

Unpixelated Hate? Lessons from VR Gaming for a Digital Civil Society

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Introduction

In Germany, over half of 6–69-year-olds play computer and video games (Game – Verband der deutschen Games-Branche e. V., 2023). While many game titles are increasingly breaking stereotypes, some video games incorporate anti-democratic narratives and promote discrimination in their plots and character design. It is not just the game settings that have political implications, but also the gaming communities that are becoming increasingly political. Discussions on topics such as Black Lives Matter (GameStar Redaktion, 2022), the invasion of Ukraine, or the situation in the Middle East are also taking place in in-game chats and on gaming platforms. These debates are often characterized by toxic arguments and discrimination against marginalized positions – a climate that anti-democratic actors exploit. Gaming spaces with poor moderation are used to spread misanthropic narratives, intimidate people, and strive for international networking. Players experience toxic agitation on gaming platforms such as Twitch, Steam, or Roblox, as well as in in-game spaces, voice or text chats, and virtual realities. The intensity of hate and discrimination varies within immersive gaming realities.

In this article's first step, the nature of video game culture will be examined, and a definition of immersive gaming realities will be provided. Various examples will be outlined, and the cornerstones of VR gaming will be traced. The topic of dark participation and toxicity in video game contexts will then take center stage. Different levels of discrimination will be outlined, and examples of reactionary agitation within different gaming communities will be discussed. The extreme right in existing immersive realities will also be the focus. Three forms of instrumentalization will be examined here: networking, mobilization, and the 'meta-politics' of the extreme right in video game contexts. These examples emphasize the challenges that metaverse-like structures face and the tasks they will have to deal with in the future. The text introduces the idea that immersive realities

have great potential for promoting democratic values. Both titles created for entertainment purposes and serious games (games with an educational focus) are discussed here. These types of video games can effectively convey values through virtual realities. The passage concludes with a summary of the lessons and challenges for designing metaverse-like structures based on the cultural aspect of gaming.

What do we Mean by Immersive Realities in Video Games?

The term „immersion“ initially refers to being fully immersed in a specific environment or setting (Murray, 1998). Digital technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality (AR), mixed reality (XR), and the entire ecosystem of digital games are all categorized as immersive realities (Mühlhoff & Schütz, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2016). Video games often contain elements of immersive realities. They have a virtual environment that is partially disconnected from the physical world but can still be based on reality. A prime example of this is the popular game Minecraft, which has over 180 million users each month in 2023 (Redaktion G-Portal, 2023). Players can create and design entire worlds, establish ecosystems, and work towards cooperative or competitive goals. Along with countless fictional worlds, Minecraft also has servers where players can recreate real German cities, while elsewhere, digital depictions of Nobel Peace Prize winners educate players on basic democratic values (Diedrich, 2022). Additionally, the project „Reporters Without Borders“ created the „Uncensored Library“ in a digital Minecraft environment to showcase works that are banned in autocratic regimes. Thanks to the free accessibility of Minecraft's immersive reality, progressive literature remains accessible even in dictatorships (Redaktion Reporter ohne Grenzen e. V., 2023).



Figure 1: Screenshot of the Saudi Arabia section in the "Uncensored Library" (source: Reporters Without Borders, 2023)

Another important aspect of immersive realities can be seen in video games: avatarization. Players often have the opportunity to take on the role of a fictional character, create their own storyline, or follow a predefined narrative. Designing a unique character is also a central component, particularly in (online) role-playing games. Many modern titles implement a wide range of options for customizing your own digital image closely to real-life conditions if desired. Titles such as the space role-playing game "Starfield" allow for a free choice of pronouns, while other examples such as the fantasy role-playing game "Baldur's Gate 3" allow players to choose their voice, gender attribution, and external characteristics independently. While many players welcome these diversity options, allowing players to correctly integrate their own identities into a game, other gamers react with reactionary rejection and toxic criticism (Seng, 2023).

It is also noticeable that many online video games enable multi-layered interaction options with other entities. One example of this is the escapist simulation game „Animal Crossing: New Horizons". A game mechanic here makes it possible to visit neighboring islands of other players. In addition to social interaction opportunities, a visit can also be economically motivated. Different islands mean potentially different beet prices – a rare commodity for which prices vary daily and are different on different players' islands. The focus here is less on social motives and more on the capitalist maximization of one's own money within the game cosmos (Zeitz, 2020). In addition to these obvious forms of interaction dictated by the game, Animal

Crossing has also attracted attention through political protest. Players join forces and demonstrate in favor of a free Hong Kong, the anti-racist Black Lives Matter movement, or against toxic corporate structures in gaming companies (Mack, 2020).



Figure 2: *Black Lives Matter protest in The Sims 4* (source: *BlackSimsMatter*, 2020)

Digital protests with references to real-life conflicts take place in immersive realities in many places, while other titles focus on co-operative or competitive scenarios. Potential characteristics of an immersive gaming reality therefore include the creation of separate ecosystems, the ability to live through fictional or realistic scenarios with an avatar, shaping stories, and interacting with other players.

Gaming and the Changing Relationship with Virtual Reality

Debates about the use of VR technology are nothing new. Decades before Mark Zuckerberg and Meta publicized the idea of a metaverse-like, digital parallel world, the first attempts at VR were already being made in the game industry. In the 1980s, projects tried their hand at the first VR versions, but the VR arcade machines suitable for the masses were not created until 1991 by the company "W-Industries" (Redaktion TechMonitor, 1991). Based on the Amiga 3000, W-Industries presented the one-kilogram arcade machine.

Two years later, the SEGA VR was announced, which was reminiscent of today's VR glasses for the first time (Bezmalinovic, 2017). However, due to immense production costs caused by expensive motion sensors and the then still unsolvable problem of motion sickness, SEGA's VR goggles were never released. In the years that followed, there were repeated attempts to use VR-like technology in the gaming world, such as Nintendo's "Virtual Boy" in 1995 (Norman, 2013). Ultimately, however, insufficient processors, low frame rates, high latency, high production costs, and extensive reports of eye and headaches put a stop to these first steps in VR gaming.

It was not until 2012 that the newly founded company "Oculus VR" once again attempted to integrate VR into the gaming market. The VR goggles "Oculus Rift" were financed via crowdfunding (Harris, 2019). Meta discovered the potential of the VR market and bought Oculus VR. Many other companies, such as HTC and Microsoft, signalled their interest and tried their hand at their own VR hardware. Once again, the virtual reality boom failed to materialize, with VR headsets from various manufacturers selling too poorly. This was mainly due to the lack of major game titles that would have justified a purchase for gamers. It wasn't until "Meta Quest" and "Meta Quest 2" and games such as the rhythm lightsaber game "Beat Saber" (2018) and "Half-Life-Alyx" (2020) that VR technology achieved higher sales figures and the interest of many video gamers. However, there is currently disagreement in the gaming community. With the PlayStation VR2 released by Sony, the company is demonstrating how powerful current video game hardware is, and high-resolution titles such as "Horizon Call of the Mountain" are impressing the trade press and gaming public. However, there is still no broad catalogue of games for the VR glasses from Sony, Meta, or Apple that would anchor the technology more firmly among gamers. As of 2023, VR remains a niche in gaming culture that is perceived by the broad mass of gamers but is far from being favored by them.

Dark Participation, Toxicity and Gaming

Despite the current scepticism towards VR hardware, immersive realities and virtual reality have long been an integral part of gaming culture. Video gamers are usually part of various gaming communities that form around different genres, influencers, or game titles. The majority of gamers have already experienced hate in gaming spaces – whether in-game chats, on platforms, or through private messages. According to the "Hate is no

Game" study by the Anti-Defamation League, 77 % of over-18s have experienced hate speech in video game contexts. Alarmingly, even 20 % of adult gamers have encountered right-wing extremists within their communities. Primarily, female gamers, non-white gamers, Jewish gamers, and parts of the LGBTQIA+ community are affected by hate in gaming. These groups are defamed because they belong to specific groups (e.g. Jews or African Americans) (Anti-Defamation League, 2022).

"Dark participation" or toxic behavior primarily excludes marginalized groups from various fields of interaction in immersive realities. The term "dark participation" encompasses insults, hate speech, sexual harassment, discriminatory profiles/nicknames, doxxing, and the spread of disinformation. In gaming practice, there are various levels at which dark participation becomes visible. Firstly, there is the "in-game" level. Whether via text message or voice chat, almost every online video game must deal with insulting, patronizing, and even misanthropic statements within player communication. Studios and game makers try to reduce hate speech with moderation tools and word filters, but toxic gamers adapt systems and circumvent restrictions, for example with leetspeak (i.e. mixing letters and similar-looking numbers). For example, many e-athletes and gamers report on toxic everyday life in the video game "League of Legends" (Gogoll, 2021) or female gamers report sexism in the voice chat of the shooter "Valorant" (eSports-Redaktion, 2021). VR video games, in particular, harbor the risk of ableist, racist, or misogynistic discrimination reaching those affected unfiltered. There are examples of "Among Us VR" or VR sports games in which, for example, the N-word is uttered by an avatar in the immediate vicinity. It is not just gaming experiences, but also misanthropy that is made more immersive by VR glasses (MayoMonkey Bowblax¹, 2022).

Another level at which dark participation in gaming takes place is the platform level. Toxic communication is also noticeable on various gaming platforms outside of the actual game. For example, when Black Lives Matter (BLM) is discussed on Steam, a platform popular with PC gamers. In addition to solidarity with George Floyd and the BLM movement, gamers reproduce racism and spread disinformation (Amadeu Antonio Foundation, 2022). Elsewhere, toxic gamers postulate that diversity in video games leads to a boycott and that political attitudes must be kept out of normative works.

1 Content warning about racism.

Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores (PS5)

Release Date: April 19, 2023



Stop! Also isn't your game rated T for teen
Guerrilla!? Have some shame!! You're
teaching under age kids to become
homosexual now? You're sick!! **Collapse**

Figure 3: Toxic user review of the Horizon Forbidden West expansion on Metacritic. The narrative: Children are "homosexualized" by the game story (source: Metacritic, 2023)

The comments on the game "Starfield," where players can freely choose pronouns for their avatars, are characterized by such subjective criticism (Steam, 2023a). Other interactive platforms like Twitch are also not safe spaces for marginalized groups. Apart from discrimination in livestream chats, there are countless talk shows where far-right opinions are given a platform (Belltower.News, 2021).

Immersive Realities and the Far Right

Dark participation is gaining ground in various areas of the gaming world with little resistance. This is largely due to players ignoring problematic content and reporting functions being underutilized. In addition, platform operators are inconsistent and lacking in their moderation efforts. As a result, extreme right-wing actors are also active in immersive realities, alongside toxic voices. There are three ways in which the extreme right utilizes immersive realities.

The first is networking (1) within digital worlds. In the online mode of the popular action game "Grand Theft Auto V," users can create their own avatars. On their own role-playing servers, players establish their own objectives and follow a daily routine. Within the digital world, players who follow the SHAEF conspiracy narrative also gather. In GTA Online, they

even go on digital patrol. SHAEF refers to the "Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force," a term used by supporters of this conspiracy theory claiming that Germany is an occupied state, a "BRD GmbH" (De:hate, 2021). The platform Roblox allows players to create their own mini games/"experiences" and offer them for free download, but it also features numerous right-wing extremist worlds and experiences. On one map, players can assume the role of an SS officer and march through a fictionalized 1940s Berlin, greeting others with the Hitler salute. In other areas, players navigate through an extermination camp where the Shoah is trivialized. Digital avatars can also participate in target practice on swastika emblems. Known for its popularity among 9–12-year-olds, Roblox has over 200 million active users. Many of the far-right "experiences" can be found with just a few clicks (Prinz, 2023). Another title on Steam, however, is more subtle. The description states that "[game name] is a truly immersive and uncensored social experience where you can engage with like-minded people in a mutually constructive way." At first glance, this may sound promising. However, the game allows for the expression of any political opinion in a digital environment. It incorporates symbols from the Canadian Covid-19 protest movement and the "QANON" conspiracy ideology (Steam, 2023). This use of immersive realities as alternative spaces for interaction is a tactic employed by extreme right-wing actors to build their own world of experience with like-minded individuals, without encountering resistance.

This is also connected to another motivation: gaming and immersive realities are seen as part of a cultural struggle for the right, known as "metapolitics" (2). The "new right" considers "metapolitics" as a strategy for shifting social discourse to the right by occupying pre-political spaces. In practice, this can involve the dissemination of right-wing extremist symbols and codes or the glorification of extreme right-wing actors within immersive gaming realities and on video game platforms. For instance, there are numerous profiles on Steam that use the far-right slogan "Read Siege", inspired by the instructions for "race war" and "leaderless resistance" followed by the right-wing terrorist group "Atomwaffen Division" (Ayyadi, 2020). The perpetrators of Christchurch, Halle and Buffalo were also praised on Steam through their profile pictures and descriptions (Gensing, 2020). Roblox even had its own video game worlds where players could assume the role of right-wing terrorists and re-enact these attacks. For example, one downloadable experience allows players to play as the right-wing extremist from Buffalo and replay the attack on the "Tops" supermarket.



Figure 4: Right-wing extremist "experience" on Roblox. Here, players can re-enact the Buffalo attack (source: Roblox, 2023)

The attacks in Christchurch and Halle were available on the platform until the moderators reacted months later (Graf & Marx 2022). The far right primarily uses gaming areas where they can create and design their own content. Sandbox-like game concepts such as "Roblox" and "Minecraft" are used here, as well as the workshop area of Steam. Modifications (mods) for existing games can be developed here. This includes mods in which players can play as the Waffen SS, a legitimate faction in "Company of Heroes", or select Adolf Hitler as head of state in "Civilization VI" (Steam, 2023b). Therefore, it primarily utilizes existing gaming infrastructures in which right-wing extremists push their "meta-politics". Occasionally, neo-Nazis also try to develop their own propaganda games, such as a right-wing developer studio belonging to the „Identitäre Bewegung“. In this game, players can choose a cadre figure from the so-called "new right" and fight against right-wing enemies as Martin Sellner or Alexander "Malenki" Kleine in a dystopian 2D pixel platformer (Jugendschutz.net, 2020). Developing independent VR games does not seem to be a priority for right-wing extremist groups.

The final motive for the extreme right to use immersive gaming spaces is mobilization (3). Extreme right-wing actors use gaming evenings or patriotic video game tournaments to appeal to potentially interested parties and reactivate their own in-group. Roblox's immersive realities have been used to target young people. Young players were invited to join right-wing extremist groups and motivated to participate in joint shooting exercises (Vollbild, 2023). Elsewhere, merchandise from conspiracy ideology influencers is distributed in the game "Second Life". Player avatars act as digital billboards for disinformation. Right-wing extremist groups also appear in

existing VR games like "VRChat" to spread and provoke inhumane narratives, but also to arouse interest. For example, players in Ku Klux Klan outfits have appeared in the VRChat game and given racist monologues (ScaryToaster, 2022).



Figure 5: Screenshot from VR Chat. A person in a KKK outfit harassed other players (source: VRChat, 2022)

It is clear that the far right uses various areas of immersive realities to spread racist and anti-Semitic ideological elements, (re)mobilize people, and network at the same time. Creating their own avatars, implementing gestures, and creating their own immersive realities (such as in the Roblox sandbox or Minecraft) harbors potential dangers. As a result, parts of the digital world are becoming places where those affected by discrimination, in particular, cannot move freely and safely.

Democracy in VR and Immersive Realities?

Gaming culture highlights the challenges faced by immersive realities and metaverse-like spaces. At the same time, experiences from various video game communities emphasize that digital worlds harbor democratic potential. More and more video games convey a canon of values that emphasize plurality and tolerance. This also applies to video games that primarily serve entertainment purposes and have a commercial interest. For example, the game "The Last of Us 2" implements a queer love triangle and deals with experiences of discrimination against trans people. "Spider Man 2", on the other hand, depicts anti-racist and diverse narratives in its setting, while modern role-playing games, such as "Baldur's Gate 3", break with

binary gender stereotypes in the character editor (Hart, 2022). Elsewhere, the action game "Assassin's Creed Mirage" provides insights into Islamic beliefs. So-called "serious games", i.e. video games with educational claims, are also significantly more immersive than the static educational games of the early 2000s. "The Darkest Files", for example, is a historical investigation and courtroom game. Players are part of Fritz Bauer's team of public prosecutors and have to bring Nazi perpetrators to justice (Steam, 2023c). The game "Hidden Codes" by the Anne Frank Educational Centre, on the other hand, provides information about current right-wing extremist symbolism. Thanks to a classroom version, the title can be used in school lessons without much effort (Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, 2023). Democratic values can thus be played and experienced.

Democratic movements are also articulated within immersive realities. For example, hundreds of players come together every year in the world of Tyria in the online role-playing game Guild Wars 2 to organize a protest march for the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition to its symbolic effect, donations were also collected for initiatives that take a stand against misanthropy (Guild Wars 2 Forum, 2023). Elsewhere, players in the worlds of "The Sims" and "Animal Crossing" show their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement by designing cosmetic clothing with BLM lettering and highlighting everyday racism and discrimination in digital demonstrations (Grayson, 2020). In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, players in the world of "The Elder Scrolls Online" took a stand and organized a march for peace for those affected in Ukraine (Marasigan, 2022). Democratic protests are no longer a rarity, especially in online video games where gamers create their own avatars and organize themselves into player communities.



Figure 6: Pride Parade in the game Guild Wars 2; once a year, players organize a solidarity demonstration for the LGBQIA+ community (source: Guild Wars 2, 2022)

Within VR worlds, on the other hand, there are only a few pilot projects that promote greater awareness of discrimination. On one hand, this is due to the limited distribution of VR headsets compared to other gaming hardware. On the other hand, it is also due to the educational and didactic challenges that immersive experiences in VR worlds present. The depiction of discriminatory and hateful statements in virtual realities can be traumatic, especially for those affected, due to the immersion. The "Debug" project therefore accompanies users in their VR experience away from the headset. Players are followed in VR by a swarm of mosquitoes that continuously utter racist stigmas. Debug conveys the omnipresence of everyday racism for those affected and the intensity of stigmatization (Prinz, 2022). In the title "1,000 Cut Journey", on the other hand, players experience different life cycles and perspectives of a POC protagonist. Whether during disciplinary measures in the classroom, as a teenager by the police, or as a young adult through discrimination in the workplace – racism runs through the life of the character (Games for Change, 2022).

Another VR experience entitled "I Am A Man" makes the history of the American civil rights movement of African Americans tangible. The VR presentation aims to provide personal understanding of the struggles of marginalized groups. The title uses historical film footage, photographs, and voice recordings of actual participants in the civil rights movement. "I

Am a Man" sees itself as an interactive documentary experience to provide a deeper awareness of anti-racist struggles (Meta, 2018).



Figure 7: Screenshot of the VR game "I AM A MAN" (source: Meta, 2018)

Virtual realities cannot fully depict the suffering and pain of those affected. However, they attempt to make the perspectives of those affected accessible to those who have not yet had to deal with discrimination from privileged perspectives or who simply did not want to. They can also generate a sense of closeness and tangibility to historical events through the integration of historical sources and make processes more tangible.

Conclusion and Appeal for an Democratic Civil Society

The experiences of immersive realities and VR experiences in the context of gaming culture highlight opportunities, possibilities, and challenges that future metaverse-like ecosystems will face. Extreme right-wing actors utilize various segments of immersive reality, while democratic movements also make use of these spaces. In conclusion, clear recommendations for participation in future virtual realities are formulated.

- 1) *Avatarisation*: If VR spaces allow users to create and design their own avatar, diversity options must be considered. An editor that only thinks in terms of binary gender models or ignores skin or hair types excludes broad sections of society. It is also important to ensure that discriminatory and/or criminally relevant symbolism cannot be reproduced.
- 2) *Moderation of inhuman content*: In addition to comprehensive reporting and notification functions, proactive moderation is necessary

to identify hateful symbolism and recognize anti-democratic narratives. It is also important to make it more difficult for extremist groups to participate in VR. Anti-hate language programs are already being tested in video game rooms and criminal content should ideally be recognized in its early stages.

- 3) *Promote democratic participation*: Immersive realities can be used to draw attention to problematic aspects in the analog world and to show solidarity with those affected. Ideally, VR spaces should provide an infrastructure that not only enables but also promotes democratic participation. For example, through moderated discussion forums, lectures, or workshops in immersive realities. Positive examples such as the "Uncensored Library" (Minecraft) should be made accessible to users.
- 4) *Protect marginalized groups/security settings*: The so-called "metapolitics" and mobilization attempts in games such as Roblox or VRChat make it clear that extreme right-wing actors use immersive realities strategically. People affected by discrimination in particular, but also all other users, must be able to make comprehensive security settings and be informed about them. It should be possible to mute text and voice chats, hide gestures, and activate a security area around your own avatar. This is essential to guarantee physical proximity if desired.

In order to ensure democratic participation and not exclude marginalized positions, these four points are a minimum requirement for immersive realities.

The article emphasized the potential of VR spaces and digital worlds for a progressive understanding of values. At the same time, there are many pitfalls and anti-democratic endeavors that need to be taken into account in the potential technology of tomorrow. The problem becomes particularly clear with increasingly realistic graphics in immersive realities: if right-wing terrorist attacks, such as those in Christchurch or Halle, switch from a static block Roblox graphic to a hyper-realistic guise, the pull effect for extremist actors will increase. Developers, companies, authorities, and digital civil society must all play their part in a democratic metaverse. The lessons learned from game culture should not be forgotten.

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