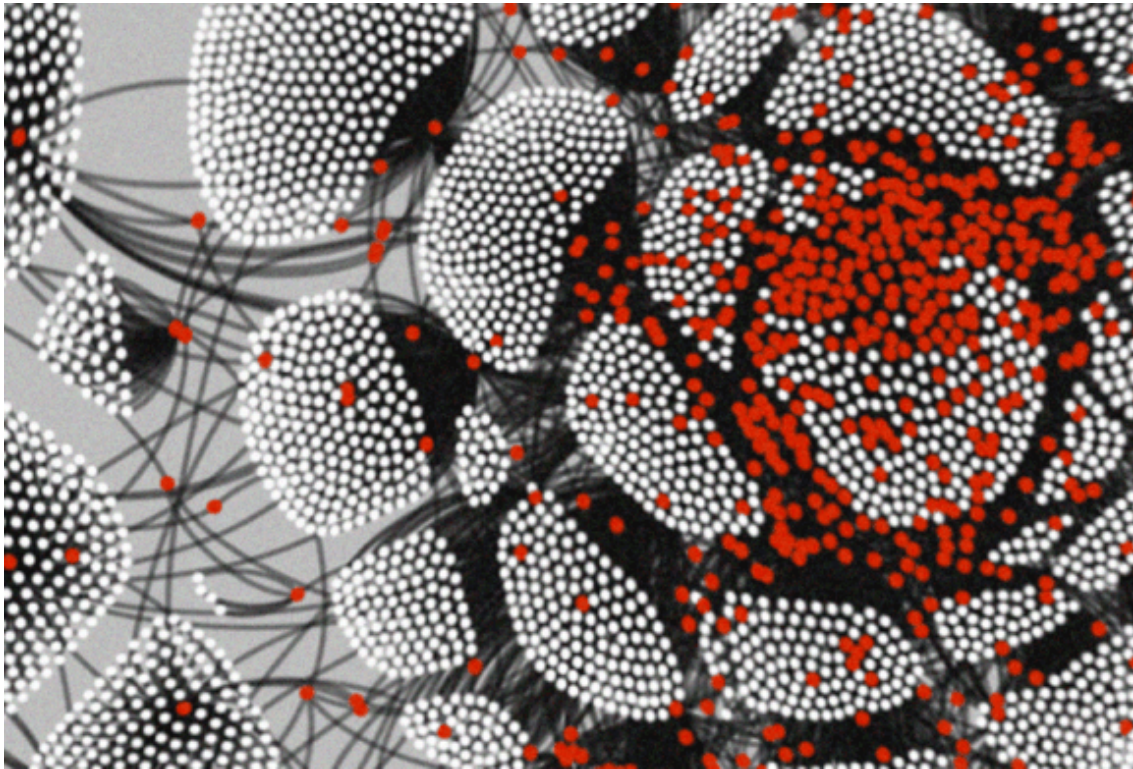


This is Not a Game: How Steam Harbors Extremists



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INTRODUCTION

On June 10, 2019, authorities in Northern California arrested Ross Farca, 23, on state felony criminal threats and weapons charges. They acted on an anonymous tip sent to the Concord, California, Police Department, flagging a potential imminent threat.

The criminal complaint states that Farca, using the handle “Adolf Hitler (((6million)))”, repeatedly posted online threats against “high value” Jewish targets and police officers, praised Christchurch mosque shooter [Brenton Tarrant](#) as a “hero” and boasted of violent plans: “Wanna see a mass shooting with a body count of over 30 subhumans?”

The platform hosting these threats: Steam, the leading storefront and social platform for PC games.

Steam, the largest and most important online store for PC gamers with over \$4 Billion in revenue in 2017, has recently gained popularity among white supremacists for being a platform, like [Gab](#) and [Telegram](#), where they can openly express their ideology and calls for violence.

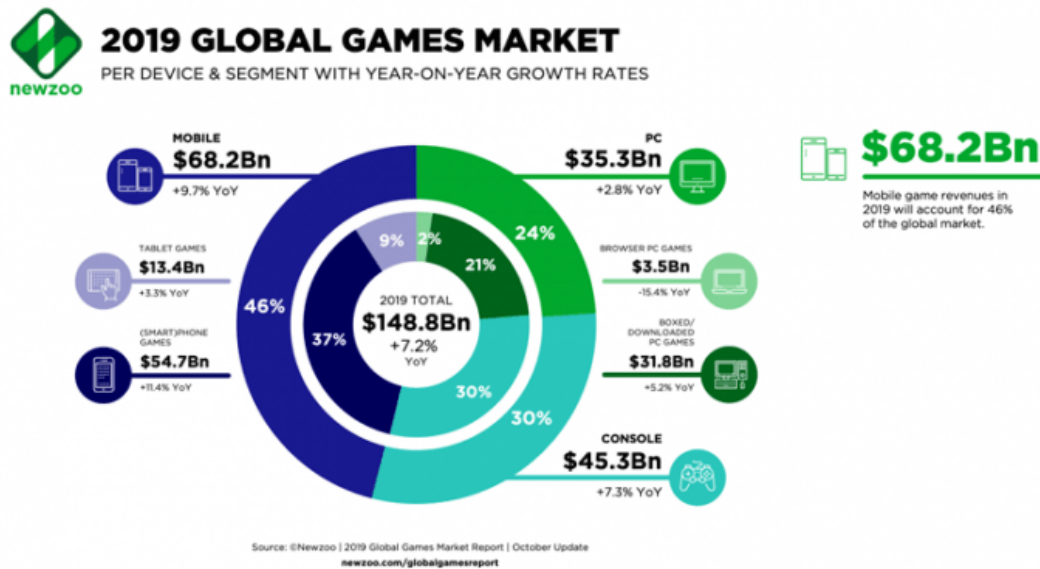
The difference between Steam and social media platforms like Telegram or Gab is that while the latter do not share a formal business relationship with the wider social media industry, Steam has direct and lucrative relationships with most major game companies, including [2K](#), [Electronic Arts](#), [Xbox Game Studios](#), [Ubisoft](#) and others. [Many of these](#) game companies have made public statements about and dedicated significant resources towards keeping their products safe from the kinds of hateful ideologies espoused by extremists -- while continuing to work with Steam.

Gaming and Extremism

Gaming plays a huge role in American life: [according to the Entertainment Software Association](#), 75% of American households include at least one gamer, and the video game industry generates more money annually [than the film and music industries combined](#).

The PC game market, specifically, includes video games played on PC computers,

as opposed to games played on mobile devices or consoles such as Playstation or Xbox, and generates \$35.3 billion annually, or 24 percent of total gaming revenue.



Source: [Newzoo Global Games Market Report 2019](#)

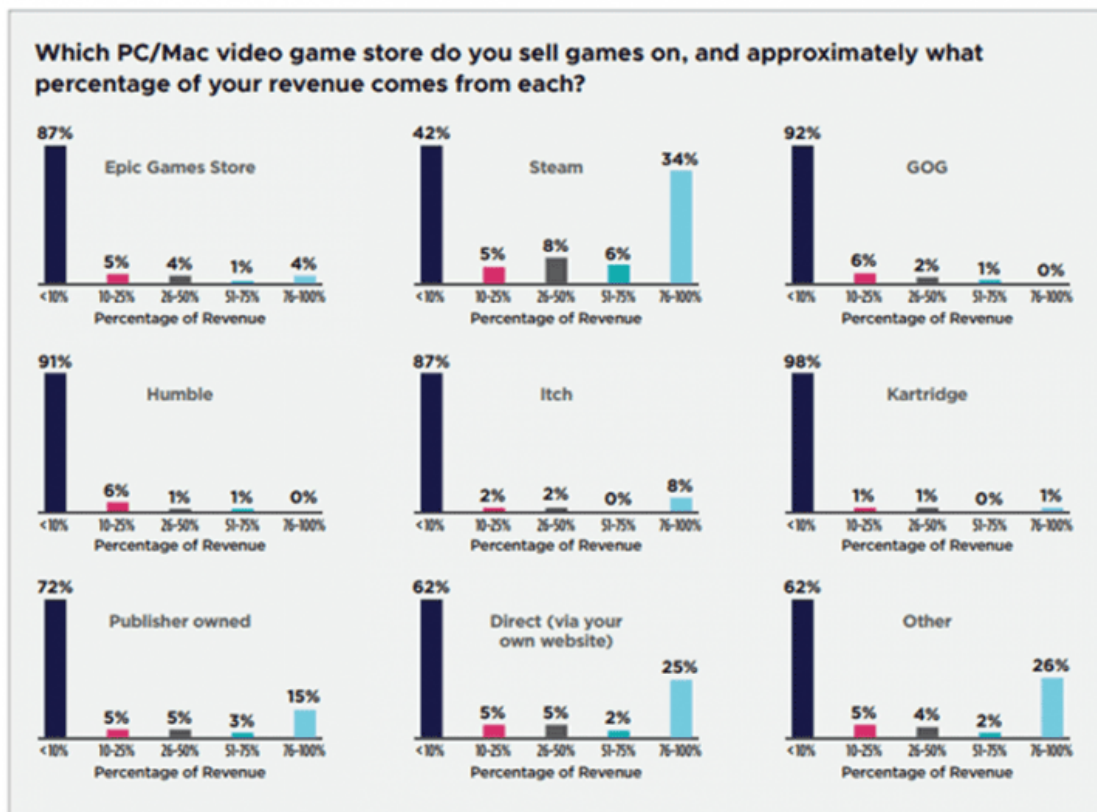
[ADL's 2019 nationally representative survey of Americans who play online multiplayer games](#) found that 23% of respondents were exposed to extremist white supremacist ideology in online games. While much has been written on this topic, outside of these survey results, the evidence of the widespread extremist recruiting or organizing in online game environments (such as in *Fortnite* or other popular titles) remains anecdotal at best, and more research is required before any broad-based claims can be made.

That being said, the Steam platform is among the growing list of virtual spaces where one can encounter extremist activity. Steam is of specific concern now when considering that the online games where Americans experienced the most harassment, according to ADL's survey, were *Defense of the Ancients 2* or *DOTA 2* (79%) and *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* (75%). Both games were developed by Valve, the company that owns and operates Steam, underscoring a clear need for this and other companies to be more transparent about how extremism functions

in online game spaces, and to call particular attention to the role Valve plays in the operating of the Steam platform.

WHAT IS STEAM?

Launched in 2003, Steam is primarily an e-commerce platform for PC games, akin to the Apple app store. [A 2020 industry-wide survey of game developers](#) found that most respondents (around 60 percent) made at least some money selling games on Steam. Almost half (41 percent) generated at least some revenue selling games directly to customers, while a third made between 76 percent and 100 percent of their game revenue on the Steam platform. In May 2019, Steam added its [1 billionth account](#), though the average of active users on the platform each month hovers around the 90 million mark.



Source: GDC State of the Game Industry Report

Valve, Steam's owner/operator, takes 30 percent of the revenue from game

developers for all games sold on the Steam platform. Game developers that sell on Steam range from independent developers, to small studios, to industry giants such as Xbox, Ubisoft, Electronic Arts and Bethesda. In addition to revenue made from other developers selling games on Steam, Valve, also makes its own games that it sells on the platform, such as Counterstrike: Global Offensive and DOTA 2. In March 2020, Valve released the critically acclaimed Half Life: Alyx, a VR addition to their popular Half-Life series from the early 2000s. In 2017, [Steam made \\$4.3 billion in game sales over the course of the year](#), which accounted for roughly 18 percent of the overall PC game market. This does not account for other income streams for Valve, such as in-game microtransactions and other downloadable content.

Beyond providing a marketplace where users can purchase and play PC games, Steam is also a social platform, which includes customizable “profile pages” for individual users, the ability to add friends, groups that act as online forums, discussion boards related to certain game titles, as well as the ability to communicate via instant messaging and voice chat. In March 2020, as a result of social distancing efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, Steam hit 23.5 million concurrent user/players, far surpassing its previous record high of roughly 18 million.

The Steam Community and Content Moderation

In late 2017 and early 2018, [Vice](#), [the Huffington Post](#) and the [Center for Investigative Reporting](#) uncovered Steam users and groups glorifying Nazi imagery, and pushing racist, sexist, homophobic, antisemitic and otherwise hateful content. In June 2018, Valve [announced a new content moderation policy](#) for the Steam platform: it would “allow everything onto the Steam Store, except for things that we decide are illegal, or straight up trolling.”

In the two years since this policy announcement, Steam has taken several related actions. In September 2018, the company [attempted to clarify their policy](#), saying

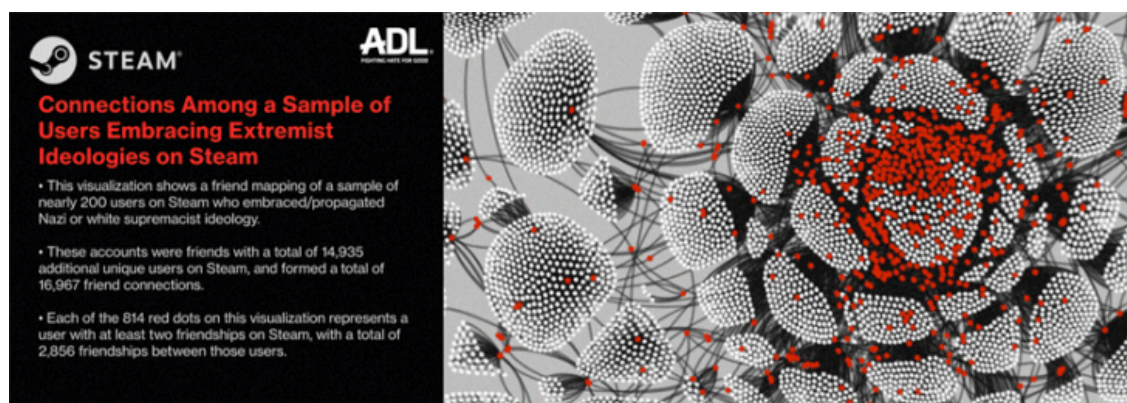
that while it was intentionally vague, the focus of their harm mitigation efforts was game developers who “aren't actually interested in good faith efforts to make and sell games to you or anyone.”

Steam’s subsequent action resulted in [the removal of 179 games](#). Around the same time in September 2018, [Valve announced](#) that it would, for the first time, begin moderating user-flagged content on Steam discussion boards for specific games. Up until that point, content moderation on discussion boards had been left to the discretion of the games’ creators, a decision that had using the platform. In announcing this change, Steam also noted that developers could opt out of Steam moderating their game’s discussion board’s comments, if they wished.

Since the June 2018 announcement, Steam has seen several additional high-profile incidents, including a [March 2019 announcement](#) that they would not allow a game called “Rape Day” on the Steam platform, not because of its misogyny and celebration of violence against women, but because it would pose “unknown costs and risks” to Valve, developer partners and customers.

Most recently, in December 2019, responding to a request from the German government, Valve removed 50 instances of Nazi-related user content, which is [illegal under German law](#).

STEAM AND EXTREMISM



[View this data visualization in detail](#)

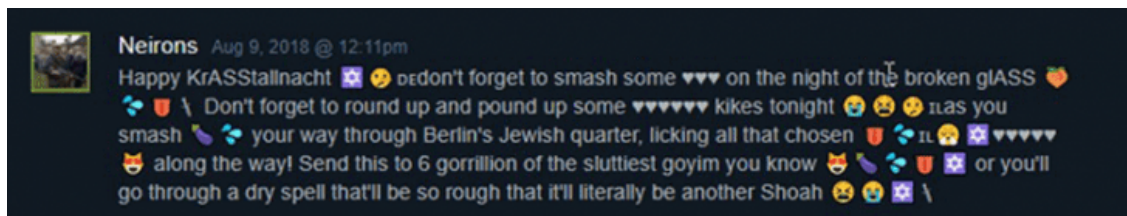
It was disturbingly easy for ADL's researchers to locate Steam users who espouse extremist beliefs, using language associated with white supremacist ideology and subcultures, including key terms, common numeric hate symbols and acronyms.

In a non-exhaustive selective sample of platform users we were able to identify nearly 200 unique Steam accounts that embraced and propagated Nazi and/or white supremacist ideology. The majority of these profiles trafficked in blatant white supremacist belief evidenced in their screen names, bio descriptions, profile pictures and comments; others either incorporated into their profiles Nazi imagery such as SS bolts and Nazi [totenkopfs](#), or death's heads, glorified prominent Nazi figures or fantasized about the 4th Reich. And a minority of the profiles displayed deeply antisemitic elements and/or embraced violence against Jews, using terms including "Gas the Jew" and "Smash Jew scum." The final category includes a subset of users who posted memes involving variations of [Pepe the Frog, a cartoon character appropriated by the white supremacist movement, in a context that was specifically racist, antisemitic or otherwise bigoted](#). These elements and their continued presence on Steam also signal an acceptance of hateful and racist rhetoric and may encourage others to share similar content.

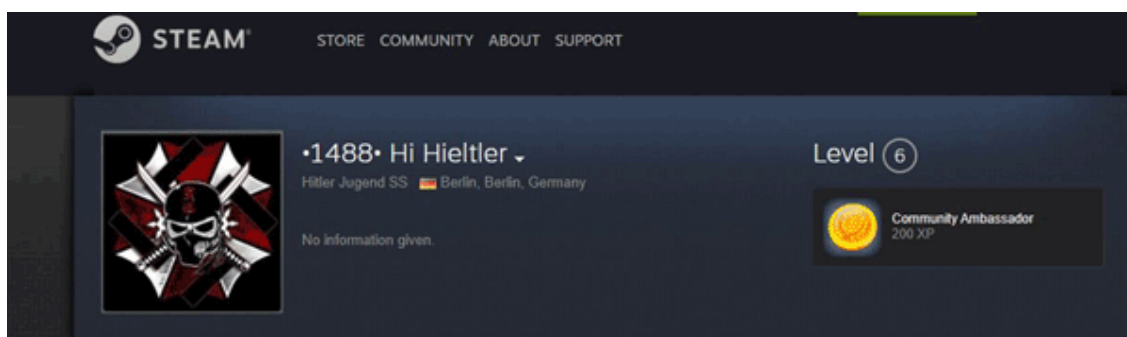
Nazi Trolls

Video games have long focused on World War II, modern history's largest and deadliest armed conflict, beginning with *Wolfenstein 3D*, the first massively popular first-person shooter game, through today's popular *Battlefield* game series, among others. Interest in this historical period is, of course, not uncommon, or inherently hateful or racist, but these Steam games do appear to attract users who glorify the Nazi Party, Waffen SS soldiers and prominent Nazi figures, especially Adolf Hitler.

For example, on August 9, 2018, Steam user *Neirons* posted a message encouraging violence three months prior to the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, when members of the Nazi Party and their supporters destroyed nearly 8,000 Jewish-owned businesses and homes across Germany. The user wrote, “Happy KrASStallnacht [sic] don't forget to smash some ♥♥♥ on the night of the broken glASS [sic]. ...Send this to 6 gorrillion [sic] of the sluttiest goyim you know or you'll go through a dry spell that'll be so rough that it'll literally be another Shoah.” The term “[gorrillion](#)” is popular term among white supremacists used to trivialize the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust.



Another user, Anwarter_88, provides a link to a pro-Hitler propaganda film about the “greatest story never told.” The 88 in his username is a reference to the [white supremacist numerical code for Heil Hitler](#). One user chose the screenname of [1488 Hi Hieltler](#). The 1488 is a [common white supremacist numerical code](#); 88 references “HH,” the eighth letter of the alphabet (for Heil Hitler), and 14 is a reference to the white supremacist 14 Words: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” This same user earned the Steam title of “[community ambassador](#),” a badge that demonstrates a level of engagement on Steam.



Memes and White Supremacist Subculture

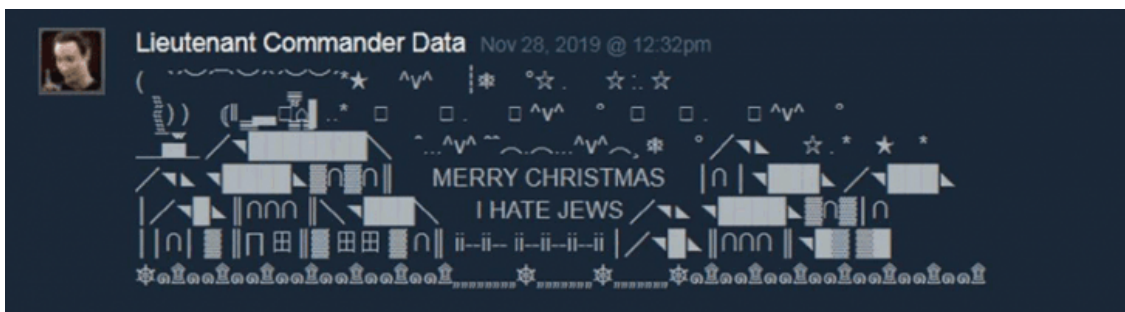
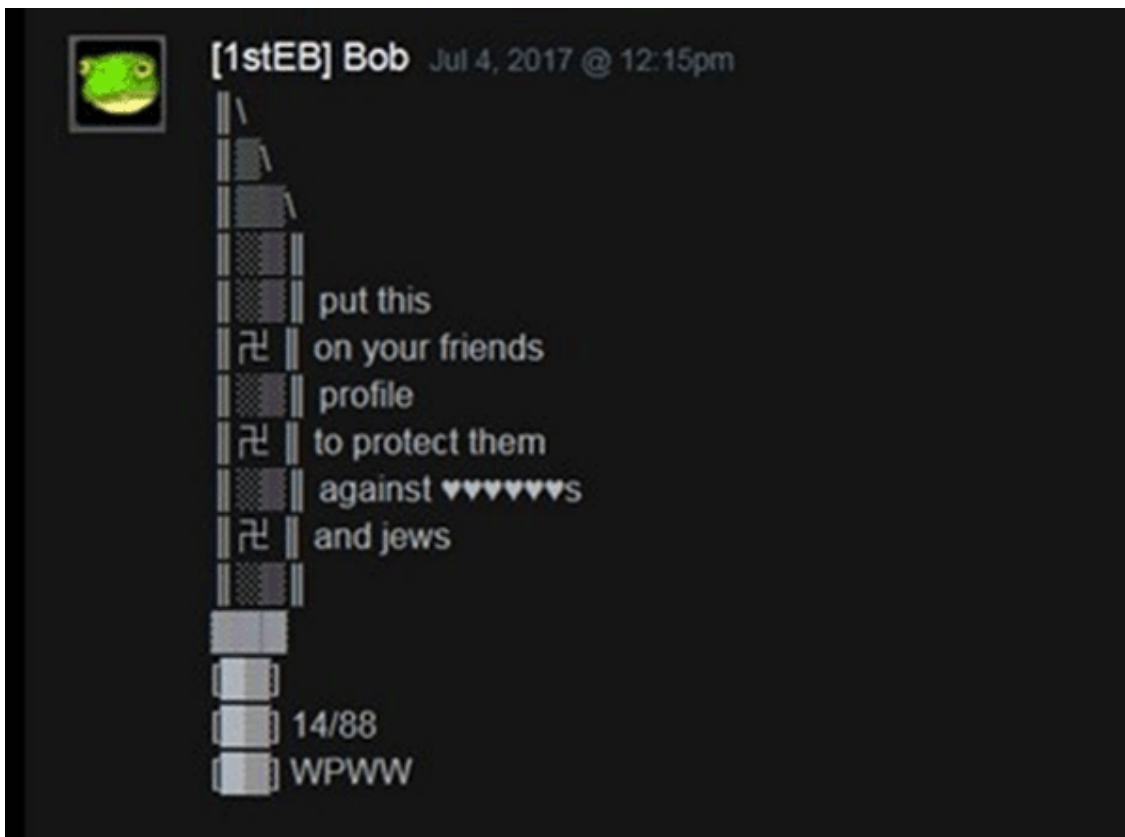
Bigoted humor and irony are hallmarks of the emerging virtual counterculture that promotes radical, extreme and violent views as cool and/or humorous. In that vein, it's not uncommon to find references on Steam to white supremacist memes, common vernacular or other trappings of this white supremacist subculture. A significant number of Steam profiles feature [Pepe the Frog](#), a popular Internet meme that was hijacked by the alt right, in clearly white supremacist contexts. For example, user "Agent Pepe Kekson" writes in his bio: "Kekson—Pepe Kekson, Agent [1488](#), With a License to Troll."

"Kek" is a fabricated religion which worships Pepe the Frog. Another user, [Honkler](#), named after a clown version of Pepe, included an animated image of a white supremacist variation of the [sonnenrad](#) in his artwork showcase.

Even Steam users that are not explicitly identifiable as extremists often post antisemitic or extremist imagery, including swastikas, graphics of the [happy merchant](#) meme (an antisemitic depiction of a Jewish man with heavily stereotyped facial features), or more violent images such as a knife through a Jewish star.



Racist and antisemitic chain messages encourage other Steam users to spread the hate. In one example, a graphic of a knife with a swastika on it includes the quote, “put this on your friends [sic] profile to protect them against [niggers] and Jews 14/88 WPWW.” The acronym WPWW, commonly used by white supremacists, stands for “[White Pride Worldwide](#).” In another, a Christmas scene includes the quote “MERRY CHRISTMAS I HATE JEWS.” A third example, from the Steam comments section, reads, “IF U WERE KILLED TOMORROW, I WOULNDT GO 2 UR FUNERAL CUZ ID B IN JAIL 4 JEWIN DA MOTHAFUKR THAT KILLED U! WE TRUE SCHLOMOS WE JEW TOGETHER WE GET HOLOCAUSTED TOGETHER send this SHEKEL to everyone you care about including me if you care. C how many times you get this, if you get 6,000,000 your [sic] A TRUE SCHLOMO.”



Glorification of Killers

Glorification of infamous extremist murderers abounds on Steam, with users overtly praising everyone from Adolf Hitler to [Anders Breivik](#), a Norwegian white supremacist who killed 77 people, to [Dylann Roof](#), who murdered nine African Americans participating in a prayer group in a church in Charleston, South Carolina church, to Ted Kaczynski, otherwise known as the Unabomber. Others reference extremist murders more obliquely, including Steam user [Kilroy](#), who posted Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Tree of Life synagogue shooter [Robert Bowers'](#) final Gab post, "Screw your optics."

Following the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, a number of

Steam users praised shooter [Brenton Tarrant](#). A profile using Tarrant's alleged Steam username, "[Commander Rockwell](#)," posted messages celebrating his massacre. One user, referencing killing Muslims, posted, "I saw you dominate in kebab removing simulator and I wanted to say well done." Another user wrote, "Blessed be Saint Tarrant." A third user, who has been awarded a Steam community ambassador badge, wrote, "Thank you for your service, love from New Zealand." Yet another user opted for username SupremeGentleman88, a combined reference to white supremacist ideology and incel [Elliot Rodger](#), who killed six people in Santa Barbara, California in 2014.

Extremists often use gaming terminology in conversations around violence. Violent perpetrators and their adherents refer to mass shootings in terms of getting "high scores." [Stephan Balliet](#), who launched a (failed) attack on a synagogue in Halle, Germany on Yom Kippur 2019, included a gaming style list of "achievements" in his manifesto. Both the Halle perpetrator and [Tarrant](#) livestreamed their attacks on religious communities, ensuring their violence went viral. The footage from their GoPro devices, strapped to the shooters' heads, mimics first-person shooter games that simulate real-world weapons-based combat scenes.

Notable Extremists on Steam

A number of extremist leaders and mass killers have spent numerous hours on Steam. As stated above, Tarrant, the Christchurch mosques shooter, reportedly had a [Steam profile](#) under the username *Commander Rockwell*. The username expresses admiration for George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party. Steam removed the profile in question in March 2019, immediately after the Christchurch attacks.



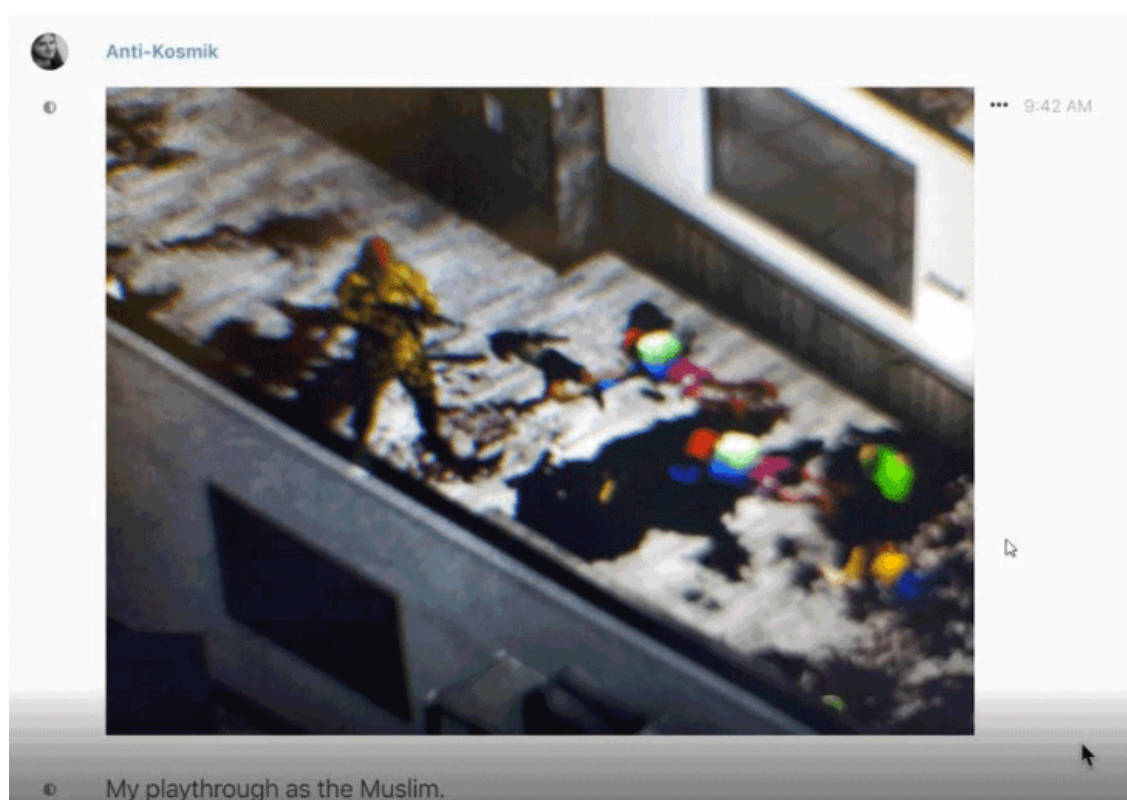
[[Source](#), Kotaku.com]

According to information acquired on confidential Wire chats, the former leader of [Feuerkrieg Division](#) used the Steam profile username [although they previously played under the names n1gg3rk1ll3r and Siege \(a reference to a collection of noxious essays written by U.S.-based neo-Nazi James Mason\)](#). In their bio, this individual references Estonian Nazi leader Oskar Ruut and quotes Nazi German propagandist Joseph Goebbels and Nazi SS leader Heinrich Himmler, among others. This Steam account earned a “Community Ambassador” badge and frequently showed up as a player in *Fallout* -- a popular, mainstream game series developed by Bethesda Softworks.

[On February 10, 2020, U.S. Army Specialist Jarrett William Smith](#) pleaded guilty to unlawfully distributing instructions for making explosive devices over social media. At the time of his arrest, Smith was associated with the neo-Nazi organization Feuerkrieg Division, using the screenname of [Anti-Kosmik](#) on the encrypted Wire chats. He allegedly used the same name on Steam, where his bio reads, “Anti-Cosmic misanthrope. Interests include black metal, Current 218, anything that goes bang or boom, alcohol, etc. Veder-Gal Tiekals Somdus Azerate.” The phrase is a reference to the lyrics of the black metal band, Dissection, whose main songwriter was convicted of being an accessory in Sweden’s infamous 1997

Keillers Park murder of a gay Algerian national. Smith's Instagram bio includes lyrics from the same song: "Anti-cosmic bringer of the end."

In encrypted communications on Wire, Anti-Kosmik posted a screenshot from a video called *Hatred*, an isometric shooter game in which players are mass-murdering villains, created by small, independent development studio Destructive Creations, and available exclusively on Steam. The screenshot indicates that Smith took on a Muslim persona and killed in an urban setting. He writes, "My playthrough as the Muslim." The image shows a heavily armed perpetrator surrounded by corpses.



Later in the same chat, Anti-Kosmik suggests making a modification to the game, envisioning a Feuerkrieg Division protagonist who shoots police, accompanied by the words of James Mason, a well-known U.S.-based neo-Nazi. Anti-Kosmik adds, "The most baste [based] is of course playing as Hitler."

Embroided in controversy, *Hatred* was removed from the Steam Platform before it launched. However, Valve CEO Gabe Newell ordered it reinstated in December

2014, and it remains available on the platform as of this writing. As of April 2020, there are also rumors about the [game being released on Nintendo Switch](#).

Steam Communities

Although Steam has taken steps to remove some extremist elements, including the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division group, [archived here](#), similar groups remain on the platform. Some have only a few members while others have hundreds. For example, one Steam group, founded February 28, 2018, is named *Varg Vikernes Appreciation Club*. Varg Vikernes is the stage name of a notorious neo-Nazi figure in the Norwegian black metal scene who was convicted of murder. Another Steam group called *Read Siege by James Mason* (RSJM) references the white supremacist essays as a blueprint for violent [accelerationist](#) action. Still another group, [BOWLGANG](#), is named in honor of [Dylann Roof's haircut](#), which has become a symbol for some white supremacists. One of the group members, who goes by *Ted Kaczynski Gaming*, posted the following antisemitic poem mocking the Holocaust in the comments section of the group: "jewish [sic] man, take me by the hand, lead me to the land that you understand jewish [sic] man, the voyage to auschwitz [sic] is a real trip jewish [sic] man, the crust of a beard man imbibed by the gas Soaking [sic] up the gas of the shower jewish [sic] man..."

Extremist References to Steam on Iron March

Steam is being used by white supremacists, as evidenced by cross-platform references on other extremist sites. For example, [on Iron March](#), a now-defunct fascist social networking platform, users mentioned Steam as an alternative platform for further communications.

Among many examples: Iron March user *Starman* asked another user to add him on Steam, so they could continue their conversation. Others on Iron March wanted to create neo-Nazi groups on Steam. On July 10, 2017, "Stribog" wrote to Steam user Ka7, "...there should be some kind of Iron March group on Steam for

hells sake!" Referencing the Iron March founder, Ka7 responds, "I think Slavros has a group with a few others for his gaming channel but I'm not sure if it's public..."

In the Iron March chats, it is clear extremist groups used Steam to recruit possible members, especially [Atomwaffen Division](#). One user, Staradder92, inquired about joining the neo-Nazi group and provided his Steam address to the recruiter.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Valve/Steam

To address the continued prevalence of extremists and extremist ideology on Steam, Valve needs to make significant changes to their approach to platform governance both in terms of policy and practice. These would be the same steps mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, have been implementing and refining for at least a decade, adapted to the specific nature of the Steam platform.

These changes would include:

- 1. Create and Adopt Policies to Address Hate and Harassment**

Like every social media and online game platform, Steam must have clear terms of service that address hateful content and harassing behavior, and clearly define consequences for violations. Moreover, their platform policies must state that the platform will not tolerate hateful content or behavior based on protected characteristics (race, ethnicity religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin). They should prohibit abusive tactics such as harassment, doxing and swatting. Platforms should also note what the process of appeal is for users who feel their content was flagged as hateful or abusive in error and provide transparent due process for those users.

2. **Enforce Policies Accurately at Scale**

Steam needs to take greater responsibility in enforcing their policies, once expanded, and do so accurately at scale. They need to utilize both a user flagging and complaint process along with a proactive, swift, and continuous process to address hateful content using a mix of artificial intelligence and human monitors who are fluent in the relevant language and knowledgeable about the social and cultural context of the relevant community.

3. **Engage with Civil Society**

In establishing and updating their policies, Steam should consult regularly with civil society groups from a broad cross section of positions, including civil rights and civil liberties groups, and especially seek out and use their advice and expertise to shape platform policies that may impact the experience of vulnerable and marginalized groups

4. **Increase Investment in Governance, Oversight and Transparency Reporting**

Steam needs to adopt robust governance. This should include robust transparency reports. The transparency reports should be produced regularly and include data on user reporting and enforcement across the platform's set of policies. This should include insights on the experiences of vulnerable communities using their platforms and provide information on how different groups are targeted. Once these are in place, the platform should also submit to regularly scheduled external, independent audits so that the public knows the scope and nature of hate and harassment on the platform. Audits need to also allow the public to get detailed independent measurement of hate on their platforms, verify that the company followed through on its stated actions and assess the effectiveness of company efforts in creating and enforcing anti-hate and harassment policies over time. Beyond their own community guidelines, transparency efforts and content moderation policies, Steam should look at product level design changes with anti-hate principles in mind. It must conduct a thoughtful design process that puts

their users first, and incorporates risk and radicalization factors before, and not after, tragedy strikes. Just as sites have for some years embraced “privacy by design”, so should Steam and other platforms embrace “anti-hate by design” principles and processes.

This would require a significant change of focus and culture on behalf of Valve and Steam. In the past several years, despite pressure and entreaties from journalists and civil society to take greater steps to address this problem, they have not taken some of the most basic steps to do so, such as create a platform policy around hate speech or produce a transparency report.

Should this continue, it may be appropriate for industry, civil society and government to consider the Steam platform in the same category as platforms such as Telegram or Gab. Unlike mainstream platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, these platforms take a wholly hands off or even antagonistic stance towards making their spaces safe, respectful and inclusive for all people. Our recommendations in this category focus less on what the platform in question should do, as they have already proven themselves to be a bad faith actor in this regard. Rather, our recommendations here are aimed towards those companies whose services support and maintain the activities of the platform in question.

Recommendations for Industry

1. Speak Out Against Extremism in Games

Game companies and executives should speak out against hate and extremist ideology in society, and especially in the online game platforms they create and manage. Companies and executives should make it unequivocally clear that the online game spaces have a zero tolerance policy for extremist views and extremist activities in their online game spaces, and that the game industry stands on the right side of history -- and against the growing threat of extremism in the US and abroad.

2. **Update online game platform policies and enforcement around extremism**

While some game companies have created policies regarding abuse or harassment in their online game platforms, very few have explicit policies defining and action extremist related activity in their games. As game companies establish expanded policies and enforcement practices for their online game spaces, they should consider how best to protect their online game platforms from abuse by extremists. They should be clear about whether a game space permits the proliferation of extremist ideologies, and what the consequences are for users who use those spaces for proselytizing extremist ideas or organizing extremist activities.

3. **Work with Civil Society**

Online games come in a variety of genres and take a variety of forms. In order to shape policies and practices around countering extremism, game executives should consult with civil society experts who can speak to the online gaming experience of marginalized or otherwise vulnerable communities. Discuss the best ways to approach preventing extremism in online game spaces. Explain to them the particular challenges of countering hate and extremism in your online game and work together to identify creative, workable solutions.

4. **Examine Business Practices and Relationships**

If a game company is partnering or doing business with another game company that is not doing enough to counter hate and extremism on its services, consider addressing those concerns with that company directly and/or publicly. The fight against hate and extremism requires all stakeholders to take responsibility for doing all they can to stand against its spread. Continuing to work with companies that refuse to take meaningful action against extremism sends a troubling message to the game community and the general public.

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