological formation leveraged through memetic communication in these subreddits shows how political stance-taking is an active and ongoing process. For instance, in r/KotakuInAction, memes that emphasize media skepticism and anti-woke attitudes present conservative political views as ‘common sense’ understandings of social, cultural, and political matters. They also depict social justice advocacy in the gaming and media sectors as a corrupt leftist conspiracy (Figure 11), a notion similar to accusations directed at mainstream media in broader discussions beyond gaming culture. In r/videogames, nostalgia and red pill references reframe inclusivity as being at odds with ‘correct,’ established hierarchies, which align with culturally hegemonic arguments applied to other forms of entertainment, such as film and television. Meanwhile, in r/pcmasterrace, the explicit focus on PC gaming as superior to console or mobile gaming is a rather blatant ideological project that entrenches a sense of material elitism, gatekeeping, and implied geek masculinity (see Chapter One).

Similar to the power dynamics above, the right-wing subreddits amplify ideological reinforcement in much more visible ways. In r/Ask_TheDonald, for instance, memetic communication linking social justice to hypocrisy and corruption through references to President Biden or Anthony Fauci (via critiques of mask mandates or attacks against President Biden’s oratory skills) reinforces a political narrative in which distrust of democratic institutions or so-called ‘liberal elites’ becomes a prevailing axiom. R/mramemes’ memetic communication likewise evidences ‘humor’ (e.g., sarcasm) meant to entrench patriarchy through mockery of

emotional expressivity and the framing of feminism as an existential threat to hegemonic masculinity (Figures 9 and 10). Examples like these convey their messages through innuendo, contributing to their reinforcing effect, as audiences must ‘get’ the message or buy into the ‘levity’ for the memes to achieve their goals. R/TheLeftCantMeme’s memetic communication likewise often resorts to the ‘just a joke’ defense, reinforcing narratives around progressive incompetence and initiatives like LGBTQIA+ rights and anti-racism as unfunny, cringeworthy (to use common parlance), or dangerous.

Legitimation and Delegitimation Strategies

In all six subreddits, humor is strategically employed to make delegitimation more acceptable. By framing political critiques as jokes, sarcasm, or irony, it lessens the perception of harm while enhancing ideological influence (tracking with earlier scholarship; see Dafaure, 2022; Elkhatib & Hill, 2021; Frischlich, 2020; Phillips & Milner, 2021). Irrespective of community focus, humor serves as a shield for reactionary narratives that oppose diversity and inclusion in gaming and the broader digital landscape. This dynamic permits the endurance of culturally hegemonic structures (e.g., whiteness, heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity) without significant confrontation. In r/KotakuInAction, for instance, delegitimation occurs through the derision of games journalism as complicit in a liberal agenda in gaming, and the framing of diversity initiatives as pandering or fraudulent (Figure 11). Within r/videogames, memetic communication undermines newer, more inclusive games by romanticizing a perceived masculinized gaming experience through inadvertent—or perhaps, intentional—use of chivalric imagery and (e.g., Figure 8) through nostalgia-driven tales of a ‘golden age of gaming’ (related to some interviewees’ views on politically incorrect *Call of Duty* chat lobbies discussed in the

next chapter). At the same time, r/pcmasterrace establishes PC gaming as the superior mode of play while nonchalantly dismissing those who do not adhere to the community's material elitism.

In the right-wing subreddits, these strategies are more readily apparent.

R/Ask_TheDonald's memetic communication employs humor and exaggeration to delegitimize 'woke' leftist media, activists, and promotes a worldview where reactionary populism is propped up as the only rational option (Figures 1 and 2). R/mramemes' consistent mockery of feminism and gender equality similarly enacts delegitimation through their framing of the so-called feminization of men and the ridicule of women and non-binary people who seek equality (Figures 9 and 10). Likewise, r/TheLeftCantMeme's use of oversimplification distorts LGBTQIA+ positionality (and specifically, trans activism) as laughable or flawed (Figure 3). In all such cases, the actual thrust of these memetic devices is that they are meant to be consumed rapidly; over time, exposure to these political positions may further legitimation and delegitimation processes by conditioning community insiders and observers to believe that these beliefs are *expected* rather than problematic *exceptions*.

Identity Formation and Othering

CDA emphasizes how discourse constructs identities and *others* those who do not conform to the hegemonic expectations laid out for them. In the game-based subreddits, this process closely aligns with the typical gamer identity profile addressed in earlier chapters. For instance, in r/KotakuInAction, memetic communication often portrays the "true gamer" as resistant to 'woke' influences and embraces libertarian or conservative political views. Meanwhile, r/videogames presents its ideal gamer as young, male, straight, and technically skilled, effectively excluding newer and potentially more diverse players by omission. In a similar vein, r/pcmasterrace upholds the aforementioned material-based identity profile,

marginalizing non-PC gamers as uncommitted or illegitimate. In right-wing subreddits, identity politicking is more pronounced and weaponized; r/Ask_TheDonald, r/mramemes, and r/TheLeftCantMeme form a loose network of solidarity by marginalizing diverse voices and positioning hegemonic subject positions (e.g., whiteness, heteronormativity) as preferable. As such, memetic communication—within both game-based and right-wing communities—acts as a reinforcer by repeating expectations around stereotypical gamers or by mocking ‘woke’ social justice advocates and their supporters.

Discussion

I have discerned several patterns within this dataset: (1) the intersection between gaming and far-right political content, (2) the ebb and flow of alt-right themes in gaming communities, (3) the role of humor and social commentary bundled into memes as rhetorical devices, (4) the links between meme formats and political expression, and (5) connections to broader discourses like the literature on adjacent online communities (e.g., the manosphere). These findings suggest a dynamic interplay between digital media, popular culture, and grassroots discourses that surround social and political debate. Below, I connect these ideas to previously outlined RQs.

Memes & Hegemonic Norms in Game-Adjacent Spaces (RQ1)

As Tables 10 and 13 show, alt-right themes (e.g., anti-social justice or anti-woke rhetoric, anti-globalism, anti-immigration or nativism, and anti-mainstream media sentiments) are quite present amongst the bulk of this dataset. However, they are far more visible among the right-wing communities (r/Ask_TheDonald, r/mramemes, and r/TheLeftCantMeme) than they are in the game-based subreddits (r/KotakuInAction, r/pcmasterrace, r/videogames). Although this CDA was not structured around hypotheses, it is moderately surprising that nearly 20% of all captured game-based memes contain at least a passing connection to alt-right political stances.

Less surprising is the finding that just over half of right-wing memes contain alt-right sentiments; this suggests that alt-right ideology has been, to some degree, absorbed into the mainstream of American conservatism (Bond, 2022). Similarly, it is rather intriguing that game-based subreddits evidence culturally hegemonic systems within memetic content at relatively significant rates (at or exceeding 10% for many subcodes), despite stereotypical social perceptions of gaming culture as secluded or divorced altogether from political debates. I argue that game-adjacent spaces, regardless of their focus, *are* political memetic arenas, and that memetic communication *is* a significant lens through which to view a community's political discussions.

Discussions about the stereotypical gamer identity—typically portrayed as young, white, able-bodied, heterosexual males—appear in approximately 33% of memes (Table 10). When broken down by community focus—game-based vs. right-wing—it is clear these discussions are more prevalent in the former (Table 14). This indicates that identity-based debates regarding the stereotypical gamer find some discursive safety among all-time top-rated game-based memes. Those who fit the stereotype (straight, young, cisgender, white men) are memetically shielded, suggesting that audiences generally reflect this stereotype, or are at least receptive to it. Although misogyny and identity-based hate are comparatively less common in the game-based portion of the dataset (Table 14), they do occur, indicating that stereotypical assumptions are tied to harmful identity-based ‘humor.’ Moreover, the lack of posts celebrating marginalized gamers suggests that cultural hegemony persists, whether through memes or other means, by reinforcing the privileged subject positions noted above.

Memes & Extremist Ideologies in Game-Adjacent Spaces (RQ2)

To continue developing the discussion on the rather alarming frequency of alt-right themes present within the dataset, it should be noted that references to ‘social justice warriors,’ anti-woke sentiments, perceptions of the left or progressives as ‘groomers,’ and other far-right-wing talking points use humor or other rhetorical tactics for bandwagon appeals as commonsense thinking. Indeed, and as others have argued (see Phillips & Milner, 2021), humor is interesting because it can be operationalized to critique *and* provide a gateway toward extremism, depending on the context in which it is deployed and the various ways audiences read the content. The StoneToss examples discussed above are an excellent example of this; unless audiences are observant of, or sensitive to, politically extreme views, unobservant readers may not pick up the messaging contained within them, or they may simply not register that a ‘joke’ is much more than that, but a gateway into extremist stance-taking. That images like Figure 13 appear in right-wing communities in apparent mockery of the political left (i.e., the “StoneToss is a Nazi” caption indicates this is a leftist critique of StoneToss, and its posting in r/TheLeftCantMeme indicates the poster has deemed it a memetic failure), suggests they serve the dual functions of (1) humorously delegitimizing fair concerns about Trump Republicans’ (Make America Great Again or MAGA) racially motivated rhetoric while also (2) downplaying StoneToss’ connections to neo-Nazism as inconsequential and non-threatening.

Figure 13. *r/TheLeftCantMeme - StoneToss Trump*



This supports other scholarship that investigates specific meme formats (e.g., Askanius, 2021; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Phillips & Milner, 2021) regarding the use of humor to downplay legitimate concerns about problematic content, deflect fair criticism, or legitimize extremist views. Concurrently, while connections to adjacent toxic technocultures, like the manosphere, are relatively rare in the game-based communities' all-time top-rated posts (2%, Table 14), their presence in nearly a quarter of the right-wing community memes (of which *r/mramemes* is a self-designated manosphere meme-sharing space) showcases how game-adjacent communities have the potential to intertwine, influence, and (de)stabilize the communication occurring there via emergent bespoke formats, networked community action, and other coordinated efforts.

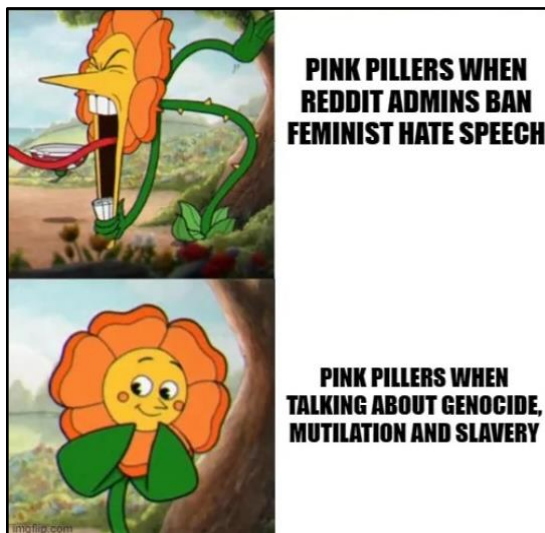
Co-Opting Gaming Content for Political Messaging (RQ3)

Even within game-based communities, video game imagery is much rarer than one might assume; for right-wing subreddits, video game images are essentially insignificant (Tables 11 and 14). This finding is surprising, as one would expect video game assets and references to feature more heavily in game-based subreddits; conversely, this finding substantiates the

argument I and others have made above and elsewhere that game-adjacent spaces are areas in which social, cultural, and political discussions distinct from gaming take place, alongside and sometimes despite their gaming focus. Even so, the fact that gaming content occasionally becomes co-opted to advance or advocate political stance-taking implies that the authors of such memes view video game assets as useful rhetorical tools. Since they occur so infrequently, a shift in critical attention toward the content dimension, rather than form, would better clarify community reception of the ideas contained within.

For example, one example of the Cagney Carnation format, derived from the video game *Cuphead* (2017), may articulate hypocrisy, irony, sarcasm, sardonicism, and various social, cultural, or political stances (sometimes all together) relative to the template's expressively juxtaposed imagery.

Figure 14. r/mramemes - Cagney Carnation



Beyond *Cuphead*, this CDA reveals that other formats, such as impact font/image macros and the Wojak NPC template, are more commonly used when discussing political content. Furthermore, social media platform posts and tweets are, by far, the most prevalent category, as opposed to the comparatively more common but stylistically disunified bespoke examples. As

such, perhaps an astute follow-up question regarding RQ3 entails asking *why* video game assets and references are *not* the foremost drivers of memetic discussion in these game-adjacent communities, or at least not more common amongst the communities' all-time top-rated posts.

Memetic Permeability in Game-Adjacent Space

Building on my articulation of game-adjacency in the previous chapter, these research sites exhibit fluid ideological boundaries, as their memetic communication indicates they are not echo chambers but interconnected nodes in a broader constellation of game-adjacent space. Through bespoke and known meme formats (Tables 11 and 15), I have discerned rhetorical throughlines (e.g., anti-wokeness and identity politicking) and strategic ambiguity (framing political expression as 'humor') that accompany present scholarship (Askanius, 2021; Dafaure, 2022; Elkhatab & Hill, 2021; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Hine et al., 2017; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022), while also shedding new light on how cultural topics get baked into seemingly 'apolitical' memetic communication flows. I contend that a kind of political pipeline exists between these research communities. The memetic communication in r/pcmasterrace and r/videogames incorporates subtle political elements that may normalize culturally hegemonic perspectives often found in more explicitly political communities, such as r/KotakuInAction. Moreover, we can observe the same rhetorical scaffolding in overtly right-wing communities such as r/TheLeftCantMeme and r/Ask_TheDonald. This memetic permeability may enable the migration of ideas (and users) across seemingly disparate spaces, allowing each community to maintain a certain degree of plausible deniability about its connections to politically extreme views. This pipeline illustrates how some perceive game-adjacent communities as 'apolitical,' particularly when memetic communication occurs on the less obvious side of the political spectrum.

Reflecting on the Memetic Dimensions Framework in this Dataset

Shifman's (2013) germinal article on the memetic dimensions framework advocates its use to understand better digital communication by: (1) tracking memetic spread, (2) revealing imitative patterns, (3) providing context as to the interplay between innovation and established digital cultures, (4) enabling analysis of social, cultural, and political ideas, and (5) providing a flexible means to categorize memes based on shared characteristics. Using this relatively robust framework, this chapter has established a wide variety of intracommunity and cross-community analyses that illustrate social, cultural, and political topics are present in game-adjacent spaces and that, somewhat counterintuitively, video game assets and references feature much less frequently than one would assume. However, the memetic dimensions framework (and this CDA, for that matter) cannot adequately attest to diffusion, nor can it address the various ways in which political messaging occurs within spreadable media as a specific form of political discourse. Instead, the dimensions framework allows for broad-stroke evaluations in the same way video game uses and gratifications theory has been used to articulate gaming interests across strata, including age and gender identity. In tandem with my conceptualization of game-adjacency in Chapter Two, I will use the final chapter of this dissertation to propose an expanded framework that builds upon Shifman's contributions to refine the stance dimension, particularly as it relates to social, cultural, and political expression in game-adjacent spaces.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter presents several thought-provoking insights into memetic communication in game-adjacent spaces. First, alt-right themes and politically extreme views are present among the all-time top-rated posts in both game-based and explicitly right-wing communities, although they are more prevalent in the latter. Second, relative to the information collected in the literature

review, discussions around the stereotypical gamer identity and cultural hegemony persist (particularly in gaming subreddits), often reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about gamers. However, these conversations are quantitatively less frequent than one might expect from nominally games-based communities. Stated differently, while these cultural debates remain, their middling visibility implies they benefit from the shielding hegemonic structures provide - the expectation that stereotypical subject positions (e.g., whiteness, heteronormativity, misogyny) populate gaming spaces and that marginalized identities and worldviews are exceptional, othered, and not the norm. Third, humor serves a core function in conveying political messages and potentially extremist views; this finding complements and extends extant scholarship by placing game-based and right-wing communities in conversation under the framework of game-adjacency, highlighting how problematic “jokes” are often perceived as such. Indeed, many of the memes captured and included in this dataset compound culturally hegemonic structures by framing them as innocuous or portraying concerned audiences as overly sensitive. Fourth, counterintuitively, video game imagery and references are used relatively infrequently in memetic discourse, even within gaming communities, again reiterating that game-adjacent spaces do not solely focus on gaming topics. Finally, this CDA highlights the value of Shifman’s memetic dimensions lens for analyzing game-adjacent communication. It also offers several areas for expansion, which are further covered in the fifth and final chapter.

These findings have important implications for understanding the political nature of game-adjacent communication. They challenge the notion that game-adjacent spaces are apolitical, revealing instead that they serve as arenas for social, cultural, and political interaction, as well as showcasing a relatively high degree of attentiveness to popular culture and current events, which contradicts common framings of gamers as unconcerned with non-gaming

discourses. The fluctuating presence of alt-right themes and extremist views, even when couched in humor, suggests potential pathways for desensitization (and, in extreme cases, radicalization), compounding socially constructed norms that have created barriers for marginalized communities in game-adjacent spaces and gaming more broadly. The limited use of video game references and imagery in well-discussed memetic posts raises questions about how gaming content is co-opted for broader ideological purposes. As such, and as we transition into the next chapter's focus on interviews with players about their consumption of gaming memes, these findings provide a foundation for understanding how individuals may perceive and participate in game-adjacent memetic communication. In other words, the interviews will examine how the trends observed in this CDA are reflected in players' lived experiences and perceptions of gaming culture. Additionally, I will explore the topic of what players, in their own words, consider extreme political views to be and whether they believe memetic communication has any impact on gaming's status quo. By combining the macro-level insights from this memetic CDA with the micro-level perspectives of individual players, this dissertation develops a more comprehensive understanding of the interconnections between gaming culture, memetic communication, and political discourse in contemporary digital culture.

4. Memorable or Memeable?: Player Perspectives on the Influence of Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

This chapter presents the results of direct conversations with players regarding memetic influence in gaming culture, asking them to consider how game-adjacent memetic communication, personal and observed, affects their attitudes about games, gamers, and gaming. More specifically, I highlight their interpretations and offer a critical discussion regarding gaming memes' social, cultural, and political implications, a participant-oriented extension of the previous chapter's textual focus. While all interviews centered on the role of memes in game-adjacent communication, players commonly commented on various concerns tangentially related to memetic communication (insofar as messaging about these topics can be conveyed through memes), including monetization, gambling, and game development. What follows is thus a blend of various perspectives on the state of gaming culture, industry influence, and the role of memetic communication in facilitating these discourses.

The main sections of this chapter will follow the arc of my research questions. First, I revisit RQ4 and discuss how exposure to extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication influences my interviewees' decisions to participate in gaming culture. Next, I address RQ5 regarding interviewees' views on how extreme political views in gaming memes influence their understandings of who gamers are and what they believe. Third, I synthesize interviewees' suggestions for RQ6 and their proposals for addressing the spread of extreme political views through game-adjacent memetic communication. I then consider the broader implications of these findings, emphasizing overarching patterns that align with or diverge from the CDA findings presented in the previous chapter. After connecting these implications to societal narratives about gaming and digital culture, I propose practical and theoretical

implications for game developers, game-adjacent community managers, educators, policymakers, and others. Finally, I recap the chapter by constructing a conclusion that looks towards the future of gaming culture, one set amidst increasingly turbulent social, cultural, and political change. This reflection, however, is not one marred by pessimism; instead, it offers actionable next steps for promoting positive change.

Revisiting the RQs

Through inductive thematic analysis of interview transcripts, I address each of the following RQs in sequence:

RQ4 In what ways does exposure to gaming memes with extreme political views shape perceptions of, attitudes towards, and decisions to participate in gaming culture?

RQ5 In what ways do extreme political views influence expectations around who gamers are and what they believe?

RQ6 How do participants propose addressing the spread of extreme political views through gaming memes or within gaming culture more broadly?

RQ4 focuses on discursive trends (e.g., reinforcement or redefinition of the stereotypical gamer identity, memetic impacts on interviewees' willingness to engage in game-adjacent spaces), illustrated by anonymized excerpts. RQ5 integrates interviewees' perceptions of gamer demographics and political leanings—both their own and those of the game-adjacent communities they frequent. These perceptions dovetail with a parallel discussion on external and internal stereotyping of game-adjacent memetic content and the broader social, cultural, and political discourses encircling gaming communities. RQ6 offers interviewee-generated solutions and strategies for addressing memetic hate in game-adjacent spaces, encompassing various approaches such as educational interventions and enhanced platform and community

accountability. I offer critiques of the feasibility of these recommendations, as well as personal observations on the state of extreme political views in game-adjacent spaces.

Interviewee Data & Prominent Codes

My interviewee pool consists of seventeen players, predominantly based in the Western United States, with one participant based in the Southern United States. Interviewees were recruited using multiple solicitation strategies, including in-person invitations at journalism and media studies seminars and digital invitations on university-affiliated Discord servers, at a large research university in the Pacific Northwest. The interviewees' rounded mean age was 23 years, reflecting a typical student age range, inclusive of graduate students, but younger than the mid-30s average gaming age reported in recent industry data (ESA, 2024). Eight (n=8) interviewees self-identified as White/Caucasian; five (n=5) self-identified as Hispanic/Latin@, two (n=2) as Black/African American, one (n=1) as Indian/South Asian, and one (n=1) as mixed Caucasian/Native American. Interviewees self-identified as male (n=13), female (n=3), and genderfluid (n=1). Most self-identified as straight (n=12); some self-identified as bisexual (n=3), one (n=1) self-identified as queer, and one (n=1) self-identified as questioning. Most participants described leaning to the political left, though at least two interviewees described having independent or libertarian values (explored below). No interviewee described themselves as conservative or right-leaning. This specific group of interviewees enables a direct connection to the viewpoints of individuals who do not align with the far-right, which has been recognized in previous scholarship as the main factor behind political extremism in gaming environments (see Gallagher et al., 2021; Schlegel & Kowert, 2024; Vaux et al., 2024). Additionally, despite all players demonstrating regular consumption of games and participation in gaming culture, only twelve (n=12) readily identified as gamers; four (n=4) did not, and one (n=1) shared they do so

conditionally. Interviews typically lasted between 35 and 40 minutes, with a maximum length of 58 minutes; see the interview guide (Appendix). The following table provides participant designators and the interviewees' self-descriptions.

Table 17. Interviewee Demographics

<i>P#</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>Gamer Identification</i>
P1	21	Hispanic/Latin@	Male	Straight	Yes
P2	22	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	No
P3	21	Hispanic/Latin@	Female	Straight	No
P4	23	Caucasian/Native American	Male	Queer	Conditionally
P5	43	Black/African American	Male	Straight	No
P6	21	Indian/South Asian	Male	Straight	No
P7	21	White/Caucasian	Male	Questioning	Yes
P8	20	Black/African American	Male	Straight	Yes
P9	22	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	Yes
P10	21	White/Jewish	Male	Straight	Yes
P11	22	White/Latin@	Male	Straight	Yes
P12	23	Hispanic/Latin@	Male	Straight	Yes
P13	20	Hispanic/Latin@	Female	Bisexual	Yes
P14	21	Hispanic/Latin@	Female	Bisexual	Yes
P15	21	White/Caucasian	Genderfluid	Bisexual	Yes
P16	20	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	Yes
P17	24	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	Yes

*This table collects self-descriptions in response to the interview protocol's demographic questions.

Cleaned interview transcripts were loaded into the qualitative analysis software Dedoose and coded from an inductive orientation (Braun & Clark, 2022). In other words, iterative coding passes built an original codebook generated directly from the perspectives of interviewees, as

opposed to the deductive application of preexisting concepts and theories. Once all transcriptions were coded, the most frequently occurring codes were sorted into buckets, which were then categorized into themes. Primary codes were initial springboards for more specific interview themes; secondary, tertiary, and in some cases, quaternary codes were used to indicate intricate or more niche exemplifications regarding ‘big-ticket’ ideas like identity, harassment, and toxicity, or platform-based observations (in which interviewees discuss their most frequently used game-adjacent platforms). I also collected information on each interviewee’s knowledge of gaming culture, including factors such as introductory forces (i.e., how they discovered or were introduced to games) and their levels of involvement with game-adjacent communities (e.g., subreddit communities, game-based content creation, community moderation, and independent game development). Table 18 collates all primary code springboards, unpacked further in the discussion.

Table 18. Primary Interview Codes

<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Distribution</i>	<i>Subcodes</i>
Content Creator Influence	Participant muses content creators’ influence on game-adjacent memetic communication and gaming culture	54	2
Coping Strategies	Participant discusses how they navigate interacting with political content in games or gaming culture more broadly	42	2
Economic Factors	Participant muses on economic factors encircling games and gaming culture	23	2
Education & Awareness	Participant remarks on how education and awareness about sociocultural topics might affect debates in gaming culture	9	3
Gamer Identity	Participant discusses the gamer identity	33	1
Gaming Escapism	Participant discusses gaming as an escape from ‘real-world’ or offline	14	3

	stressors		
Gaming Background & Knowledge	Any time participant discusses their favorite games OR games about which they are particularly knowledgeable; also includes participant's gaming history	213	3
Generational Differences	Participant notes generational differences between gamers or sociocultural perceptions of gaming culture by non-gamers	21	2
Impact on Perceptions of Gaming Culture	Participant muses on gaming memes' impact on perceptions of gaming culture	87	4
Meme Exposure & Game-Adjacent Engagement	Participant discusses the main ways they are exposed to gaming memes and related game-adjacent content	209	2
Participant Involvement	Participant discusses their level of personal involvement with gaming culture	21	2
Personal Sociopolitical Beliefs	Participant discusses their personal social, cultural, or political beliefs' impact on their gaming engagement	64	2
Social/Game Platform Moderation	Participant discusses whether platforms (gaming platforms and social networking sites) adequately moderate the interactions taking place on and around them, and how this moderation affects memetic communication	107	5
Socialization	Participant emphasizes the social aspect of their play; gaming with (or to maintain) friends/friendships	53	0
Sociocultural Content in Memetic Communication	Participant reflects on social, political, or cultural content in game-adjacent memetic communication	213	14

The subsequent sections synthesize interviewees' perspectives on game-adjacent memetic communication concerning the RQs. Where appropriate, excerpts will be included to illustrate especially relevant sentiments or, in some cases, contrary opinions.

Thematic Analysis

The Interviewees: Introductory Forces & Gameplay Histories

The Gaming Background and Knowledge code was applied to all areas in which interviewees described their gaming histories (introductory forces, first platforms, etc.) and general knowledge about games and gaming communities. Almost all interviewees described being introduced to gaming early in their childhood, most often by or with family members, such as parents and siblings. Many credited these introductory forces as sparks for their initial interest in gaming; some had parents who were avid Nintendo fans (P1), enjoyed cooperative *Lego* titles (P8, P16), or siblings who bonded through split-screen multiplayer play (P3, P4, P13). Others started with family-oriented devices, such as the Nintendo Wii (P2, P6, P7, P11), or through educational software (e.g., typing games like *Type to Learn*, P16, P17), which gradually transitioned into more recreational play. In almost all cases, gaming was initially a shared activity that helped strengthen or introduce relationships between family members and friends.

The transition from childhood into adulthood saw many interviewees diverging toward various games and platforms. Some (P6, P9) gravitated towards sports simulations, such as *FIFA* or the *NBA 2K* series, or FPS games (P4, P8, P10), including the *Call of Duty* series or *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege*. Others favored story-driven games, such as the *Assassin's Creed* series (P5, P15), sandbox games like *Minecraft* (P12, P14, P17), or immersive action role-playing games like *The Legend of Zelda* series or *The Elder Scrolls* series (P13, P15). In terms of hardware, Nintendo's Wii, Switch, and classic handhelds, such as the Game Boy, were common to childhood experiences, with many transitioning to PC gaming as they grew older. More recently, interviewees have begun moving to mobile platforms, depending on the games. However, these shifts are attributed more to lifestyle changes (i.e., breaks from work) rather than

long-term gaming consumption habits. Regardless of preferences, however, a consistent theme emerged from all interviews: gaming serves as both entertainment and a means for relationship-building, bringing interviewees closer together with their significant others through shared interests, cooperation, and friendly rivalries.

I draw attention to interviewees' gaming backgrounds, knowledge, and introductory influences to emphasize that many indicate significant engagement in gaming culture, even though at least five do not explicitly identify as gamers (Table 17). Building on my discussion of game-adjacency in Chapter Two, these viewpoints illustrate how participants' initial experiences with gaming, their evolving connections to platforms and play, and their overall gaming knowledge provide context regarding their potential exposure to game-adjacent memetic communication. As the subsequent thematic analyses will indicate, it is evident that interviewees recognize social, cultural, and political themes within game-adjacent memetic communication—irrespective of their willingness to claim the gamer identity label.

While all interviewees reflected on the influence of extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication, nine (P1, P3, P6, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15) mentioned directly that exposure to political extremism has affected their personal participation to some degree. Major themes born out of the codes listed above (Table 18) include: reinforcement or redefinition of the gamer identity, impacts on willingness to engage with specific gaming communities or gaming culture more broadly, and tensions between normalization versus resistance to extreme political views, and more specifically right-wing talking points (unpacked further below).

RQ4: How Does Perception Shape Participation?

Exposure to Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

One of the dataset's most populous codes, Meme Exposure and Game-Adjacent Engagement, relates to the ways interviewees find, actively or incidentally, game-adjacent memetic content. Further divided into two subcodes, Platforms & Sites and Types of Game-Adjacent Content, interviewees noted their primary platforms for game-adjacent memetic consumption include Reddit, Twitter, Discord, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. More granular examples of specific sites like IGN, Game Informer, or fan wikis (or community-maintained encyclopedias) were mentioned, but these were uncommon. Surprisingly, well-known names such as Twitch, Steam, Snapchat, and Facebook were not frequently mentioned by interviewees. While Facebook can be nominally explained away due to age range (i.e., most interviewees are squarely Generation Z, while Facebook users trend early Millennial or older, see Pew Research Center, 2024), the lacking popularity of Twitch and Steam, two very popular game-adjacent sites, is noteworthy relative to their relationship with other codes (i.e., Content Creator Influence; explained below). In other words, it is surprising to find that interviewees do not frequently use Twitch and Steam, suggesting they consume streamers' memetic content in ways (e.g., video on demand [VOD] or stream clips archived on YouTube or TikTok) beyond the expected livestream.

A throughline between each of the platforms mentioned above is their function as community hubs, particularly in relation to specific games or influencer communities:

[Platforms like] Reddit or Discord you can join, which are obviously more specific to the game you're playing, just because Reddit I feel is more specific. But also, I feel just like streamers in general, like content creators, I feel they kind of create [gaming memes] in a way where it's like they're also part of the community. So it's even things that aren't even video games. I saw a Minecraft

meme with the Homelander reaction recently, and it's just become a mixture of the Internet and video games (P1).

These perspectives focus on the role of game-adjacent platforms as community hubs, encompassing not only games but also popular culture more broadly. Like P1's mention of Homelander, a prominent villain in Amazon's superhero series *The Boys*, these spaces mix video game references (e.g., *Minecraft*) and other entertainment media topics to stoke memetic dialogue and interaction. Importantly, these spaces do not demand interviewees' regular involvement ("I'm not regularly on video game Reddits, but you know, if I'm really into a game, I'll definitely go on. I'll scroll down some stuff and see what people said" [P2]). Instead, interviewees share that they turn to these game-adjacent spaces if they feel a desire for increased involvement, or want to stay informed on developments by their favorite content creators or game developers:

Twitter is a big one for me. People make artwork, or maybe a hashtag. My timeline is pretty cool. I follow a lot of the creators of the games I like on Twitter, so I get to see a lot of their other projects and a lot of in jokes about [those games]. I like to browse [Twitter hashtags] and Reddit boards (P7).

Platform choice aside, all interviewees made clear that they are capable of navigating game-adjacent platforms if and when desired. This demonstrates (a) that players know how to locate game- or genre-specific digital communities and (b) that their varying levels of desired involvement determine their participation in these spaces.

In terms of the Types of Game-Adjacent Content consumed, interviewees were most likely to share that lighthearted or game-focused memes are their central units of consumption, or content that, in their words, does not focus on social, cultural, or political issues. Popular culture references were also commonly cited, referencing current events like celebrity Kanye West's controversial Nazi statements (Lenthang, 2025), Hailey Welch (of "Hawk Tuah" viral

fame, see Rosenblatt & Yang, 2024), and prime suspect in the UnitedHealth CEO killing Luigi Mangione (Sundby et al., 2024), among many others. References to the stereotypical gamer identity (unpacked further below) were also very common:

This is just what comes to mind because of what I see online, you know, with memes, and just my typical like my experience with it. [The stereotypical gamer] is male, has a messy desk and headset. There's food everywhere. Screaming into the mic. He's like, I don't know, plays really grindy games like *League* or like *Valorant* (P14).

Perspectives that echo P14's statement above showcase how memetic content (of messy personal spaces, expected gaming paraphernalia like headsets, and popular AAA games like *League of Legends*) reinforces expectations about who gamers are, what they enjoy playing, and, in some cases, how they conduct themselves. Other commonly cited memetic content included clips of streamed gameplay, gaming news, nonsensical "brain rot," and fan art. At least seven mentions of political news clips (e.g., of presidential candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris) also occurred, referencing the then-current U.S. presidential elections: "I see a lot of [political clips in gaming communities] now, especially since we're coming up into an election, a presidential election. While they're not personally attacking me, I feel for those who they are" (P3). Distinct from political rhetoric, concepts, or images embedded in static memes, the small number of observed political news clips within the dataset suggests that interviewees are aware that expressly political content permeates game-adjacent spaces, and that for those like P3, such content can create feelings of exclusion and discomfort. While this specific interviewee was careful to delineate that such content does not specifically target them, they also implied that this memetic communication contributes to the othering of marginalized communities: in a U.S. context, immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and more. This diversity of consumption suggests interviewees are exposed to a wide variety of game-adjacent memetic content, which may subsequently influence their perceptions of gamers and gaming culture.

Impacts on Willingness to Engage

Across interviews, a commonly reported sentiment is that game-adjacent memetic communication, particularly when it takes on extremist, divisive, or overtly hostile tones, directly influences decisions about *how* and *when* to engage with gaming communities. Several interviewees describe opting out of public voice chat out of concern that they may be lumped in with the negative stereotypes encircling those environments: “You’ll look at some of the names of some of the groups or the [group or account profile pictures], and those are somewhat racist, and so I kind of avoid them” (P5). Others shared that the negativity prevalent in comparatively closed game-adjacent spaces, like Discord servers, pushed them away, even when communication did not always focus on games: “I joined a bunch of like Discord servers, and I literally have had to leave after five minutes because stuff they’re posting in that community was crazy bad” (P14). Meanwhile, some participants emphasize that they can separate their play from the memes (“It’s hard to say. I want to say that they [toxic gaming memes] don’t influence the games that I play” [P11]), suggesting that exposure to problematic content or extremist views does not fundamentally alter their interest in gaming (“There’s nuance to [political gaming memes], as with everything. But, I don’t care what you do. I think you should do what makes you feel good as long as you’re not doing it at the expense of somebody’s wellbeing” [P9]) or decision to participate in gaming communities. Unfortunately, such perspectives offload the onus of addressing toxicity (especially that received by already-marginalized gamers) onto others, which does not address the problem of memetic hate in game-adjacent communication. Stated differently, the impact of politically charged or exclusionary game-adjacent memetic communication positions these interviewees on a spectrum that ranges from strong avoidance (of specific titles or platforms) to indifference. Interestingly, no interviewee reported that exposure

to such content *increased* their desire to participate in gaming communities, suggesting that, at some level (and despite some interviewees indicating indifference), problematic game-adjacent communication *does* have a demonstrable dissuading effect.

Whether interviewees illustrated how hateful gaming memes fractured their personal interests or shaped their interactions in online contexts (e.g., no longer using voice chat in public multiplayer lobbies, P3), it is clear that game-adjacent memetic communication *does* affect player perceptions and attitudes toward gaming culture. While such material does not collectively drive everyone away, these interviews indicate that it at least raises questions about the communities themselves, specifically regarding toxicity, harassment, and inclusion. To circumvent these issues, interviewees note things like friend group curation, account blocking and muting, and similar measures to curtail the adverse effects of toxic gaming memes in their own digital ecosystems: “The demographics I’m around are usually heavily queer and non-male, and all that fun stuff. So I guess I’m usually in like, very much in a bubble. I make great use of the mute and block button” (P15). As such, a key takeaway that can be drawn from these perspectives relates to curation: to what lengths are players willing to go regarding pruning content they deem unacceptable from their timelines? These perspectives are supported by findings in the literature (Cote, 2018, 2020; Ortiz, 2019; Vossen, 2018), particularly regarding the decision-making strategies players face when deciding to participate in gaming communities.

Normalization vs. Resistance

The Impact on Perceptions of Gaming Culture code connects previous sections by addressing instances when interviewees discuss how memetic communication about games shapes their perceptions, emphasizing the tension between normalizing and resisting stereotypes.

Some interviewees noted that ‘rage bait’ or problematic gaming memes foster exclusion and evaluations of gaming communities as unsafe spaces:

[Participating in game-adjacent communities] is like a totally elective activity, you know. I would tend to kind of, I would say, avoid the toxic stuff, or [if] somebody’s coming at me with some rage bait. I’m not gonna engage with it, because I think it’s a waste of energy (P9).

Others expressed frustration at how gaming memes push stereotypical expectations despite actual conditions reflecting more diverse participation than what is portrayed in everyday media:

It’s pretty annoying, you know, making fun of the whole, any [gamer] girl stereotype. I don’t know, ‘She’s not good at video games so she has to have guys carry her’ or whatever. And there’s also just so much racism when people get mad at a game. They just resort to a bunch of slurs. And when I see memes about that, all the comments are like, ‘Yeah, well, that’s just gaming culture.’ And it’s like, really not. You can be mad at a game without insulting a whole group of people (P14).

As such, interviewees highlight how memes shape, or reinforce, mainstream assumptions and influence stereotypes about games, gamers, and gaming. Despite recent industry data (e.g., ESA, 2024) showing an ever-increasing diversity among gaming audiences, game-adjacent memetic communication may foster a sense that identity-based hate is condoned as an expected experience in gaming. By way of resistance, it is clear negative game-adjacent communication affects beliefs about games, gamers, and gaming; players invested in these communities must address, in some way (e.g., avoidance through curation, indifference, tacit acceptance), that game-adjacent memetic communication exists on a spectrum of toxicity, and that in some communities this scale can be wildly out of balance. This means that players engaging in game-adjacent spaces must perform a certain degree of affective labor during consumption, insofar as it requires conscious effort to set parameters for filtering out harmful content or scrolling past negativity. This realization poses issues because (a) it situates the burden of affective labor on individual players rather than addressing the structural issues of game-adjacent spaces

themselves (i.e., examining how their memetic discourses endorse or even promote toxicity), and (b) further cultivates a sense of memetic privilege among stereotypical gaming audiences by condoning the unchecked spectrum of toxicity at a systemic level.

RQ5: Who Are Gamers?

Reinforcing the Gamer Identity

Many interviewees describe that memetic communication in game-adjacent spaces is a powerful driver for reinforcing or (in some cases, challenging) the stereotypical gamer identity: the young, white, socially awkward, straight, cisgender, man. Importantly, some interviewees (P3, P5, P7, P10, P11, P13) perceive stereotypical gamers as leaning toward, or outright endorsing, right-wing political views:

I definitely have stereotyped people on the spot when I've heard they're a gamer. Just because of those memes that I've seen, the content that those gaming accounts are posting. I think what they value aligns more with like, a little bit of the extremists, especially on the right-wing side. I hear there's a lot of memes right now about Project 2025 and things like that (P3).

Additionally, some interviewees felt that memes about “sweaty basement-dweller, Mountain Dew-chugging, Dorito finger-licking kinds of gamers” (P12) contribute to concerns that gaming communities cater to antisocial manosphere assemblages, like incels (“I’ve had a couple instances with *Warhammer* where I’ve shown memes to my parents and my girlfriend, and they’ve been like, ‘Is it just incels that play this game?’” [P10]). One interviewee leaned into this perception further, connecting toxic gaming behavior and the stereotypical gamer identity to platforms that condone hate, like 4chan:

I feel like there's already been a sort of point of view of gamers, or like perception of gamers, like sweaty, greasy guys in their basements, posting on 4chan all day and writing manifestos. I feel like it used to be more niche fringe people that were viewed like that. But now, I feel like there's a sort of rise of alt-right rhetoric and ideology that's sort of come into the mainstream more. I feel like that people in the gaming community and outside of the gaming community have been emboldened to share their feelings about it

for better or for worse. It's definitely not good for the gaming community, but it's also not limited to the gaming community. It's everywhere, unfortunately (P13).

Notably, the above quote highlights that politically motivated hate is not exclusive to gaming spaces, but instead has become more pronounced due to escalating tensions beyond gaming culture. Such perceptions underscore a prevailing theme that is interwoven throughout this dissertation: gaming spaces *are* inherently political and influenced by the social and cultural tensions that surround them. In turn, gaming spaces (and the memetic communication that happens within them) are hotbeds for political debates, whether they pertain to gaming topics or otherwise.

Some interviewees raised points that online forums, content creator culture, or lighthearted memetic content can challenge stereotypical expectations about who gamers are. These interviewees contend that gaming memes alone do not define gamers (“[Gaming memes] don’t really change my outlook on how I view them. That’s kind of how our world is, because you’ll find that no matter what community you look at kind of sucks” [P6]), though these perspectives were delivered with a certain sense of blasé that did not outright embrace memes as vehicles of change. Simultaneously, some noted that gaming memes *can* visibly challenge stereotypical expectations when paired with emotion (“One [gaming meme] I remember seeing earlier this year was like a girl playing Fortnite. They’re just kind of going off the walls and being crazy and kind of playing into this feminine rage stereotype, I guess” [P4]). Even so, most agreed that repeated exposure to memetic “gamer language” (e.g., Ortiz, 2019) featuring marginalized identities as the target of jokes only serves to entrench the stereotypical audience as the norm:

There’s a lot of negative memes that I think is really disheartening. Like, men, women, and trans people have been playing games as long as we’ve [trans people] existed, so it really sucks that we’re still kind of a punching bag. I think that overall a lot of gaming

culture is pretty much, originally tailored for cis white men, and I think that whenever they feel threatened they turn to this humor to try and push these marginalized groups out. That's how I see it (P15).

Perspectives like the one shared by P15 underscore how humor is operationalized to embellish stereotypes, even in cases when the 'joke' is transphobic, homophobic, misogynistic, or in some other way targets aspects of a person's identity. In such instances, gaming memes may create the impression that all gamers share these views, especially when the jokes are pervasive or circulate in non-gaming spaces.

It is important to note that interviewees who mentioned encountering offensive or problematic memetic content regarding the stereotypical gamer identity made choices to avoid the titles or communities associated with them (e.g., *League of Legends*, *Call of Duty*, *Rocket League*):

You'll see a guy [in gaming memes] being really cringey, like playing *Rocket League* or another game like *League of Legends*. You're like 'Oh, dude. I don't want to be known as that guy that doesn't go outside,' and you know, it kind of does definitely keep you away from those games. And it's kept me away from those games for a while. Yeah, I have stayed away from those games because of those things (P1).

Those who were more indifferent or uncaring implied that exposure to such memetic content is an expected feature of gaming participation ("Their [stereotypical gamers'] beliefs, I feel politically could be either way. It could be like 'I want better economy,' or it could be like 'women suck.' But I mean, to each their own" [P8]). Game-adjacent memetic communication that focuses on the stereotypical gamer identity can actively repel newcomers or casual players who prefer not to associate themselves with what is perceived as ongoing identity-based, culture-war-esque tension. Likewise, these perspectives suggest gamers who meet the stereotypical gaming audience expectation may feel validated by being represented in these memes, even when criticism is apparent. As such, exposure to gaming memes about the stereotypical gamer

identity—who they are, what they play, and their political leanings—can negatively affect perceptions of gamers and gaming culture, reinforcing a sense of exclusion.

Perception of Gamers' Demographics & Political Leanings

I applied the Sociocultural Content in Memetic Communication code to any interviewee's mention of social, cultural, or political topics witnessed in game-adjacent memetic communication. While there are too many subcodes to list here, prominent subtopics included things like: aggressive behavior (e.g., 'gamer rages' featuring yelling, shouting, smashed gaming equipment), references to the economy or business, freedom of speech/expression, gun control, military/war, political parties/movements/organizations, representation/diversity & inclusion, and toxicity/harassment. Interviewees consistently suggested game-adjacent memetic communication reflects sociocultural and political values within gaming communities, often indicating an undercurrent of right-leaning or right-wing conservatism ("Twitter's pretty big on having random memes with video games in it. Like someone says, 'Trump's the best president' and it's like Kratos jumping off a building, trying to kill Zeus or whatever. It's just funny stuff like that" [P8]). Perspectives similar to those of P8 showcase how video game content (e.g., *God of War's* main character, Kratos) becomes intertwined with political stance-taking, such as "Trump is the best president," neatly packaged in a small unit of culture that can be consumed quickly.

References to Donald Trump, the Heritage Foundation's ²⁰ Project 2025, and "alt-right humor," occurred across at least five interviews (P3, P5, P8, P11, P13), suggesting interviewees are sensitive to right-wing politics insofar as they identify these references as such. This type of game-adjacent memetic communication appears to mirror the political leanings of vocal

²⁰ A U.S. right-wing think tank based in Washington, D.C. (The Heritage Foundation, 2017).

members, regardless of whether these leanings are in the minority. For example, some interviews focused on how right-wing ideology is amplified by way of content creators or gaming influencers (“I know I’ve heard Adin Ross talk about Trump, and I know he had Trump on his podcast or something, maybe just a stream. And xQc, is that the guy? I think he was also somewhere in that stream” [P11]). It should be made clear, however, that some interviewees are conscious that the political bent of their witnessed memetic communication does not describe *all* of gaming culture, and that instead, memes represent a gamut of social, cultural, and political views:

I feel like it’s something that you have to experience. If you really want to understand a game, you got to play it at least once, right? You got to spend like thirty minutes. You can’t just look at these memes and be like ‘Yo, this lobby is full of neo-Nazis,’ which it might. I’m not gonna deny it. Some games are just absolutely overrun by horrible, horrible people (P12).

Perspectives like P12’s emphasize the importance of perspective-taking when attempting to understand the memetic discourses of gaming communities. In other words, game-adjacent memetic communication can be viewed as a cultural marker of the interactions taking place within any particular game-adjacent space, but they may not accurately reflect the *entirety* of sociocultural and political sentiments inherent to it. Regarding my constructive critique of Limor Shifman’s (2013) memetic dimensions lens in the previous chapter, I argue that a more refined framework is necessary for examining game-adjacent memetic communication, explicitly acknowledging that a player’s lived experiences influence their responses to such exposure. I explore this new model, which expands on my concept of game-adjacency introduced in Chapter Two, in the upcoming final chapter.

Stereotypes, Exclusion, & Perspective-Taking

Accompanying findings in previous scholarship (Condis, 2018; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Massanari, 2024), interviewees noted that gaming memes significantly contribute to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes within gaming culture. Some interviewees were clear that they try to distance themselves from this “drama,” emphasizing a need for perspective-taking when observing memetic discourses in gaming communities (“I’ve really just been taking everything with a grain of salt. Especially when it comes to famous players or [their] player base, or a debate with the community” [P17]). There were also numerous examples of interviewees commenting on gaming memes depicting the typical gamer as antisocial, aggressive, misogynistic, or homophobic (“I think there’s honestly discrimination everywhere, and like video games, I think there is a lot of discrimination when it comes to women, people of color, queer people, cause they’re not typically welcomed in [gaming] space” [P4]). As noted above, this memetic content frequently characterizes gamers as socially isolated young white men (even though many types of people have long played games) whose behavior reflects constructs like toxic masculinity and exclusionary behavior against marginalized players (e.g., women, LGBTQIA+ players). Some interviewees emphasized that these gaming memes lead to harmful or reductive assumptions, which then become normalized through repetition in the memetic discourse:

Recently a player on the Red Sox [Major League Baseball team] got suspended for saying a homophobic slur, and when I saw that, like the whole comment section was just like, ‘Oh he wouldn’t have survived in the *CoD* lobby’ or anything like that. And that’s definitely a running joke I see all the time, like ‘Oh, people are so soft.’ And I know that on my [social media timelines] I’ve seen female streamers and like, whenever she joins a chat everyone’s like ‘Oh, it’s a girl in the chat.’ Why is that the way we choose to express ourselves, you know? (P6).

Perspectives like P6 above indicate a fair degree of self-reflexivity, questioning why gaming communities conduct themselves in such a manner while also highlighting how running jokes about the ‘softness’ or sensitivity of contemporary gamers are made.

Interviewee reflections on gaming memes used in resistive or counternarrative ways were comparatively much less common. Despite some expressing how memetic communication can be an opportunity for general resistance (“Whenever I see people reacting to that crazy anti-woke stuff, it makes me kind of hopeful. As many of those anti-woke racist, misogynistic, transphobic people there are, there’s just as many who will call them out on their bullshit” [P13]) or allyship with specific social movements (“Things like Black Lives Matter, or just you know, the push for diversity has definitely affected [game-adjacent memetic discourse]” [P5]), most interviewees commonly focused on instances of exclusion, harassment, or general toxicity. These perspectives suggest that interviewees are aware that gaming memes can serve as vehicles for hate and identity-based harassment, with the implicit understanding that memes are not merely nonsensical images or short video content. Stated more simply, memetic communication is impactful.

Impacting Intersectionality

Lastly, while all interviewees touched on toxicity in gaming memes to some degree, several (P3, P5, P9, P14, P15, P16) emphasized the detrimental effects that such memetic communication has on marginalized players. These interviews described witnessing memetic communication that was outwardly racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic, specifically targeting marginalized players due to their identities. This witnessed memetic behavior gave many interviewees pause; for example, those who did not self-identify as men (P3, P13, P14, P15) shared such material prompted them to withdraw from online spaces, consciously avoid

public interactions in multiplayer scenarios, or to form closed, safer spaces with persons familiar to them (friends, family, etc.). This withdrawal underscores a critical tension amongst the interviewee pool: while some compartmentalize or (ostensibly) dismiss toxic memetic communication in game-adjacent space (“It doesn’t poke or prod me in any way just due to my experience and my view on drama. It’s drama, [it] doesn’t affect you as a person. You’re just there to observe and gawk” [P17]), marginalized players shared a sense of increased vulnerability, with gaming memes sometimes threatening their inclusion and safety in gaming spaces (“I would say because of my political beliefs and based on my experience with the gaming community, I only game or socialize through video games in person. So, if all of my friends are in one room” [P3]). These viewpoints highlight a significant concern: when marginalized players and their allies feel alienated by toxic memetic communication, the hegemonic status quo continues, reinforcing the notion that toxic expressions are the *sole* forms of game-adjacent memetic exchange. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that toxicity and extreme political perspectives in game-adjacent memetic communication impact not only the perceptions and attitudes surrounding gamers but also directly affect how marginalized players choose to engage with gaming culture.

How Interviewees’ Personal Values Shape Their Participation

While there is a spectrum of political orientation among the interviewee pool, many expressed left-leaning or progressive viewpoints. Several interviewees explicitly identify as leftist or liberal (P3, P5, P10, P13, P15), and their discussions centered on topics such as inclusivity, diversity, and the rejection of reactionary politics in gaming spaces (see the various quotes above). However, some (P1, P9) articulated more libertarian-leaning (“I’m more of the idea of the government kind of needs to stay out of it” [P1]) or independent perspectives (“Some

people would consider me a liberal, but in [state] I don't want to be associated with them either. I don't know if my political beliefs affect anything, because I'm able to disconnect myself from video games" [P5]), emphasizing a desire to keep political discussion distinct from games, despite acknowledging that political topics *do* exist within gaming discourses, memetic or otherwise. Despite this diversity, many participants associate gaming spaces (and even gaming culture's future) with right-wing or reactionary politics ("I think more than anything that gaming is going to be very, not rapidly, but in the near future going to be associated with right-wing politics" [P12]). These observations seem to fuel tensions within the perspectives of progressive interviewees regarding the impact of game-adjacent memetic communication on marginalized communities (see above). Notably, while direct mentions were comparatively rare, a few interviewees (P6, P10, P12, P13, P15) described encountering extreme right-wing discourse in gaming subreddits, including Nazi imagery ("I have seen streamers jokingly dress their characters up [like Nazis] and make jokes about that, which is not good. They're going to purposely do something that they know will get engagement" [P6]) and reactionary backlash against diversity in games ("I haven't seen anything about [video game trailer] except people complaining about the DEI²¹ protagonist" [P13]), reinforcing a perception that some gaming communities are deeply resistant to increased inclusivity in gaming culture. Perspectives akin to those of P6 are fascinating because they view extreme ideologies like Nazism as mere engagement tactics instead of genuine expressions of hatred. This viewpoint suggests that repeated exposure to similar instances of extreme political 'humor' may desensitize individuals to the severity of such toxic behavior.

²¹ Diversity, equity, and inclusion; like *woke*, or its previous iteration *social justice warrior*, this acronym has become a right-wing pejorative and thought-terminating cliché which attempts to rhetorically shut down discussion relating to inclusivity in gaming spaces.

It is important to note that while some interviewees indicated their personal values (social, cultural, and political) do not directly influence their gaming engagement, they *do* acknowledge that exposure to extreme political views in gaming memes has shaped their perceptions of specific communities (“I think a lot of the right-wing memes and the gaming stereotypes come from online competitive games that involve a little bit more community outreach and consistent updates. I don’t ever hear bad things about story-driven games” [P10]). Perspectives like these may be predicated on the notion that competitive online multiplayer spaces, to some degree, necessitate communication between players, which in turn increases the likelihood of exposure to contentious political statements. However, such perspectives are still surprising, given the examples of intense backlash to narrative-driven “walking simulators” like *Gone Home* or interactive non-fictions like *Depression Quest*, which were embroiled in the Gamergate controversy (Bezio, 2018; Braithwaite, 2016; Cote, 2020; Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018). In any case, nearly all interviewees agreed that the presence of extreme political views in game-adjacent spaces contributes to a general sense of exclusion for those who do not fit the stereotypical gamer identity profile (i.e., young, straight, white, cisgender, male). This consensus highlights the influence of game-adjacent memetic communication as an ideological gatekeeper, as these viewpoints demonstrate how social, cultural, and political content shape perceptions of communities, their players, and even entire game genres.

RQ6: Intervening in Problematic Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

Effectiveness of Content Moderation

The Social/Game Platform Moderation code (Table 19) was applied to any instance of an interviewee discussing the state of content moderation on gaming platforms (e.g., Steam, Activision-Blizzard’s Battle.net launcher) or game-adjacent social media platforms (e.g.,

subreddit communities, Facebook gaming groups, Discord servers, Instagram pages). This code was further subdivided by discussion on algorithmic filtering and artificial intelligence (26), censorship (14), human moderation (16), and suggestions for improvement (30; unpacked further below). Together, these perspectives articulate the interviewees' views on the successes or failures of measures employed to stem the tide of toxicity and hate in game-adjacent spaces.

Overall, interviewees expressed widespread skepticism about the effectiveness of content moderation, in both game-adjacent social media spaces and on gaming platforms themselves. While some acknowledged moderation has improved in specific areas—like algorithms preventing racial slurs from being used in account handles or usernames, or identifying extreme cases of hate speech (P2, P8, P16)—many shared that enforcement of things like social contracts (e.g., agreeing to treat others with respect and ‘play nice’) is inadequate: “[The social contracts are] maybe just a couple of sentences big on the screen, right wher epeople get on the game. I want to play online, like, click accept, if that makes sense. No one’s gonna read that” (P2). At least five participants (P3, P5, P9, P12, P15) indicated they view content moderation as largely performative:

Yeah, I’m not gonna lie. I understand that [social contracts and content moderation policies] help companies with legal liabilities, but it definitely feels more like a cop out. I don’t think that you can trust any online group to be completely civil with a friendly warning, essentially (P9).

Supplementing this apparent consensus is the idea that gaming and social media companies lack a true desire to enforce moderation policies because it does not overtly make them money: “Why would they step in? They can’t control what sort of people do now. If they’re not losing any money, I don’t know if they really care” (P5). Some interviewees believe that while bans or content takedowns do mete out a modicum of judgment, most gaming and social media

platforms are structured in such a way that engagement and monetization is privileged over community safety and well-being:

Obviously, there's people within the [gaming and game-adjacent social media] companies that are fighting, like do want to fight for what's right. But the goal of an organization, the goal of a business is to make money. At the end of the day, that's what a business does. And I feel as though as long as it is a business, they're not going to sacrifice money in order to stand for what's right, like firmly stand for what's right. I think there's a lot of skirting around the issues in order to not isolate both sides of their consumer base (P13).

In other words, short of a massive public relations crisis, interviewees believe that gaming and social media platforms are content with condoning toxicity as long as it does not affect site-wide (or game) engagement (Cote, 2018; Smith, 2019).

Running parallel to this skepticism is the perception of moderation mechanisms being easily circumvented through hateful creativity: "I think [algorithmic content moderation] it honestly depends on their algorithm. If you're saying a new slang word that's negative, their system doesn't really know what it means. Some AI algorithms are better than others" (P3).

Perspectives like these liken non-human content moderation efforts (algorithms, banned lists of words, AI-powered filters) to a kind of pseudo-arms race between player communities and companies. When asked to consider human moderation, comparatively more closed spaces (e.g., Discord servers) and loosely moderated platforms (e.g., subreddit communities, X/Twitter) are viewed as equally affected by middling content moderation: "Well, Reddit moderators don't really pay a whole ton of attention. They care about what the topic is like, what and who people are. Discord moderators take it a little more personal and are more considerate with the community" (P16). Another noted deficiency relates to how algorithmic filtering mistakenly flags player communications as instances of toxicity or hate, which then leads to frustration and distrust in current moderation practices:

I know that their Facebook algorithms kind of check that stuff. Even with me, like one of my older brothers, we joke around a lot and I was about to post on his Facebook. I was gonna call him ugly and Facebook was like ‘Are you sure you want to post this?’ I was like, wow, I’m not even cursing or nothing. And so I’m guessing that is very similar in some of these gaming communities. But you can’t stop somebody from, you know, [direct messaging] you and I think that’s where a lot of the hate happens and the threats and the stalking (P5).

Due to this lack of control, some interviewees perceived game-adjacent memetic communication to be overshadowed by broader Internet discussions on freedom of expression or free speech.

Interviewees imply a type of perceptual dichotomy, with concerns about censorship on one end (i.e., perceptions of heavy-handedness) and overt laxity on the other (i.e., unaddressed toxicity).

Perceptions on How Moderation Affects Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

Due to the perceived ineffectiveness of content moderation on gaming and game-adjacent social media platforms, interviewees (P6, P12, P13) articulate an environment in which toxicity remains an expectation rather than an exception:

Moderation just across the board is just going out the window. Right? Like, it really comes down to this argument of free speech and everything. It’s like, what exactly can you say, right? At least in my mind, people like being a little bit naughty. People like doing hateful things, especially online. Because, who knows? Who knows who you are? (P12)

Perspectives like P12’s above imply that, in gaming spaces specifically, reactionary views are tolerated (perhaps even encouraged), which shapes how players interact and communicate with one another. Consequently, some noted how players with marginalized identities (or in some cases, themselves) must curate their online experiences and game-adjacent memetic consumption in avoid toxicity and hate, frequently resorting to things like muting, blocking, abstaining from public chats, and creating bespoke servers: “People will be like, ‘Oh, just mute and move on.’ It’s like, no, there’s a deeper problem that needs to be addressed. We shouldn’t just put a bandaid on it” (P15). Interviewees suggest that these actions may be more akin to band-aids (i.e., short-

term fixes) than genuine attempts to address cultural norms, echoing similar findings in previous interview studies (see Cote, 2020). Even so, some emphasized self-moderation as an actionable step towards pruning toxicity and hate from their timelines, assuming a level of curatorial agency in lieu of relying on platforms to do this work. However, self-moderation is not equally enacted by interviewees (or gaming audiences more broadly); marginalized players, who are often targeted by toxicity and hate, may have to do extra curatorial work (or may even be unable to fully extricate themselves from seeing hate in their feeds). In this vein, some interviewees (P13, P15) argue that placing the burden of moderation upon individuals rather than gaming and social media platforms allows an evasion of accountability, encouraging a status quo in which hate speech and politically extreme views are allowed to thrive. Further, some believe human content moderators are unable to keep up with the sheer weight of toxic game-adjacent communication: “I think it’s unrealistic for a human to be able to effectively monitor all these communities. A lot of these AI have done a good job removing hate speech a little bit in online communities, but people are creative” (P2). As such, similar to the aforementioned tension between censorship and laxity, there is also an emerging perceptual divide between human and algorithmic (or AI-assisted) interventions (see Gillespie, 2020; Gorwa et al., 2020).

Suggestions for Improving Content Moderation

Interviewees suggested various ways to improve content moderation on gaming platforms and game-adjacent social media platforms, including: (1) clearer rules or social contracts, (2) harsher repercussions for repeated violations (such as permanent hardware or IP-address bans), and (3) better tools for creating safer digital environments:

I really do think that punishment should just be harsher for bigotry and stuff like that. I genuinely think it should be like one warning then a ban, and even to go as far as like IP banning. I think that would be reasonable. I don’t think that it should be acceptable behavior just because you have the mask of being online and being anonymous (P15).

Many interviewees (P2, P5, P10, P13, P15, P16) wanted more straightforward community guidelines; burying communicative expectations within lengthy terms of service does not, they argue, help players understand which behaviors are acceptable versus unacceptable, nor do they promote the idea of community itself: “I would make it official on the page, saying there’s rules that you should follow: no racial remarks, no controversial topics, just specifically talking about the game. If you have a personal question, you should talk to the company” (P16). Several interviewees advocated for stronger enforcement mechanisms: P4 and P15 supported zero tolerance policies for bigotry or identity-based hate (“I think there is a point where people should be banned, and I think that is important for things like hate speech or harassment” [P4]), while others (P3, P14) called for more streamlined curation mechanisms to more quickly prune problematic communication in both in-game and game-adjacent contexts: “I would find ways to protect those people who want to play and want to create a safe space and are learning. Giving them options of how they could turn off the chats, turn off headsets” (P3). P7, P8, and P14 also argued that increased human moderation is key, insofar as agreeing that algorithmic filtering alone is insufficient to determine whether content is toxic, hateful, or an attempt at reclaiming words and phrases (e.g., LGBTQIA+ slang terms) for community building: “I know in *Disco Elysium* [communities] a lot of LGBTQ+ people are reclaiming a lot of slurs. I feel like that a lot of stuff gets taken down or hidden because [homophobic slurs] get identified and automatically taken down” (P7). Likewise, others propose rewards for good behavior (“If you get the friendly [commendation or badge], you get rewards. Knowing gamers, they will do anything for a cool cosmetic” [P12]), incentivizing respect through game mechanics (e.g., *League of Legends*’ commendation system or other in-game rewards) or profile badges somewhat similar to AnyKey’s GLHF pledge (Brewer et al., 2020). Beyond content moderation, several interviewees

(P1, P7, P10, P15) mentioned the importance of education and awareness initiatives for both players and non-gamers (e.g., parents, grandparents), suggesting developing curricula on Internet etiquette, media literacy, and digital safety can help current and future users parse problematic game-adjacent memetic communication, reducing toxicity in the process:

Educating people from a young age, you know, there should definitely be just how we have a class on etiquette. There should be a class on like, Internet etiquette, how to be safe on the Internet. I know we have that now on cyberbullying, but it needs to go beyond that. Cyberbullying is, in my opinion, way worse now that it was back in the day. Now you have a community that hates you. Now it's not just one person that's sending you memes. You know, you can hit a block button and block them, but you can't hit a block button against a thousand people (P1).

Assessed collectively, interviewees largely agree that *more* needs to be done to address toxicity and hate in game-adjacent spaces, and that a human touch is necessary (even if not always entirely feasible). Offloading the onus of this work entirely onto algorithmic filters and artificially intelligent systems is insufficient to address this issue.

Critical Interpretation & Commentary on Interviewee Perspectives

This interview data highlights how game-adjacent memetic communication fosters social, cultural, and political discussions within gaming communities, particularly in shaping attitudes and perspectives toward participation (RQ4). As outlined above, several interviewees have emphasized that gaming memes frequently perpetuate narrow, stereotypical images of gamers (e.g., young, cisgender, heteronormative, white, politically right-leaning men). Many recognize that these stereotypes are *exaggerated* through gaming memes, which sometimes paint an unfair picture of the actual state of diversity within gaming communities and audiences. Even so, the persistent circulation of these memes appears to entrench these exaggerations as *normal*, and interviewees indicate these memes, when read by non-gamers, can influence ideas about who exactly participates in gaming spaces. As such, these insights highlight that the ongoing culture

tension about diversity and inclusion in gaming remains alive and well within the memetic discourse; as the “language of the Internet” (e.g., Levinson, 2012), memetic communication may even be considered the ground zero for these debates.

Regarding RQ5, interviewees highlight how gaming memes do more than simply reflect gaming culture; they actively shape perceptions of what gaming culture is and who ‘belongs’ in gaming spaces. The interview data strongly indicate that game-adjacent memetic communication functions as a kind of shorthand for social, cultural, and political currency, where stereotypes about gamers are not only referenced but also reinforced through repetition and implicit normalization. The recurring theme of the toxic gamer (i.e., the stereotypical gamer identity mentioned above) is critical to such a reflection. Gaming memes actively sustain this caricature, elevating it to an easily recognizable status and pushing some interviewees to distance themselves or remove themselves entirely from online gaming communities. This finding aligns with scholarship on the operationalization of humor in digital spaces (e.g., Phillips & Milner, 2021), where it is not only used for levity but as a gatekeeping mechanism that draws ideological boundaries between hegemonic and marginalized viewpoints. While some interviewees expressed the ability to compartmentalize such views (e.g., taking things with a “grain of salt” [P17]), others shared that their perceptions of hate and toxicity in gaming communities left them feeling unsafe and unwelcome in those spaces (see Vossen, 2018). As such, despite most interviewees indicating opposition to reactionary viewpoints in game-adjacent spaces, the seemingly high prevalence of right-wing views in gaming memes leads many to cultivate limited or avoidant consumption patterns, creating safe space “echo chambers” (P13) in which toxicity and opposing views are curated.

Regarding RQ6, interviewees' perspectives highlight the common perception of limited content moderation mechanisms, especially regarding the expression of extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication. Several proposed more heavy-handed interventions (e.g., permanent bans), such as proactive content takedowns, better-trained algorithmic filters, and increased human moderation in game-adjacent communities. Others called for better transparency and accountability regarding companies' policies for enforcing content moderation. It should be noted, however, that no interviewee shared the view that these solutions will be easy to implement across the board, nor did our conversations readily differentiate the tensions between freedom of speech, corporate interests, and player safety. As such, these perspectives indicate interviewees think the tenuous status quo will persist so long as content moderation remains inconsistent or susceptible to creative workarounds. Furthermore, without direct action from gaming or social media companies, interviewees maintain that longitudinal community health will not be prioritized over more immediate engagement metrics (e.g., monthly active user [MAU] data that promotes investment), thereby perpetuating a cycle of toxicity. Without many directly stating it in so many words, there is a strong implication that grassroots community action is required to address game-adjacent memetic hate directly.

Concluding Thoughts

These interviewees reveal that game-adjacent memetic communication functions as an ideological gatekeeper, through which humor is leveraged to rhetorically reinforce assumptions of the stereotypical gaming audience as white, cisgender, heterosexual, male, and receptive to right-wing political views. As has been a throughline throughout this dissertation, interviewees agree that memetic communication is not apolitical, but can entrench toxicity and exclusion, allowing these expectations to exist as 'normal' occurrences in gaming spaces. As such, these

perspectives illustrate how game-adjacent memetic communication can shape perceptions of games, gamers, and gaming culture, particularly regarding who games are ‘intended’ for. Compounding these views are interviewees’ perceptions regarding the failures of gaming and game-adjacent social media platforms to adequately enforce content moderation, often due to a lack of resources, inconsistent administration, or the creative workarounds of toxic gaming communities. These perspectives thus highlight how contemporary platform policies, perceptions of corporate priorities, and the very nature of memetic spread sustain a game-adjacent ecosystem where exclusionary views and toxicity are the norm rather than the exception. In the final chapter, I take a step toward addressing these subjectivities by proposing a model that scholars, industry insiders, and everyday gamers can use to better understand game-adjacent memetic discourses and the social, cultural, and political perspectives inherent in them.

5. The Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication Model: Proposing a Framework for Understanding the Significance of Game-Adjacent Memes

In this final chapter, I propose the Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication Model (GAMCM) as a framework for analyzing game-adjacent memetic communication, advancing my articulation of game-adjacency (see Chapter Two) as a critical lens through which to interpret the social, cultural, and political roles of memes in gaming communities. As I have argued previously, critical game studies can harness game-adjacency to describe gaming culture's reach beyond gameplay into diverse digital and physical spaces, sometimes even those that appear to be wholly unrelated to gaming. Here, I contend that memes, as products influenced by the game-adjacent environments in which they are traded, reveal various sociopolitical intricacies of and by gaming communities, shaping and reflecting broader cultural values and power structures.

This chapter aims to establish a methodological scaffolding for understanding how gaming memes act as rhetorical devices in game-adjacent spaces. Drawing once again on Michel Foucault's (1977) theories of discourse and power, this framework emphasizes that memes, like other game-adjacent productions, contribute to a constant cycle of meaning-making, where community members actively (re)construct gaming culture. By examining memes as both humorous and politically charged texts, and through the incorporation of the various game-adjacent dimensions I have articulated in Chapter Two, I highlight their role in identity and community construction, their influence in maintaining (or challenging) cultural norms, and the ideological stance-taking that routinely occurs in digital spaces—often without explicit political intent by their creators. Through this framework, I contend we can begin to better decode how gaming memes, now diffuse beyond game environments, serve as discursive drivers that connect to broader discussions on diversity and inclusion in the wider media ecology.

Core Elements of Game-Adjacency for Memetic Analysis

To briefly review, I have proposed game-adjacency as a theoretical framework for understanding how gaming culture is co-created in spaces beyond actual gameplay. Game-adjacency accounts for the rich cultural production that occurs beside, around, and beyond games. Unlike traditional understandings of gaming spaces, game-adjacency encompasses digital and physical areas where gaming culture is continuously co-constructed and (re)negotiated. This includes not only social media platforms and game-based online communities, but also the act of memetic exchange more broadly, as well as offline gatherings (e.g., hackathons, in-person game groups that meet at local game stores), and other spaces where gaming intersects with broader social, cultural, and political discussions. In essence, game-adjacency highlights how gaming spaces are deeply intertwined with real-world contexts, as gamified daily life practices, fan-made artifacts, and gaming memes all play integral roles in contemporary social interaction, identity formation, and even political discourse (the dissertation's overall focus). Building on Foucault's (1977) discourse theory, game-adjacency not only underscores how discourses in gaming culture circulate but also the ways they are contested or reinforced. While I specifically focus on gaming memes, game-adjacency can be used to account for any mode of mediated communication in game-adjacent or game-based communities.

This GAMCM serves two primary goals. First, it builds upon foundational concepts in game studies, producing new perspectives on how gaming culture is greatly influenced by the surrounding social and political landscape, even despite claims to the contrary (see previous chapters). Critical points of articulation include (1) a complication of Huizinga's (1955) magic circle, positioning game and game-adjacent spaces as permeable rather than fixed; (2) conceptualizing game-adjacent spaces as highly interpretive and participatory (e.g., Jenkins et

al., 2013); (3) elevating memetic communication as a potent form of Internet language that both reflects and shapes collective perceptions around games, gamers, and gaming; and (4) situating game-adjacency within a social constructionist paradigm, recognizing that all games are politically-charged cultural productions. The second primary goal of this framework is to expand on the germinal memetic dimension lens (Shifman, 2013), consciously positioning game-adjacent memetic communication as a mode of mediated interaction heavily influenced by the sociocultural and political systems encircling gaming culture. Collectively, these objectives enhance scholarly discussions in critical game studies, memetics, and visual culture by providing a methodological framework for exploring how game-adjacent memetic communication influences perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about games, gamers, and gaming.

Framework Components

Dimensions of Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication

Echoing Shifman's (2013) memetic dimensions lens, I have compiled each facet of game-adjacency (see Chapter Two) into a table that also includes guiding questions for memetic analysis. Importantly, the prompts in the right column serve as guidelines; they are not meant to be exhaustive and are instead proposed to help scholars, students, and industry professionals initiate their own explorations into game-adjacent memetic communication.

Table 19. The Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication Model

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Guiding Questions for Memetic Analysis</i>
Spatial	Memes as bridging online and offline game-adjacent spaces.	Where is the meme circulated? Does its context change between digital and physical spaces?
Relation to Games	Memes' direct or indirect references to gaming culture.	Does the meme reference specific games, gaming culture,

		or broader sociopolitical issues?
Level of Interactivity	The degree to which memes engage users in discussion or sharing.	How interactive is the meme? Is it widely reworked, or does it maintain a fixed form?
Cultural Production	Meme-making practice(s) that shape and reflect community values, norms, attitudes, etc.	What cultural values or intragroup knowledge does the meme represent? How does it contribute to a shared gamer identity?
Power Dynamics	Influence of community leaders or moderators over meme distribution.	What external influences affect the meme's circulation? How do these forces directly or indirectly influence the meme's dissemination in game-adjacent spaces?
Identity Construction	How memes create or reinforce identities within gaming communities.	Does the meme reinforce stereotypes about games, gamers, and gaming? Does it challenge them? Who is included and excluded in the meme's messaging? To what ends does inclusion or omission affect the meme's messaging?
Sociopolitical Expression	Memes as reflections of community attitudes on sociopolitical issues within and surrounding gaming culture.	What political themes are present, and to what extent? How do they align with or challenge broader social, cultural, or political discourses?

To unpack these components further, I encourage GAMCM users to consider how each dimension of game-adjacency can guide specific aspects of their memetic analysis, and also to evaluate how these dimensions, together, combine to reveal the multifaceted outcomes of memetic communication. For example, analyzing the *Spatial Dimension* of a gaming meme shared in a closed Facebook community may provide insights into the ways that specific item is used within discussions around a particular game (e.g., *World of Warcraft*), but *more* insights can

be revealed when the analysis also takes into consideration the item's *Relation to Games* (does it use in-game assets to convey its message, like a screenshot, or is it instead a non-gaming text upon which *World of Warcraft* content has been overlaid?), *Level of Interactivity* (can examples of the item be found beyond the example Facebook community?), and so on. In this way, when all dimensions are considered together, the framework reveals a greater depth as to how one such memetic example reinforces (or potentially, challenges) ideas about what that game and its community communicate about, how they fit within the broader gaming milieu, and how they exist within the wider media ecosystem writ large.

Boundaries & Permeability

As outlined in the previous chapter, the most challenging component of game-adjacency is determining the boundaries of a gaming meme. Since most, if not all, game-adjacent spaces are in a state of constant communication, there is a degree of media exchange between internal game-focused communicators and external sociocultural forces, including current events, developments in domestic politics, and scandals within gaming culture. To better understand these boundaries and the permeability inherent in them, I propose using the time-tested Five Ws heuristic (adapted below) to determine a gaming meme's potential for influence beyond gaming and game-adjacent spaces. While this heuristic may not apply to *all* future inquiries regarding the social, cultural, and political implications of game-adjacent memetic communication, I employ it here as a springboard for nuanced, contextually relevant analyses.

Table 20. Permeability of Game-Adjacent Boundaries & Memetic Communication

<i>Heuristic</i>	<i>Analytic Prompt</i>
Who	Else is using this memetic content to discuss the topic?
What	Does this memetic content reflect in terms of values, beliefs, and attitudes about the space in which it was found?

Where	Are similar ideas and arguments being used to discuss the topic?
When	Did this mememetic content start to gain increased circulation, and <i>what</i> contemporary events may have inspired its creation?
Why	Is this specific memetic content being used to discuss the topic?
How	Does this memetic content affect the discourse around the topic?

*Adapted from the Global Digital Citizen Foundation’s critical thinking graphic (National Geographic, 2017).

Connecting to, and Moving Beyond, Established Media Theories

The GAMCM’s benefit for communication and media studies is manifold. Perhaps most easily comparable to this framework is the concept of *media convergence* (see Jenkins & Deuze, 2008), which emphasizes how media content flows *across* and *beyond* multiple platforms. Participatory cultures, such as gaming communities, encourage audiences to shape narratives around their media of interest through active participation. My articulation of game-adjacency, and its practical application via the GAMCM, integrates convergence by expressly acknowledging how memes generated in gaming spaces often spill over into non-gaming spaces (e.g., the “NPC” meme’s inclusion in contemporary political discourse and everyday language; see Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Wojnar & Gough, 2024). Game-adjacency moves beyond media convergence, however, by directly pinpointing the ways gameful elements influence messaging and its potential effects. Another relevant point of comparison involves Jürgen Habermas’ (2020) *public sphere theory* and Nancy Fraser’s (2024) *counterpublics*; game-adjacent spaces are arenas in which hegemonic and marginalized voices and views intertwine and clash, reflecting social, cultural, and political discursive dynamics present in more mainstream spaces. Although they are commonly overlaid upon game content, not all communication happening in game-adjacent spaces explicitly focuses on gaming culture (as outlined in Chapters Three and Four). The

GAMCM effectively clarifies how memetic content—such as satire, parody, critique, advocacy, and praise—regarding political figures, ideas, or associated narratives in gaming contexts not only mirrors community-specific humor but also influences or contests broader societal discussions.

As I have articulated above, Foucault's (1977) discourse theory is one of the core influences for my articulation of game-adjacency and the GAMCM. Memetic content traded in game-adjacent spaces actively corresponds with players' and audiences' roles as active meaning-makers; the influence of memetic creators, platform governance, community moderators, and individual user preferences each showcase how power is negotiated between these relationships. For example, in esports, community-generated guides and debates surrounding current metagame strategies directly influence professional play and live service development, including player ability, mechanics, and item balancing, as well as game companies establishing tournament servers for more egalitarian competitive play. In other cases, fan theories about the embedded narratives and environmental storytelling within games (e.g., *SoulsBorne* games like *Elden Ring* or content patching in *World of Warcraft*) may prompt game developers to integrate community readings (e.g., conjectures about forthcoming narrative developments) into future updates, directly affecting a game's storytelling flow and eventual audience reception. Examples notwithstanding, game-adjacency and the GAMCM build on discourse theory (Foucault, 1977) by elevating the critical function of user-generated material, with special attention paid to memes, as a mechanism for constructing, negotiating, and potentially deconstructing power dynamics within game-adjacent spaces. This thus moves game-adjacent communication beyond Huizinga's (1955) hermetically sealed magic circle. Moments like r/wallstreetbets' 2021 GameStop stock phenomenon, during which investors invested in GameStop "for the meme"

(Guerreiro, 2024), subsequently allowing GameStop to ward off bankruptcy, showcase how game-adjacent spaces can influence financial markets.

Framework Exemplification

To further exemplify the GAMCM, I now apply it to two gaming memes taken from r/Gamingcirclejerk, a subreddit community that centers around satirizing stereotypical “Gamers” and culturally hegemonic discourses present in gaming communities.

Figure 15. *r/Gamingcirclejerk - MW2 Wojak*



Applying Figure 15 to the GAMCM would look like the following:

- *Spatial Dimension:* Digital; meme taken from a game-focused online community, r/Gamingcirclejerk (one of the *circlejerk* subreddits that satirize groups who ostensibly take themselves too seriously, which in this case involves hegemonic Gamers).
- *Relation to Games:* Direct; meme explicitly references a video game series (*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* [2009]) and the normalized (gaming) perception that contemporary players are too weak or sensitive to survive the rampant verbal abuse associated with *MW2*'s in-game voicechat.

- *Level of Interactivity:* Highly interactive; this meme is a derivative of the Wojak template, indicating its great potential for remixing and potential use beyond r/Gamingcirclejerk.
- *Cultural Production:* This meme plays with the normalized perception that *Call of Duty* voicechat lobbies are spaces in which problematic language (racist, homophobic, transphobic, sexist, etc.) is commonplace. Since the *Call of Duty* series is a highly renowned FPS title, this perception may be interpreted by some as representative of gaming culture as a whole.
- *Power Dynamics:* Since this meme is pulled from a game-adjacent community that purposefully satirizes hegemonic Gamers, one analytic perspective of the power dynamics inherent to it might entail what is elsewhere referenced as a transgressive stance or take, one that directly references the hypocrisy of condoning or promoting problematic language but being incensed by inclusivity in games (thereby becoming the very snowflakes mentioned in the meme).
- *Identity Construction:* This meme reinforces the stereotype that hegemonic Gamers are smug about sensitive contemporary audiences, but also actively satirizes the same identity by showcasing a visceral (i.e., inappropriate) emotional reaction due to newer *Call of Duty* games allowing players to pick non-binary characters. Repetitive exposure to similar memetic content could, over time, affect perceptions held toward *Call of Duty* fans, FPS gamers, and those who yearn for a return to 2009's *MW2* voice chat lobbies.
- *Sociopolitical Expression:* This meme highlights the contradictory nature of reactionary gamers' attitudes towards increasing diversity and inclusion in gaming spaces, which is

directly connected to similar discussions in other entertainment media and society and culture more broadly.

Additionally, an analysis of Figure 15 boundary permeability might resemble the following:

- *Who:* This meme is most likely consumed and remixed by those already involved in, or familiar with, contemporary gaming culture, insofar as the addition of an indignant hegemonic Gamer implies a certain level of insider knowledge about gaming's cultural dynamics.
- *What:* This meme reflects r/Gamingcirclejerk's focus on highlighting hegemonic Gamers' irrational and contradictory political takes.
- *Where:* Similar memetic content can be seen across various social media groups and is also prevalent in offline, analog game-adjacent spaces.
- *When:* The idea behind this meme has been present for some time; it will likely continue to circulate as long as identity-based harassment and toxicity remain significant problems in gaming spaces (e.g., Consalvo, 2012; Cote, 2020; Dafaure, 2020; Massanari, 2017).
- *Why:* Wojak memes are commonly found in online meme generators and can be encountered in virtually any digital space, regardless of social, cultural, or political context (Know Your Meme, 2015).
- *How:* This meme reflects the notion that many hegemonic Gamers are emotionally distressed at the idea of diversity and inclusion in FPS games, especially in spaces that have been historically known for problematic treatment of marginalized identities.

Looking beyond the humor baked into such a piece, the GAMCM framework highlights how memes like Figure 15 can be used to critique the logical fallacies (or selective argumentation) present in modern gaming discourses. A concentrated diffusion study notwithstanding, it is not

unreasonable to assume this item would find success in non-gaming spaces due to the Wojak template's ubiquity (e.g., Know Your Meme, 2015) in broader meme cultures. Figure 15 thus showcases how humor and irony can be turned back against the very voices working to make marginalized communities feel unwelcome in gaming.

Figure 16. *r/Gamingcirclejerk - Mei & Democracy*



Applying Figure 16 to the GAMCM would look something like the following:

- *Spatial Dimension:* Digital; meme taken from a game-focused online community, r/Gamingcirclejerk (one of the *circlejerk* subreddits that satirize groups who ostensibly take themselves too seriously, which in this case involves hegemonic Gamers).
- *Relation to Games:* Both direct and indirect; the meme includes a reference to the *Overwatch* character Mei's ice block ability, blocking tanks from the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre. The meme also references the fight for democracy and liberation in Hong Kong, ostensibly against the Chinese government, highlighting a sense of referential multifacetedness.

- *Level of Interactivity:* A fairly unique meme (i.e., not a standard format) indicates a lower level of interactivity insofar as remixing is concerned.
- *Cultural Production:* This meme indicates attention to a historical event that was heavily centered around political freedom. Whether the meme's creator genuinely supports democracy and liberation for Hong Kong is unclear. This meme also suggests that the user has some awareness of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, allowing them to construct its message, highlighting how game-adjacent memetic communication frequently overlays game content (in this case, *Overwatch*) onto non-gaming material.
- *Power Dynamics:* Since this meme is derived from a game-adjacent community that purposefully satirizes hegemonic Gamers, one can infer that the use of the Tiananmen Square Massacre signals a level of disrespect or disregard for the Chinese Communist Party (alternatively, it may imply implicit support for Western democratic modes of government). The meme also mentions liberation for Hong Kong, which can be linked to journalistic coverage of the 2019 #FreeHongKong protests outside Activision-Blizzard's BlizzCon convention (e.g., Grayson, 2019), suggesting an attentiveness to political acts taken by professional video game players and gaming communities alike.
- *Identity Construction:* This meme suggests that its producer has knowledge of a specific moment in world history and participates in political discussions, although the same cannot be said of all who consume it. Interestingly, this meme may be a first point of contact (for gamers and non-gamers alike) for the Tiananmen Square Massacre and #FreeHongKong events, highlighting how social, cultural, and political discussions can occur in areas as fleeting as a gaming meme.

- *Sociopolitical Expression:* It is unclear whether the meme's comparison of the Tiananmen Square Massacre to #FreeHongKong represents genuine support, but it does imply some level of historical awareness. This meme does not necessarily indicate all *Overwatch* players agree with this stance, nor does it necessarily indicate the original producer's level of involvement with the *Overwatch* community. As such, it is difficult to ascertain whether this meme is an example of game-adjacent slacktivism, a convenient joke, or something in between.

Additionally, an analysis of Figure 16 boundary permeability might resemble the following:

- *Who:* Beyond r/Gamingcirclejerk, this meme is most likely reposted or remixed by those following the #FreeHongKong event.
- *What:* This meme indicates attention for non-gaming political events on an international scale.
- *Where:* Similar concerns about Hong Kong's (and Taiwan's) politics, concerning the Chinese government, can be found across social media, in-person discussions, and in the mainstream media. Where this meme differs from such discussions is its inclusion of game-based content, specifically a reference to the *Overwatch* character Mei, which advances its message.
- *When:* This meme coincides with online buzz surrounding the 2019 #FreeHongKong event.
- *Why:* Since #FreeHongKong protests occurred outside of the 2019 BlizzCon convention, the meme's creator likely selected *Overwatch* as an example of a Blizzard Entertainment game with a Chinese character.

- *How*: This meme calls attention to a (then-current) international political event; while not immediately apparent, it may also be calling attention to Blizzard's censorship of Blitzchung, a professional *Hearthstone* player (another Blizzard game, see Grayson, 2019), for expressing support of the Hong Kong protests and Blizzard's corporate relationships with the Eastern market.

Of the two examples, Figure 16 shows attention to an event with international reach. Despite being relatively niche in comparison to the ubiquity of Figure 15's Wojak form, Figure 16 indicates (at least some) gaming communities and game-adjacent spaces are attentive to political events in non-gaming contexts and how these developments trickle down into gaming, such as company decisions to censure esports players (Grayson, 2019) or relationships between the West and East's gaming markets.

The GAMCM Beyond Research

Beyond its usefulness as a comprehensive analytical framework, the GAMCM offers numerous opportunities for applications in critical media literacy or other educational contexts. Because the GAMCM explicitly draws attention to the ways political information moves in game-adjacent spaces, the GAMCM is a valuable tool for not only researchers but also industry practitioners, such as community managers, moderators, and developers, who may consider future-proofing game and platform design in terms of community interaction and communication affordances. For example, acute applications of the GAMCM can provide community moderators with a baseline for determining whether game-adjacent memetic communication is used for productive or destructive rhetorical means, allowing them to implement community- or platform-specific moderation accordingly. Game-adjacency's various dimensions might also prove helpful for algorithmic training, especially concerning more advanced filtering

(particularly via visual means) against hate speech or politically extreme rhetoric intended to cause harm or radicalization in game-adjacent spaces. An industrial application of the GAMCM in this manner would directly address interviewee concerns (detailed in the previous chapter) regarding content moderation efforts and a desire for more straightforward platform governance.

In educational contexts, I envision the GAMCM empowering educators to implement more nuanced digital literacy curricula by providing students with an explicit framework to decode political messaging in game-adjacent memetic communication, which is especially useful given the rapidly evolving nature of the digital ecosystem. In other words, by systematically prompting critical questions derived from the various dimensions of game-adjacency (Tables 19 and 20), the GAMCM can encourage a contextually refined understanding of how cultural artifacts reflect and reproduce ideologically charged discourses. Longitudinally, the systematic implementation of the GAMCM across communication and media studies curricula might lead to stronger digital citizenship and inspire diversity and inclusion initiatives through an accessible framework for understanding game-adjacent memetic communication. These applications aren't limited to the digital realm; as explored in Chapter Two, they also apply to analog or offline game-related environments. From an educational standpoint, the modality is less significant than GAMCM's broader pedagogical value in promoting critical engagement with digital media.

Irrespective of its application in academic or non-academic settings, however, the GAMCM builds upon where Shifman's (2013) germinal memetic dimensions framework leaves off: it compels us to look beyond reductive 'viral' biological metaphors and consider how political ideas are exchanged in game-adjacent spaces, primarily through ideological amplification. By acknowledging the power of human agency in such cases, we gain a better understanding of how gaming communities influence action in the offline or non-gaming world,

which in turn compels the corporate world to respond (Grayson, 2019; Guerreiro, 2024).

Whether a gaming meme reproduces culturally hegemonic structures like misogyny, racism, or ableism through game-based ‘humor,’ or exposes audiences to extreme political views via a thin veneer of plausible deniability (e.g., proposing gaming spaces as apolitical, thus implying gaming memes as apolitical or ‘dark humor’), the model redirects attention away from micro-level inspection to showcase how gaming has become a battleground in which all manner of social, cultural, and political debates occur. The earlier chapters and the framework examples above illustrate that game-adjacent memetic communication plays a significant role in shaping identity formation. It reinforces and, in some instances, challenges our assumptions regarding gaming audiences and broader gaming culture through discussions on behaviors, identities, and associated community expectations. Consequently, the GAMCM is a vital contribution to the literature, as its robust critical frameworks offer numerous opportunities for scholarly dialogue, not only within game studies but also across the social sciences and humanities.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, my goal was to showcase the functionality of game-adjacency as a methodological framework by providing an extension of Limor Shifman’s (2013) memetic dimensions lens, which I have named the GAMCM. When applied to game-adjacent memetic communication, the GAMCM can reveal the various ways ideas about gaming culture (who games are “for,” what gamers are interested in, why these discussions occur in the first place, and so on) are baked into these at times unassuming, at-times flamboyant user-generated contents and point to how they may affect external perception and internal understandings alike.

Although it is still in its formative stages, I assert that the GAMCM can help scholars directly pinpoint how gaming culture operates beyond the confines of play, especially when

attuned to the social, cultural, and political debates that frequently occur in such spaces.

Likewise, by acknowledging the permeability of game-adjacent boundaries, the GAMCM can capture the discursive foci of gaming communities by applying the ever-useful 5W heuristic (tabled above). With there being seemingly no end in sight regarding already-contentious debates about media representation and inclusivity in games, and with an eye towards the turbulent domestic and international politics that will surely encircle a second Trump administration, the GAMCM will undoubtedly serve as an interdisciplinary boon for those approaching game studies from humanistic, social scientific, or even design-oriented perspectives. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, mixed approaches toward community study (e.g., blending things like CDA, auto/ethnography, SNA, big data analytics) will provide space to think about not only macro-level trends (What are the big ideas being discussed?) but also micro-level developments (How are communities using *specific* memetic content to advance their messages, and to what ends?). As such, I encourage future users of the GAMCM to take this framework out of games and into other digital contexts (non-gaming fan communities, digital production spaces, non-gaming political debates, etc.) to interrogate not only power dynamics and commonsense assumptions about society and culture, but also to bring attention to how gaming intersects with identity politics writ large, political activism, and cultural production.

Conclusion: Memes to an End

“I Am Become Meme”

In late February 2025, tech mogul and nominal leader of the newly created U.S. Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE, see Limehouse, 2024), Elon Musk, proclaimed himself to be ‘living the meme’ before audience members at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C. (Lambe & Rosner, 2025). Wearing a t-shirt with an overt reference to gaming culture (“I’m not procrastinating, I’m doing side quests²²”), Musk shared with various news outlets and attendees that he was “fighting the Matrix” (Lambe & Rosner, 2025) amid DOGE’s funding cuts to several U.S. bureaucracies, such as the Education Department, Department of Energy, and Department of Defense. Musk’s dramatic display with a chainsaw, meant to symbolize a cut to supposed excessive government spending, exemplifies the primary focus of this dissertation. This union of gaming jargon (*side questing*) and right-wing manosphere rhetoric (red pill discourse, see above) demonstrates a manifestation of far-right-wing rhetorical encroachment within gaming and related fields. Stated differently, the inclusion of gaming references by the world’s wealthiest man in an explicitly right-wing political context emphasizes the associations mentioned by some interviewees in Chapter Four. Musk’s awareness of how these perceptions may or may not be influential is less significant than the broader question: *Do all gamers behave in this manner?* Although it is inaccurate to proclaim this performance encapsulates the entirety of political opinion in and about gaming culture, such a high-visibility moment compels those of us committed to making gaming culture a safer space

²² A common phrase used by players to describe exploration, task completion, or other deviations from a ‘main storyline’ or questing track. More recently, this phrase has been used to describe successful people’s ventures into areas that were not part of their initial success (e.g., sports, music, business).

for *all* players to consider how game-adjacent memetic communication is being utilized for explicitly political ends.

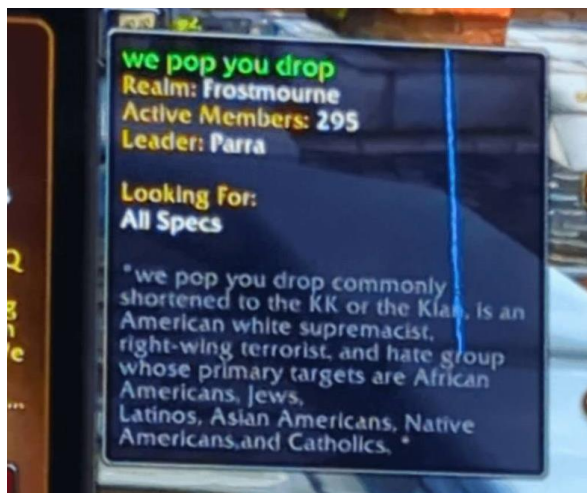
Adding to the Literature

Throughout the research and writing of this dissertation project, several meta-analytic and monograph studies have been published, examining the influence of extreme political views in gaming. Collison-Randall et al. (2024) employed framing theory to investigate how the media influence the public's understanding of extremism in esports, particularly concerning policies aimed at addressing radicalization in such contexts. De la Cruz et al.'s (2024) systematic literature review on contemporary political discourse in digital games takes a broader view, employing the SALSA framework (search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis) to emphasize how games serve as powerful political communication tools across all social strata, and highlighting their potential for fostering education and awareness. Linda Schlegel and Rachel Kowert's 2024 edited collection, *Gaming and Extremism: The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds*, along with Romero-Medina and Vilasís-Pamos' (2024) systematic narrative review of studies exploring alt-right influence in gaming culture, tie even more closely to this dissertation. Both works draw attention to how extremism manifests in the digital realm by tracing theoretical overviews on how right-wing extremists exploit games for their own agendas. My findings speak to this growing body of scholarship by highlighting how 'humor' serves as an ideological gatekeeper, building on earlier work (see Phillips & Milner, 2021), by normalizing politically extreme or culturally hegemonic views under the guise of entertainment or satire. As the preceding chapters have shown, there appears to be broad agreement between the aforementioned works and this project that exposure to politically extreme 'humor' or more

explicit ideological rhetoric in game-adjacent spaces can lead to desensitization and, in some instances, radicalization.

In my personal social media feeds, I have come across examples of community debates on the presence of far-right extremism in both in-game and game-adjacent contexts. For instance, consider the following image posted in the r/WoW subreddit (Reddit's World of Warcraft community), which evidences a Ku Klux Klan recruitment message on an Australian server (Figure 17). Although r/WoW was not included in my CDA, I am sharing it here to highlight how gaming communities, including some in which I personally participate, are attentive to political acts occurring within them.

Figure 17. *r/WoW - Extremist Recruitment*



Games have always been political; it is time to acknowledge that the game-adjacent spaces which encircle them are likewise home to manifold political expressions, many of which are explicitly intended to cause harm and spread fear. Recent work, such as *Gaming Democracy* (Massanari, 2024), has brought this conversation into greater visibility. I present this dissertation as an addition to the dialogue that explicitly elevates memetic communication as a necessary site of political analysis. Moreover, I reiterate the persistent political nature of gaming and game-

adjacent spaces by providing not only critical textual data but also firsthand interviewee perspectives on how extreme political views in game-adjacent memetic communication shape their understanding of gaming culture.

The GAMCM is not only applicable to game studies but can also serve as a valuable resource in emerging fields like platform studies and established domains such as political science and communication. For instance, in platform studies, researchers might utilize the GAMCM to critically examine the dynamics of memetic communication and other paratexts across various social media platforms. When employed alongside quantitative sociological methods like social network analysis (SNA), the GAMCM can help trace specific producers of politically charged memetic content, including individual accounts or even entire meme-sharing assemblages. Harnessing game-adjacency, scholars can examine how platform-specific cultures (e.g., TikTok, Discord, and Twitter) facilitate distinct modes of memetic discourse that impact political beliefs, social movement coordination, and how they integrate into broader mediated discussions. Further, I propose that by incorporating the GAMCM into political communication research, scholars will be able to better trace the pathways through which politically extreme narratives, conspiracism, or misinformation migrate from ostensibly ‘apolitical’ communities to mainstream discussions.

The GAMCM similarly has the potential to greatly improve visual culture and fan studies. Scholars of visual culture can leverage the GAMCM to analyze how the rhetorical power of memetic communication embeds culturally hegemonic ideas and sociopolitical commentary into captured data, as I have begun to illustrate here. By examining identity construction and power dynamics, for example, the GAMCM will provide detailed insights ranging from meme-driven activism to the ‘joking’ appropriation of community-specific symbols in extremist

propaganda, and everything in between. In fan studies, researchers can apply the GAMCM to trace how fan communities centered around entertainment media generate and share memetic communication that reflects, challenges, or upholds the values, norms, and expectations of these communities. Considering fandoms' tendencies towards internal debate and ideological gatekeeping, the GAMCM presents a new avenue for in-depth analysis of how memetic communication affects boundary work in relation to knowledge production and dissemination, highlighting wider implications for participatory culture and social identity formation. As such, while I introduce the GAMCM in the context of game studies, it does not need to be strictly relegated to games. Researchers will find that the modular design of the GAMCM can be adapted to any context where memetic communication plays a crucial discursive role.

Game-Adjacent Memetic Communication in the (Mal)Information Age

As I reflect on the trajectory of this project, I emphasize the need for comprehensive, interdisciplinary methodologies in this research area, encompassing not only critical discourse analysis (CDA) but also digital ethnography, in-depth qualitative interviewing, social network analysis (SNA), and big data analytics, among other approaches. While I have set about articulating game-adjacency, its importance for future critical game studies efforts, and proposed a model for better understanding game-adjacent memetic communication, many serious questions remain regarding how current political developments will affect the developmental trajectory of gaming culture. Returning to an example in the introduction, one of the most pressing concerns is how game-adjacent memetic communication can cause harm, not just at the personal level, but on a macro scale, notably through disseminating malinformation. Unlike misinformation (false information) and disinformation (deliberately deceptive information), malinformation is the tactical deployment of fact-based rhetoric used out of context with the

explicit intention of causing harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Because so much of memetic communication relies on inference and innuendo, memetic malinformation—especially in the forthcoming era of widespread generative artificial intelligence—may become (and perhaps already is) a serious problem for both gaming culture and the broader digital sphere.

Decontextualized video clips of political rallies, for example, can hinder game-adjacent political discussion, depending on how they are framed. Artificially enhanced or fabricated photos (*deepfakes*), diffused memetically, may significantly contribute to increasingly contentious political outcomes during future election cycles. Perhaps, as game companies and the tech industry continue to wrestle with questions about platform moderation and e-extremism, there has never been a more opportune time to introduce game-adjacency and the GAMCM as a critical lens through which to view the movement of political ideas in gaming culture.

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Appendix

Revised Interview Guide

Intro Blurp:

Thanks so much for taking time today to talk with me about the intersection of video games and internet memes! My name is Andy and I'm a doctoral researcher in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon. You are being asked to participate in this research study because you are 18 years of age or older and have experience playing video games. This research aims to better understand how video game memes with social or political content may shape how people view games, gamers, and gaming culture. From your perspective, I'm interested in how the consumption of video game memes may affect how people feel about gamers and who they think video games are "for."

In terms of study procedures, we will engage in a conversation in which I will ask you questions about your views on the topics mentioned previously. The interview is anticipated to last between 45 and 60 minutes (around or under an hour).

There are minor potential risks associated with participating in this study, including boredom, minor embarrassment, discomfort with topics discussed during the interview (including social or political issues), and discomfort with being asked about your political beliefs or affiliations.

If you choose to participate in this research, there will be no direct benefit to you. Some of the indirect benefits that may be expected include how the academic field can and will understand the ways politics collide with video game culture. Some products of this research may include white papers or academic papers.

Before we begin, I want to assure you that your privacy is of the utmost importance. For the study, I will record our Zoom interview – **only keeping an audio file** – so I can later identify key themes in your responses. These recordings will be stored on a secure, password-protected drive, and all information that we generate during this conversation will be pseudonymized to protect your identity. In other words, the information will be kept confidential and won't be associated with identifiers like your name. For example, if you are the study's fourth participant, the audio recording will be saved as "Participant 4" in the password-protected drive.

Informed consent means that you understand your rights as a participant in this study. If you become uncomfortable or do not want to answer a question, you can simply indicate that you choose not to answer, and I will move on to the next question without any penalty to you. You can also opt-out at any time, which means you can simply close out of the Zoom window. You can let me know if you want me to use your responses or not in the final report, both now and after your interview concludes.

With this explanation in mind, do you consent to research participation?

ASK THIS QUESTION ONCE RECORDING:

Do you have any other questions about the informed consent we just went over before we begin the interview?

Background/Gaming Habits

- How long have you been playing video games?
- What are some of your favorite games? Can you share a few examples and explain what you enjoy about them?
- How do you engage with the gaming community? Are there specific forums, news sources, or meme pages you follow regularly? Could you describe your level of involvement with these venues?

Gaming Memes and Political Views

- Please walk me through a typical day of how you consume gaming memes (viral videos, gifs, cypypastas, or images); where do you usually find them, and what kinds of memes specifically catch your attention?
- Can you share some specific examples of gaming memes that touch on social, cultural, or political issues? How do you react to these memes, and what conversations do they spark for you?
 - Sometimes, gaming memes address big-ticket ideas like fairness, representation, or community behavior. Can you think of any memes you've seen that made you think about these topics - maybe challenging or confirming assumptions or perceptions that you hold about the gaming community?
- In your opinion, how do memes with social or political messages influence perceptions of gaming culture and gamers? Are there any particular memes, or even moments/cultural events, that have a noticeable impact?
 - Piggybacking on the last question, when you see memes discuss things like fairness, representation, or how people should act in games, do they change how you see the gaming community?
- While browsing or consuming gaming content, have you come across memes with strong political messages or that target specific groups of people? OR, stated differently, sometimes memes can be harsh and advocate hate and harassment against certain people or entire groups. How do you deal with these kinds of memes when you come across them?
- In your view, how have gaming memes that take strong stances on social, cultural, or political issues contributed to polarization or discrimination withing gaming communities? Can you think of any examples?

Influence on Gaming Participation and Perceptions

- Have you ever decided to join or leave a gaming community because of the political content in memes?
 - Have you ever felt unwelcome in a gaming group because of the memes shared there? What did you do in response?
- How do memes with extreme political views shape your expectations about other gamers' beliefs and values? Can you think of any examples where a meme about a game or gaming community influenced your perception (and if so, please describe it)?

- How do you think people who don't play games view gaming culture when they see gaming memes with extreme social, cultural, or political commentary? Can you think of any examples that might change someone's opinion if they were to come across it?

Platform Moderation and Addressing Extremism

- How effective do you think gaming companies are at handling harmful or hateful content in their games? Can you think of any policies or actions that have been implemented? What more do you think they could do?
- What role do you think social media platforms that host gaming communities should play in moderating or regulating extreme political views (e.g., Facebook, Reddit, Discord) on their sites?
- What measures do you think would be effective in reducing the spread of harmful content and harassment in gaming memes? Can you suggest any specific strategies or policies?

Personal Perspectives

- How do your own political beliefs shape your experience in gaming communities? Have your beliefs influenced any of your interactions or participation?
- How do your political views affect your perception of gaming culture?
- If I were to ask you to close your eyes and imagine the stereotypical gamer (whoever might embody that image), and I were to then ask you to think about their political beliefs and values, what would they be?
- When encountering individuals with different political views within gaming contexts, how do you typically navigate those interactions?

Demographic Battery

Standard demographic questions (e.g., age, gender identity, level of education, willingness to identify as a gamer, etc.) to describe participants in the manuscript. Answer these like you would a census!

- What is your age?
- What is your highest level of education (or, if a student, what year are you in school)?
 - *If they are a student, what do they study?*
- Where are you originally from - where do you consider "home"?
- What is your race and/or ethnicity?
- What gender do you identify with?
- How would you define your sexual orientation?
- Do you identify as a gamer?
 - *Follow up: Why do you feel this way?*

Wrap-Up Section

- Based on our conversation so far, is there anything else you'd like to say or think I should know?
- Can you think of any questions that I should ask other participants that I didn't ask you?
- Do you know anyone who might want to participate in this study?
- *Thanks for participating! I really appreciate your time, energy, and consideration!*

On that note, I also want to remind you that you have my contact information from earlier if you have questions, comments, or even recommendations for others who might be interested in participating: awilso25@uoregon.edu

List of Initial Research Sites

- r/KotakuInAction - self-described Gamergate hub on Reddit
- r/videogames - “friendly subreddit for discussion of (almost) anything related to videogames”
- r/MensRights - (“advocating for the [...] equality of men since 2008”)
- r/ENLIGHTENEDCENTRISM - “straying outside of the status quo is for Melvins”
- r/TheRightBoycott - “vote with your wallet”
- r/mramemes - Men’s Rights Activists Memes
- r/TheLeftCantMeme - “They make a lot of bad political memes.”
- r/Ask_TheDonald - Pro-Trump, Pro-Freedom, save America subreddit
- r/ForwardsFromKlandma - one-stop hub for all the vile stuff Grandma spouts for Thanksgiving
- r/ShitPoliticsSays - the worst political commentary on Reddit
- r/GamingCircleJerk - only allows posts about Don Cheadle
- r/beholdthemasterrace - private subreddit, discussion of neo-Nazi or white supremacist content
- r/ToiletPaperUSA - official subreddit of TPUSA
- r/TheBidenShitshow - a sub to watch and discuss the bumbblings of Joe Biden
- r/TheTrumpZone - a strictly partisan subreddit for pro-Trump supporters (media sharing)
- r/Conservative - the largest Conservative subreddit
- r/ConservativeMemes - political humor, politically incorrect memes, and conservative memes
- r/conservativecartoons - “Political cartoons [by conservative cartoonists]”

- r/conservatives - “promotes the maintenance of traditional institutions...”
- r/TheDonaldTrump2024 - “Take America Back 2024” - for Trump supporters
- r/AmericaBad - highlights anti-American and anti-US sentiments/memes on the internet
- r/FixedLeftistMemes - like r/FixedPoliticalMemes, but only with Leftist memes
- r/FixedPoliticalMemes - dedicated to fixing right-wing/liberal political memes
- r/IncelTears - subreddit for posting screenshots of hateful, misogynist, racist, etc. incel content
- r/trump - for discussing the 45th president and all things associated
- r/WalkAway - showcases reasons why people are leaving the Left in droves
- r/LibsofReddit - to discuss the lying, hypocrisy, and logical fallacies of leftists and liberals
- r/ExDemFoyer - a supportive community for Democrats leaving the cult
- r/RedPillWomen - the original Red Pill Women subreddit
- r/PurplePillDebate - a neutral community to discuss sex and gender issues
- r/exredpill - for former redpillers who recognize the damage caused by redpill
- r/ShitLiberalsSay - a communist subreddit for satirizing liberals from a far-left perspective
- r/niceguys - mostly cringe-y images of Nice Guys (incels)/NGVC: Nice Guy Virtue Claim
- r/gaming - the number one gaming forum on the Internet
- r/pcmasterrace - official subreddit of PC Master Race