

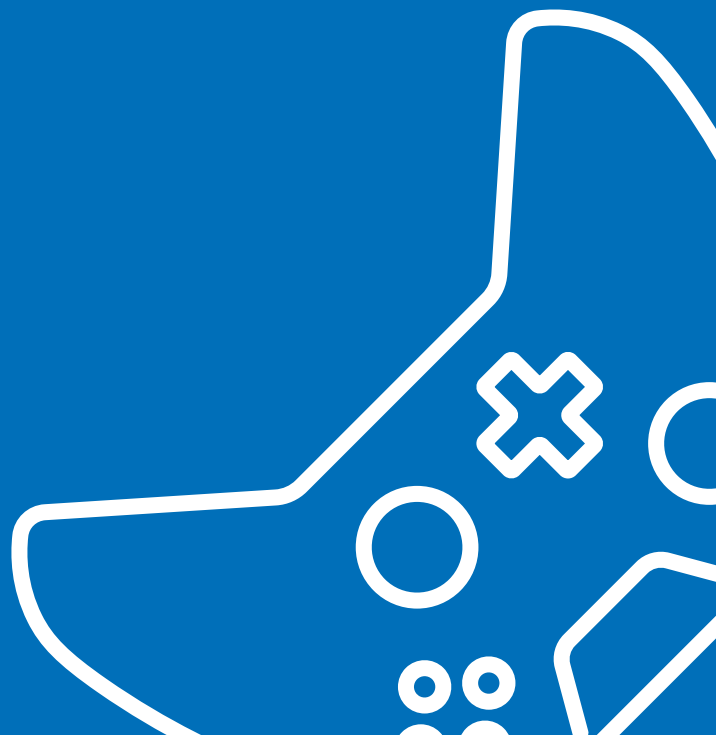
Gaming and Extremism

Gamers Who Hate: An Introduction to ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series

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About the series

This briefing is the first in ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series exploring the role online gaming plays in the strategy of far-right extremists in the UK and globally. This is part of a broader programme on the 'Future of Extremism' being delivered by ISD in the second half of 2021, charting the transformational shifts in the extremist threat landscape two decades on from 9/11, and the policy strategies required to counter the next generation of extremist threats. This briefing provides an introduction to the series and presents the key findings that ISD analysts found in an exploratory study into extremist activity on four gaming-related platforms, Steam, Discord, DLive and Twitch.



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Introduction

Globally, gaming is now the most profitable entertainment industry, far surpassing both music and film.¹ According to the gaming market data company Newzoo, there are 2.81 billion gamers worldwide² and in the United Kingdom 39% of the population play video games, a figure that rises to 73% within the 16 – 24 year old age range.³ The industry is expansive and allows huge numbers of people across the world to play and interact with one another.

However, as with social media platforms, the connectivity afforded by gaming platforms brings with it a number of risks, providing fertile ground for a range of social harms. Previous research has suggested that over 50% of young gamers in the UK have been subject to cyberbullying,⁴ and also points towards the prevalence of child sexual exploitation and abuse on gaming platforms.⁵

One area that is of particular concern is the current growth of far-right extremism and terrorism. The 2020 Global Terrorism Index reports that far-right terrorist incidents increased by 250% in the preceding five years.⁶ In the UK, right-wing extremism has been recognised as the fastest growing threat by Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, with especial concern raised around the radicalisation of young people.⁷ In turn, gaming communities have played an important role in the formation of contemporary extreme-right culture. Gamergate, a social phenomenon that saw mass mobilisation and harassment by gamers against female journalists in a push back at perceived intrusion into the gaming sector,⁸ has been seen by many as a pivotal moment in the formation of the so-called ‘alternative right’.⁹

While there is a growing body of research into the online strategies of the extreme right, there is a smaller literary corpus analysing the intersection with online gaming. What literature is available largely focuses on the small number of niche games created by extremists, or vulnerabilities which might make gamers susceptible to radicalisation. However, there is virtually no publicly available analysis into the impact of this on the UK. Additionally, whilst there are several anecdotal stories reported in the media around extremists grooming youngsters over online games, the precise role gaming plays in the radicalisation strategies of the extreme right remains severely underexplored.

To help fill this crucial evidence gap ISD engaged in a scoping project exploring the use of the gaming-related platforms Steam, Discord, Twitch and DLive by the extreme right, concentrating specifically on the UK. This work is presented in our *Gaming and Extremism* series, providing a series of snapshot analyses designed to identify key trends and patterns which can provide the groundwork for future analysis.

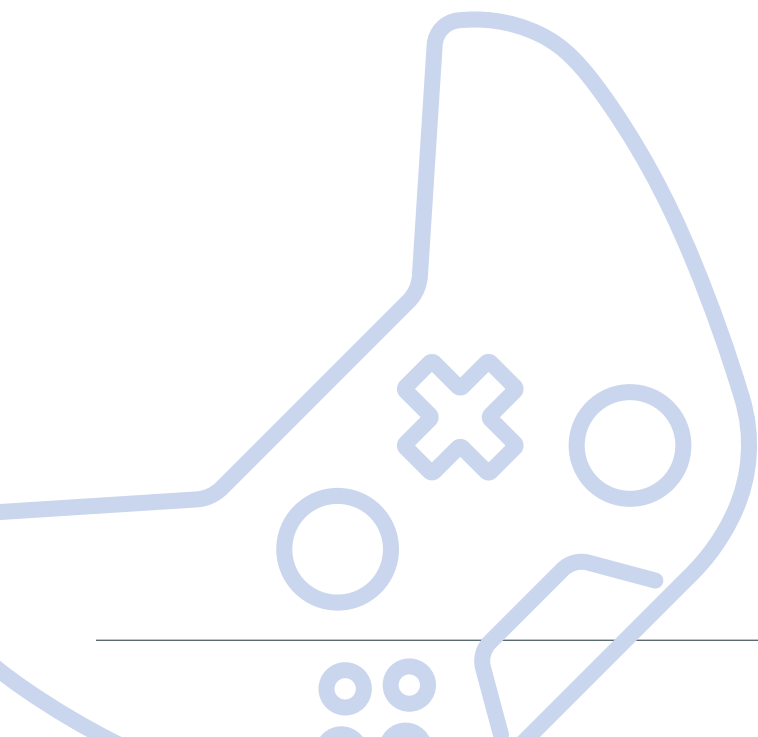
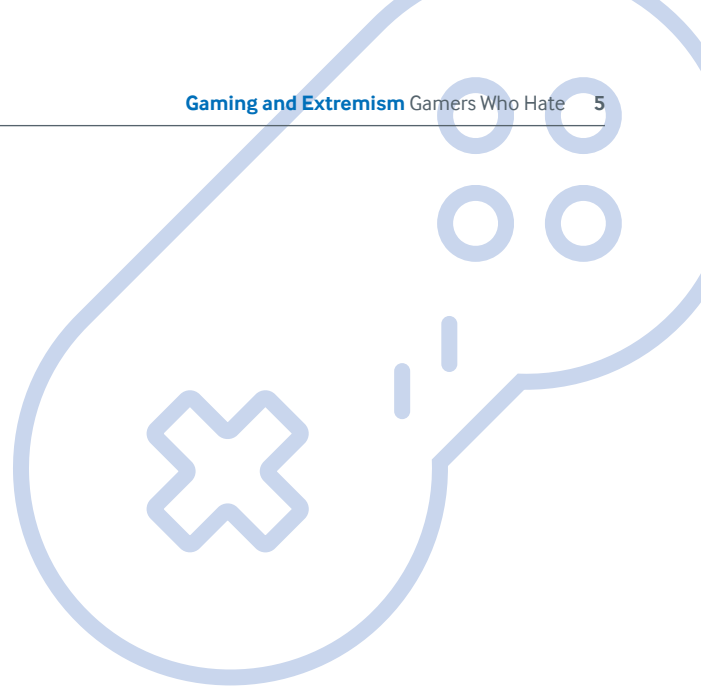
For this analysis we adopted an ‘extremist-first’ based approach, whereby we identified extreme right communities using these platforms, and then explored the role gaming played in their activity.¹⁰ In total we analysed:

- 45 public groups associated with the extreme right on **Steam**, a video game digital distribution service which also provides a platform for gamers to build community groups;
- 24 extreme right chat servers on **Discord**, a community chat application originally designed for gamers;
- 100 extreme right channels on **DLive**, a livestreaming platform used by gamers;
- 91 channels and 73 videos on **Twitch**, another popular livestreaming platform.

In addition to providing a broad evaluation of the role these platforms play in the digital strategies of the extreme right, this research aims to explore the specific ways in which gaming is used by extremists, either as a tool through which to target new audiences, or as a method of building and strengthening new communities.

Importantly, this series of research found limited evidence to suggest that online gaming is used as part of a deliberate strategy to groom new people into extremist movements. Instead, we found that gaming is predominantly used by extremists as a means of bonding with their peers over a shared hobby. That is to say extremists use games in much the same way as any of the millions of other gamers globally do – as a means of having fun, socialising and strengthening community.

Beyond unpicking the extent to which video games form part of a deliberate radicalisation strategy we also further evidenced the nature of extremist mobilisation on platforms associated with gaming communities. Importantly we found that the PC game distribution service Steam hosted an active, well established and long-lasting network of extremists including violent groups. This would suggest that whilst gaming doesn't necessarily form part of a deliberate strategy to reach new individuals, there is a notable extremist subset within broader gaming communities. Additionally, we found that cultural gaming references permeate extremist spaces online, illustrating the proximity between far-right extremism and broader internet culture.



Key findings

We identified a wide range of extreme right communities and influencers operating across Steam, Discord, and DLive, and a smaller variety of influencers on Twitch.

- We found Steam to host the most diverse subgroups of extreme right communities, ranging from public servers set up for supporters of far-right political parties to violent neo-Nazi groups;
- Discord servers primarily appear to host racist trolls, drawing on the white nationalist and white supremacist forum culture of 4chan and 8kun, but also include neo-Nazi content;
- DLive was found to be home to influencers promoting a range of extreme right talking points, including white supremacists and white nationalists;
- Content on Twitch focused on the promotion of conspiracy theorist, misogynistic and white supremacist worldviews; however, we found less evidence of established extreme right influencers on the platform.

We found support on Steam and Discord for violent extreme right groups, including content from proscribed terrorist organisations on Discord.

- Of the online spaces analysed by ISD, only two Steam groups were expressly affiliated with violent extremist groups. One of these is a group affiliated with the **Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM)**. The NRM was connected to a series of bombings in Gothenburg¹¹ in 2016 and 2017, with several Finnish members currently under investigation in relation to violent attacks¹² and murder¹³. The Steam group we identified carry links to the official NRM website.
- The second Steam group is named after **Misanthropic Division (MD)**, a Russian group now active in several countries, including Ukraine, Germany and the UK. Reportedly, MD¹⁴ attempted to recruit right-wing extremists to join the Azov Battalion while it was still a volunteer-based paramilitary unit. The group's UK branch has shared personnel¹⁵ with both Combat 18 and National Action. This Steam group had 487 members when it was analysed by ISD.
- While none of the Discord servers in our sample were directly associated with any known violent actors, ISD did record several instances of users in public channels sharing graphics created by or promoting activity of the proscribed terrorist groups **Atomwaffen Division** and **Sonnenkrieg Division**. Additionally, we identified one Discord user asking how they could join Atomwaffen Division, although we found no evidence that this conversation was met with any serious instructions on how to connect with the movement.

We found evidence that suggests users of extreme right channels on Discord are very young, raising concerns that the platform is being used for the radicalisation of minors.

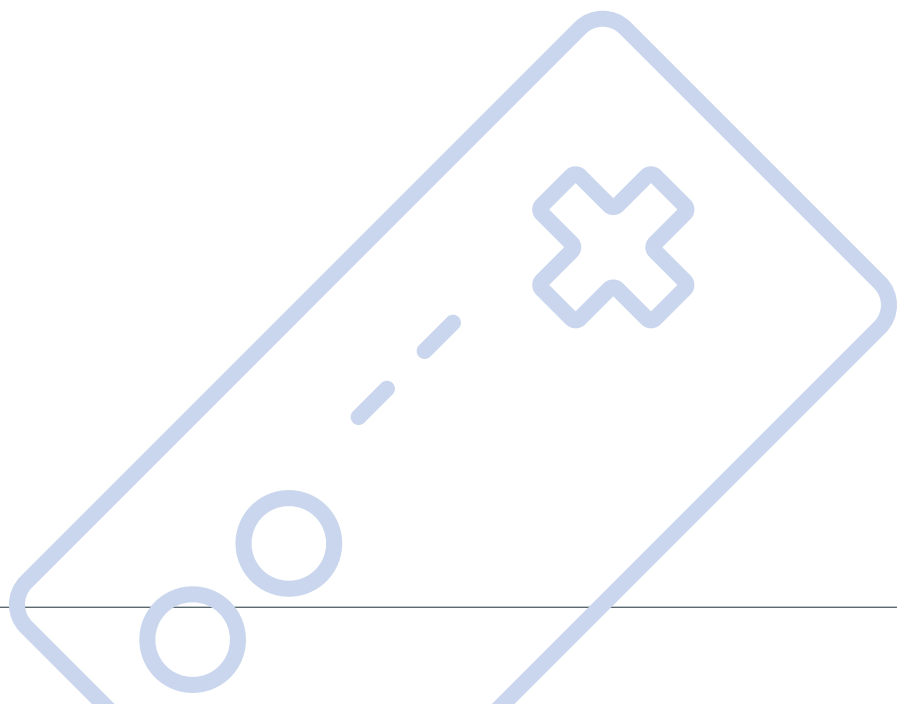
- Discord was the only platform where we were able to identify any demographic data for users. On several Discord chats in extreme right channels, users self-reported their age and gender. Of 62 instances where users provided their age, 45 users self-reported their age as between 13 – 17 years old, with only 17 users reporting to be above 18.

The average age for users in the sample was 15.

Additionally, of those who gave their gender in one Discord chat, 72.2% of users self-reported as male, and 27.8% as female.

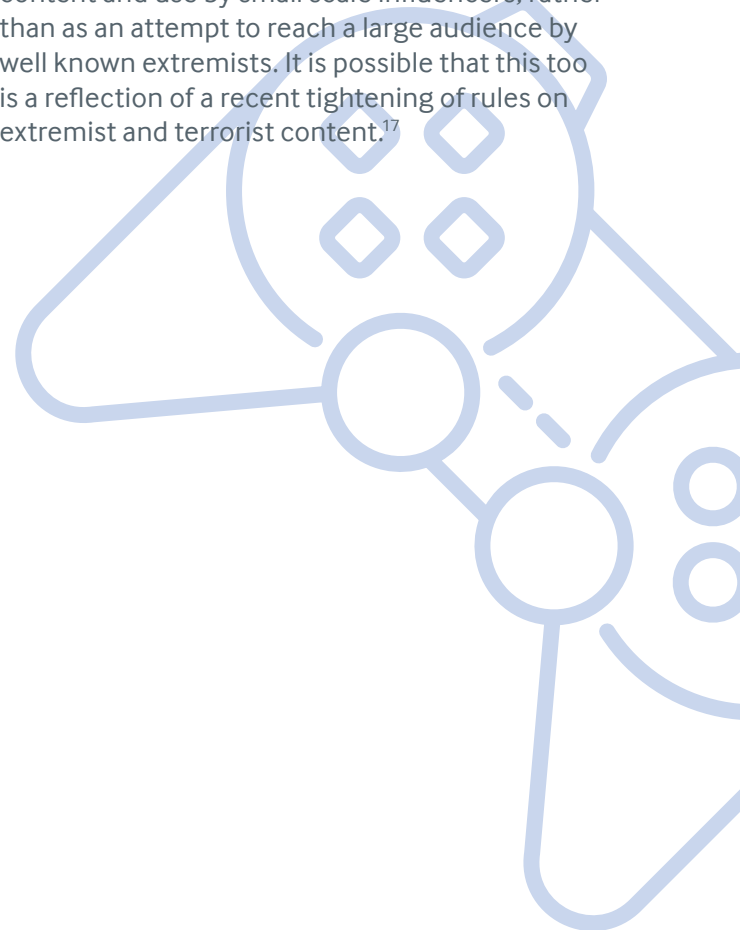
We found a limited number of extreme right wing channels and communities operating on these platforms which were specifically created to target audiences in the UK.

- On Steam eight out of the 45 channels identified were specifically focussed on British figures or organisations; on Discord one out of the 24 channels appeared to be created specifically for British audiences; and on DLive 14 out of the 100 channels analysed appeared linked to British extreme right activity.
- Instead, a majority of the English language communities analysed on Steam and Discord are country agnostic extreme right wing spaces, a reflection of the transnational nature of extreme right wing activity online.



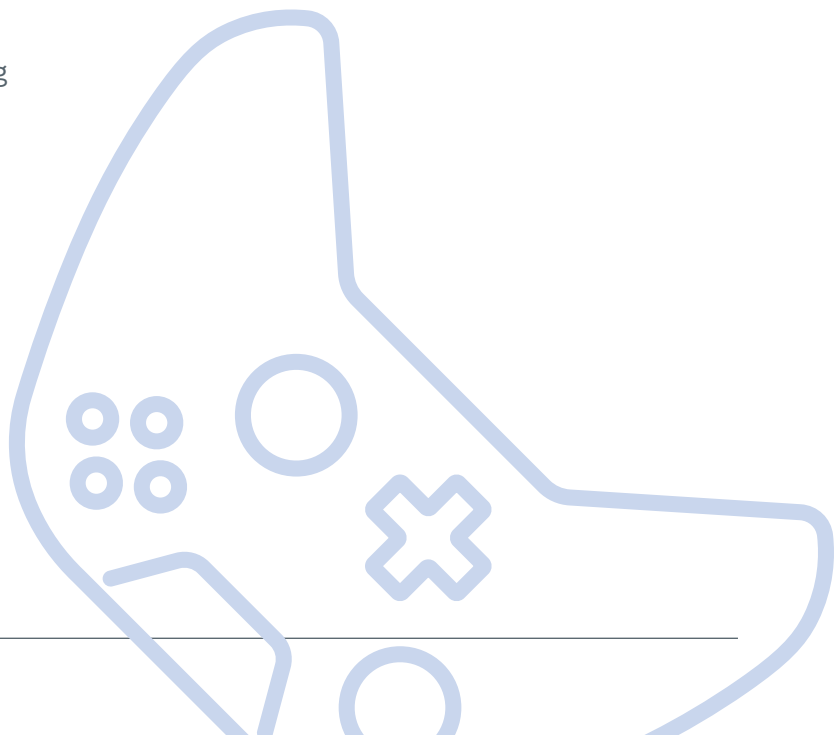
The four platforms investigated by ISD appear to serve several different roles in the extreme right ecosystem. In part, these roles appear to be linked to the content moderation of the platforms themselves— platforms with stricter and well enforced policies appear to be used in a more opportunistic fashion.

- **Steam seems to have the most entrenched and long-lasting extreme right communities**, with some groups analysed dating back to 2016. Although access to information on the platform was limited, it appears that Steam is used primarily to establish and strengthen communities, and in the case of servers associated with specific movements, to direct users to off-platform content such as the official websites of extremist groups.
- **Discord servers appear to have relatively short life-cycles, with a majority of servers analysed being less than a year old and having less than 100 users.** This is potentially a reflection of moderation efforts by the platform, which has taken steps in recent years to shut down extremist servers.¹⁶ Based on our analysis, it seems that Discord groups primarily serve to fill two functions – firstly, to provide safe spaces for young people to explore extremist ideologies and movements, and secondly, to host communities dedicated to the coordinated trolling of minority groups online.
- **The extreme right appear to have an ambivalent relationship with the streaming service DLive**, and in reflection of increased content moderation, we observed several influencers voluntarily leaving the platform for more attractive alternatives such as Trovo and Odysee, which have yet to impose similar content moderation and reportedly offer better video hosting. This would suggest that extremist use of the platform has been based on the need for a place to livestream and reach audiences, rather than any affinity for the platform itself, nor the potential audiences it offered them. A number of extremists observed by ISD seemed to use DLive as part of a multi-platform strategy, whilst simultaneously streaming on other platforms.
- **Out of the platforms we analysed Twitch appears to be the platform with the least systemic problems with extreme right activity**, although this needs to be tested with further analysis. We found that extremist activity on the platform is often characterised by sporadic posting of extremist content and use by small scale influencers, rather than as an attempt to reach a large audience by well known extremists. It is possible that this too is a reflection of a recent tightening of rules on extremist and terrorist content.¹⁷



Across all of the platforms analysed, we found limited evidence that gaming was being used as part of a concerted strategy to radicalise and recruit new individuals. Instead our analysis suggests that in online spaces populated by the extreme right, gaming acts as a means of bringing already radicalised people together.

- **The most obvious role filled by gaming in the extreme right channels analysed, appears to be the strengthening of existing extremist communities.** The clearest example of this is a series of live-streams that were delivered by the British white nationalist group **Patriotic Alternative**, specifically targeted at current supporters of the group. Indeed, Patriotic Alternative has recognised this to be part of a strategy to foster a sense of community amongst their followers. Similarly, on Steam, ISD observed frequent posts from users on extremist groups, organising matches of popular, first person shooting games, with the apparent desire being to connect and share a hobby with like-minded individuals. On Discord, mentions of gaming were largely cultural, with individuals using gaming slang and memes and talking about games they enjoy playing alongside discussing extreme right ideology. Across the platforms we examined, it appeared that gaming was primarily used as a means of socialising with other individuals who supported the extreme right, as opposed to part of a specific strategy to reach and radicalise new audiences. However, these findings come with the caveats that we did not seek to explore broader more neutral gaming spaces to test for the presence of extremist users, and that researchers did not seek to engage in online gaming and voice-chat with extremist gamers. Accordingly, it remains possible that more concerted efforts to radicalise are taking place in-game, and that these were not captured in our analysis.
- **In a small number of cases, groups on Steam used games as a signifier of political allegiance.** Some Steam groups promoted crude games supporting Donald Trump or attacking feminists as a way of visibly promoting their political identity. However, most of the discussion we analysed on the platform related to playing popular mainstream titles, such as Counter-Strike: Global Operations.
- **On Steam, we found evidence to suggest that gaming has also used as a means of living out ideological fantasies.** In particular, historical strategy games set in World War 2 or during the Crusades were particularly popular, with extremist players promoting anti-Muslim hatred or neo-Nazism in their commentary around the games.
- **Across Discord and Steam, we observed users engaging in, or calling on others to join in 'raiding' - gamified harassment of their opponents.** In this activity, which is a long-standing tactic of internet trolls and the extreme right, online harassment of minority groups is treated as a form of real life game. This acts as a potential vector to bring young people into contact with extreme right wing activity.



Methodology of the series

For the purpose of the analysis across this series we opted to use an 'extremist first' approach to explore the role gaming plays in extreme right activity. Here we sought to identify extremist communities and influencers operating on platforms associated with online gaming, and then examine the extent to which gaming played a role in their activity on these platforms. An alternative approach would be to explore gaming communities writ large and examine the extent of extremist infiltration within them.

The decision was made to use the former of these approaches in reflection of the enormous number of gaming communities online, an analysis of which would be a vast and complex exercise. Additionally, it was rationalised that a focus on extreme right wing communities would provide a more precise lens through which to understand their relationship with gaming. It is thus recognised that our analysis may not cover broader incursions into neutral gaming spaces by the extreme right, and it is suggested that this is explored further.

As each of the platforms analysed in this report have distinct functionalities, we used platform-dependent methodologies to identify accounts and communities expressing support for the extreme right. These identification methodologies and their limitations are summarised in each of the platform briefings of this series.

Once researchers identified channels and accounts potentially hosting extremist content on the four platforms analysed, they performed a qualitative analysis of the content produced and shared, as well as the symbols and terms used by communities and accounts to ensure relevance to our definition of the extreme right. These accounts were then subject to blind coding by other researchers to ensure the accuracy of this process.

Given this series' geographic focus, specific attention was paid to identifying accounts and channels associated with the extreme right in the UK. However, in reflection of the transnational nature of the contemporary extreme right,¹⁸ and due to the fact that only a limited number of accounts and channels have a specific geographic focus, this series also incorporates broader analysis of English-language extremism where it was identified on these platforms, as well as some non-English language channels when there was clear evidence of networking with English language communities.

Across all platforms analysed, researchers primarily utilised a digital ethnography, employing a qualitative analysis of online communities and the content they share to derive our findings around extremist activity.

This research was conducted within a safeguarding framework designed to protect researchers from potential psychological harm and trauma associated with prolonged exposure to extremist content. Additionally, to help ensure that the project was conducted in as ethical a fashion as possible, an ethics framework was created to govern the 'rules of engagement' for research into closed communities online. Specifically, this framework meant that researchers did not proactively engage with any of the communities outlined above, seek access to private discussion spaces, engage in conversation with extremists, or through actively playing online games with the extremist groups identified. Accordingly, this means that our ability to assess the nature of extreme-right activity in some of the spaces analysed was limited; in particular, we did not seek access voice-chat conversation on Discord and in online gaming over Steam, nor did we analyse conversation taking place during these games.

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