

"Dream of a greater Reich"

Fascist Role-Playing, Post-Irony and Alt-Histories in *Hearts Of Iron IV* Mod Communities

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Abstract This article analyzes political expressions in communities of alt-history mods for the game *Hearts of Iron IV*. It looks specifically at the intersection of alt-history worldbuilding, political role-play, memes and online alt-right / far-right codes on Reddit and Kiwi Farms. The mods discussed in the text feature fictionalized versions of real historical, and sometimes contemporary, figures, events and factions, including playable fascist regimes. The article traces how game communities involving historical discussions, memes and role-play 'playfully' reproduce certain forms of revisionism, hate speech and conspiracy theories. The ambiguity between in-game and real-world political speech is situated within a broader notion of ironic ambiguity as strategy for far-right metapolitics. It stresses the function of esoteric humour and memes as part of community building and how in- and out-group thinking can normalize and/or obscure toxic expressions.

Keywords Alt-History, Hearts of Iron IV, Reddit, World-building, Roleplay, Memes, Post-Irony

Abstract Dieser Aufsatz betrachtet politische Äußerungen in Communities von Alt-History-Mods für das Videospiel *Hearts of Iron IV*. Er befasst sich insbesondere mit der Schnittmenge zwischen Alt-History-Worldbuilding, politischem Rollenspiel, Memes und Codes der Alt-Right-/Far-Right-Bewegung auf Reddit und Kiwi Farms. Die im Text thematisierten Mods behandeln fiktionalisierte Versionen realer historischer und zeitgenössischer Persönlichkeiten, Ereignisse und Fraktionen, darunter auch spielbare faschistische Regime. Der Aufsatz verfolgt, wie Communities, die sich mit historischen

Diskussionen, Memes und Rollenspielen beschäftigen, bestimmte Formen des Revisionismus, der Hassrede und der Verschwörungstheorien ‚spielerisch‘ reproduzieren. Die Ambiguität zwischen politischen Äußerungen im Spiel und in der realen Welt wird in einen breiteren Kontext von ironischer Ambiguität als Strategie der rechtsextremen Metapolitik gestellt. Der Aufsatz betont die Funktion von esoterischem Humor und Memes als Teil der Gemeinschaftsbildung und wie In- und Out-Group-Denken toxische Äußerungen normalisieren und/oder verschleiern kann.

Schlagworte Alt-History, Hearts of Iron IV, Reddit, World-building, Rollenspiel, Memes, Post-Ironie

1.1 Introduction and Research Objective

Hearts of Iron IV (HOI4) is a grand strategy game published by *Paradox Interactive* in 2016. The base game allows players to replay the historic events of World War II, starting in 1936. As the game does not have a fixed story, it allows players to affect the course of history through play. *HOI4*'s game engine makes it easy for fans to create modifications (mods) of the game, many of which lean more heavily into the idea of alternate histories (alt-histories) already present in *HOI4* (Loban 2021: 96). Popular examples are mods like *Kaiserreich*, in which Germany won World War I, *The New Order: Last Days of Europe (TNO)*, which takes place in a timeline where Nazi Germany won World War II or *The Fire Rises (TFR)* which takes place in the early 2020s. All games discussed here deal with fictionalized versions of real political ideologies as part of their game world, including various versions of far-right and fascist ideologies. Just as the original game, these mods stress player agency and a form of role-playing and world-building that lets players choose their own paths for various nations. They are fictional ‘sandboxes’ that attempt to gamify history but are nonetheless heavily informed by our reality.

The central question guiding this research is how online communities based around alt-history games may be permeable to the dissemination of far-right speech and ideas under the guise of (alt-)historical discussions, role-play, jokes and memes. Furthermore, it asks how these communities normalize a style of ‘toxic’ discourse that excuses far-right speech and hate speech as part of collective play. To answer this question, the analysis pays special attention to the role of post-irony and ambiguity in communication, akin to other discussions of far-right and alt-right memes in online spaces

(Dafaure 2020, Crawford et al. 2020). Irony allows a speaker to say something transgressive and immediately distance oneself from it by claiming it was 'just a joke' (Askanius 2021: 160). But in the case of alt-history games there is another layer of distancing: the subjects of memes and discussions are fictional (or fictionalized) political figures and factions that, albeit based on real-world politics, can always be described as 'just part of a game'.

The following article looks at examples of texts on the online discussion forums Reddit and Kiwi Farms that veer into reproducing and/or promoting far-right ideology. These forums (with some exceptions) are primarily meant to discuss their respective games and discourage or disallow addressing 'real-world' politics. However, given the fact that all mods in one way or another engage with real history and politics, discussions can often cross the line between in-game and real-world discourse despite the community guidelines. For example, when engaging with these communities it quickly becomes apparent that in-game roleplaying naturally extends into forum discussions and is often expressed as playful and/or post-ironic identification with or celebration of certain factions or figures, including fascist ones (see r/TheFireRisesMod 2025a, r/TNOmod 2025). Furthermore, political and historical discussions may, depending on the mod, start to fluctuate between discussion of in-game lore and real-world history, especially in discussions concerning 'historical accuracy'.

Given the topic of research this text contains potentially harmful and offensive images and quotations. These are presented in their original form to denote the presence of hate speech and far-right codes in the examined communities.

When in- and out-groups form, which seems natural in the case of a niche hobby like grand strategy games, a certain manner of speech and humour is perceived as a signifier of belonging. At the same time online community discourse is dynamic and, depending on the group, there is a push and pull between, on the one hand, the cultivation of toxic but identity-forming behaviour and, on the other hand, moderation of speech to protect the accessibility and credibility of the group and the hobby. This may, as will be presented later, lead to splintering of the community into more insular, toxic groups and more moderate, public-facing groups. An approach that acknowledges this dynamic nature of online communities is necessary to develop a nuanced understanding of the ways collective worldbuilding and memefication based on fictionalized version of real-world politics may facilitate the surreptitious dissemination of

revisionist and extreme political views by a minority within alt-history gaming communities.

After a description of the methodology and research corpus the analysis will be split into three parts. The first part (3.1) focuses on the risk of historical revisionism in alt-historical gaming communities, specifically in discussion about real-world Nazism. In the mods that take place around or before WWII Nazism as it is commonly understood is absent due to the altered historical trajectory of the game world. However, many figures and factions that relate to historical Nazism are still present but rid of the immediate negative association with exterminatory fascism. That part of the analysis will focus on how they are discussed (and memeified) within various communities.

The second part of the analysis (3.2.) homes in on the role of memes and the ways real-world fascism is addressed in the form of post-ironic identification within some parts of the communities. Taking the meme Speer Hoodie as a first example, this part continues from the last one but tries to focus more on how historical revisionism and post-ironic identification with fascist figures within the mods and their communities may spill over into real-world politics. This part also discusses meme subreddits like r/DSRfunny and r/NPPfunny that adopt transgressive forms of speech that resemble those of the alt-right. Lastly, this part will present the community on Kiwi Farms as an example of a small group of players that explicitly identify with fascist ideas and try to differentiate themselves from 'normie' places like Reddit. Generally, Kiwi Farms is far less restrictive on speech and, as the examples will show, this allows for certain players to express their political opinions in the form of far-right talking points and hate speech.

The last part of the analysis (3.3.) considers the question what may change in terms of community discourse when the mod's setting is transposed into the nearest past as in the case of *TFR*. What happens if instead of historical figures and factions, living politicians and contemporary geo-political struggles are fictionalized as part of a game? How (if at all) does the mod's community draw a distinction between fiction and reality? Furthermore, *TFR*'s game world includes elements of conspiracy theory that become part of memes within the community which are often indistinguishable from alt-right memes. This particularly begs the question whether the fictionalization of and post-ironic identification with in-game far-right ideologies and conspiracy theories may reproduce their real-world counterparts under the guise of humour and play.

1.2.1 Methodology

The aim of the research is to augment the discussions on the topic of the normalization of far-right ideology and hate speech in online communities by looking at the discourse on these mods both in relation to the games and their world-building¹ and to broader far-right communication practices, especially online. For this, I will follow a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach (Fairclough 1995). CDA aims to point out the larger ideological context contained within a text or a collection of related texts. This approach seems appropriate, given the main research question of how far-right ideology may be expressed in community discourse surrounding alt-history mods. Here, CDA is used to analyse written text, in the form of forum posts, and images, particularly internet memes that can often be characterized as "multi-semiotic (ibid.: 4) meaning they often combine or contrast images and text to suggest or reinforce a specific reading of their respective elements. Furthermore, the analysis engages with each dimension of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (ibid.: 133): the posts analysed here are simultaneously understood as text posted by individual users, as part of a discourse practice, i.e. the ways in which text is produced and distributed within the context of online forums like Reddit, and lastly as embedded within a larger social practice, including political and ideological contexts inside and outside of communities. The relationship between discourse practice and social practice is central to answering the research question, specifically how the pseudonymous and distributed structure of online forums, their implicit and explicit rules and their enforcement through moderation and social pressure may hinder or facilitate the dissemination of far-right ideological contents. In addition, the analysis pays attention to the notion of (subcultural) codes (Hall 1997) within alternative history game communities and as part of far-right / alt-right online discourse. Both, for different reasons, can obfuscate the meaning of text to an outsider. Consequently, texts that express far-right sentiments within the community texts are often (but not always) doubly en-

1 In practice, it is often challenging to cleanly separate discussions about story, world-building and game strategies, especially as a relative outsider. Not only has *HOI4* created its own game vernacular but, each mod features its own mechanics, characters, factions and ideologies. Therefore, I have tried to focus on overarching narratives and themes of each mod and their respective relationship to real history and avoid discussions that strictly deal with the gameplay.

coded or ambiguous. This text aims to highlight some of the moments where such codes are used to communicate to a specific in-group.

1.2.2 Corpus

The main sources for analysis are posts discussing alt-history games, including topics such as a) the game lore in relation to real history b) discussions on ideologies in-game in relation to real-world ideologies c) memes and jokes about political and historical elements of the mods and about the stereotypical player of these mods d) meta-discussions on the mods development and their respective communities. The texts that make up the main corpus were published on various subreddits. Additionally, the corpus includes a thread running since 2020 titled “/r/TNOmod and the Reddit *HOI4* modding community – When a subreddit for a video game mod turns to utter insanity” on the discussion forum Kiwi Farms that is directly linked to certain communities on Reddit. Descriptions on the Steam Workshop and on developer- and fan-run wikis serve as supplementary texts to contextualize aspects of each mod’s world-building.

Reddit is a user-moderated platform and highly public-facing. As such it is the first place where users will engage in discussions on various mods that are largely unrepresented on the official Paradox Games forums. Reddit’s structure is based on different user-generated and -moderated subreddits. There are subreddits for *HOI4* modding in general, for individual mods as well as secondary subreddits for memes based on various mods. The Kiwi Farms thread on *HOI4* mods is home to a smaller, more insular group that often distances itself from the public-facing subreddits. The thread initially gained traction as part of an “exodus” of users from Reddit that were dissatisfied with the moderation of the main subreddits, especially r/TNOmod, and critical of *The New Order*’s development team (see for example r/TNOmodding 2023). Since then, the thread has also branched into discussing other mods like *The Fire Rises*. The mod subreddits have respective set of community guidelines that are enforced by moderators (disallowing things like, for example, off-topic discussions and hate speech). In contrast, Kiwi Farms is effectively unmoderated.

Initially, to identify relevant posts for the corpus, I have used web scraping with Python and PRAW. The subreddits scraped in the initial search were the following:

- r/kaiserredux, r/Kaiserreich, r/RedFloodMod, r/TheFireRisesMod, r/TNOmod, r/Fuhrerreich (subreddits on specific mods),
- r/hoi4, r/hoi4modding (generalized subreddits on *HOI4* and its mods)

- r/HOI4memes, r/NPPfunny (subreddits specifically focused on memes)

This algorithmic search identified posts featuring far-right and alt-right keywords and dog whistles, both classical antisemitic and fascist tropes (references to Rothschilds / George Soros, "New / Jew World Order", "Blood and Soil", etc.) and far right memes ("Kekistan", "Goyslop", "Groyper", triple brackets, etc.) supplemented by esoteric / mystical fascist terms ("Hyperborea", "Vril", "Thule", etc.). These search terms were derived from various texts discussing contemporary far-right dog whistles (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung 2021, Anti-Defamation League 2019, American Jewish Committee 2025, Crawford et al. 2020, Dafaure 2020, RAN 2021).

However, generating a corpus based solely on keyword searches has quickly revealed several problems, as a) some mods and their communities integrate these terms into their own world-building, especially when featuring factions inspired by esoteric fascist ideas and b) users will often refer to these terms ironically, as a form of role-play or as reported speech. Therefore, while the initial use of algorithmic keyword search has generated some research threads it required a lot of manual, informed selection of relevant posts as each occurrence of seemingly far-right speech requires specific interpretation and context to understand whether it is a genuine expression of personally held belief.

While most of the texts analysed here stem from this original algorithmic search, it also features additional texts that were either linked or otherwise referenced in the posts found via scraping. Some of the texts featured here referring to important events within a modding community's history that relate to the research question (e.g. the "Speer Hoodie" meme, the Kiwi Farm drama) were not found algorithmically but by reading the originally scraped posts and finding these points of interest.

As this text is not concerned with the identities of the posters all citations are denoted with the title of the subreddit. In the case of Kiwi Farms, as all citations are from one thread with over 15.000 posts, I will provide the post number as reference.

2.1 Revisions, Omissions: Alt-History in Grand Strategy Games?

In the following chapters the term 'alt-histories' will be employed to describe the world-building in the examined games. To some, this term might appear self-explanatory but carries certain connotations that should be addressed here. It was chosen over the more technical "counterfactual histories" (see

Grufstedt 2022), primarily because alt-history (or the longer “alternate histories”) is often used within the game communities themselves (see for example r/hoi4 2019). Especially given the research topic of this article “alt-histories” might also invoke another term: the alt-right. This connection is, for example, also made in the collected volume *Alt/Histories: Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History*, edited by Louie Dean Valencia-García. Valencia-García explicitly links the term to revisionist history and “alternative facts” (2020: 7).

These connotations are certainly relevant in looking at the way alt-histories work within the *HOI4* communities but naturally an alt-history game setting is distinct from a real-world claim to redefine historical facts. However, as will be described later, the line between two definitions of alt-history as either what-if-fantasy or revisionism might become blurry as the mods and their respective communities engage with fictionalized versions of real figures, ideologies and political factions. Regarding the question of historical depictions in *HOI4* and grand strategy games broadly, some research has been done, primarily from a historian perspective. Games like *HOI4* are either described as potential educational tools (Wainwright 2014: 592) or are examined in terms of their gamified rendering of history (Pennington 2022, Grufstedt 2022: 160). However, there has been no in-depth research on community-driven alt-history mods, and neither has there been research on community forums as a means of understanding gamified alt-history and world-building in practice. There are several studies on the far-right’s relationship to video games that briefly mention Paradox Interactive’s games and specifically *HOI4* and its mods. These studies are primarily part of the research on the cultural metapolitics of the far-right and do not go in depth on any of the games or communities.² *HOI4* mods can be understood as platforms for creating alt-histories with their respective subreddits being places to present, discuss and contrast these alt-histories. Howe-

2 For example, a report on Islamic and far-right terrorism by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung mentions *HOI4* mods as potential recruitment tools for the far-right. In this report the author suggests that the fact that in some *HOI4* mods “20th century history is rewritten in favour of Nazi-Germany” (Wegener 2020: 4) could already be understood as a sign of “far-right propaganda” (ibid.). When looking at the actual discourse surrounding these games on the more prominent community forums these claims seem far-fetched, bordering on alarmism. While some fringe mods can certainly function as far-right texts in and of themselves, the mere existence of an alt-history where the “Nazis won”, a common trope found in many alt-history stories, does not imply that a game is propaganda.

ver, claiming that any of the successful games or communities have a unified ideological worldview ignores the dynamic nature of community discourse.

Other theorists refer to the more subtle ways in which parts of history are altered or omitted. The Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, for example, criticizes that the Holocaust is not represented in the game, reducing the ideology of the Third Reich to one of expansionism and war rather than extermination (Schnabel, Berendsen 2025).³ Additionally, discussions on the depiction of Nazi Germany happen within the *HOI4* community itself, for example around the expansion *Götterdämmerung* which some perceived as a glorification of Nazi Germany (Bernhardt 2024). These criticisms, rightfully, suggest that a game that engages primarily with historical topics may inherently provide its players with a distorted image of history. This article will focus especially on alt-history mods which do not strive for the same level of historical accuracy as *HOI4* but relate to history in a speculative manner. Here the notion of communal role-play and alt-historical worldbuilding become (at least) as relevant as comparisons to real historical events.

2.2 The Mods

As mentioned above, Paradox Interactive provides easy-to-use tools for modifying their grand strategy games, including *HOI4*. Consequently, it is impossible to cover all mods that have been created. These range from individual additional features to full conversions. All mods were written, developed and are maintained by non-commercial teams consisting of volunteers that often change over the course of a mod's lifespan. The following chapters will focus on some of the more popular mods, but others will be mentioned when appropriate. To give context it may be helpful to provide a brief description of each of these mods:

3 It should be noted here that the omission of the worst crimes of fascism might be less of an artistic decision and more due to Paradox Interactive's attempts to avoid legal problems in distributing their games in various countries, especially Germany (Wainwright 2014: 596).

Title	Setting / content	Time period in game	Year of release
<i>Kaiserreich: Legacy of the Weltkrieg</i>	The German empire won World War I, the Weimar Republic never existed, Nazism (as we understand it) never materialized, and the Holocaust never happened. Instead, World War II, or the “Second Weltkrieg” as it is called in the game, is initiated by a conflict between a fictional socialist France (Federation of the Communes of France) and the German empire.	1936 onwards (alternative WW II scenario)	2018
<i>Kaiserredux</i>	A fork of the original <i>Kaiserreich</i> , that includes a variety of extra or cut content for the game. While <i>Kaiserreich</i> ’s content has been revised continuously by its development team to assure a semblance of historical accuracy, <i>Kaiserredux</i> fully embraces the humorous and chaotic side of alt-history (see r/Kaiserreich 2024a).	1936 onwards (alternative WW II scenario)	2020
<i>The New Order: Last Days of Europe</i> (TNO)	Nazi Germany and Japan won World War II. Subsequently, the former has conquered Europe and the latter East Asia. The mod mixes World War II ideologies with Cold War elements. It also introduces elements of occult Nazism with groups like the Russian Faction “Aryan Brotherhood” that can become a quasi-religious group akin to Heinrich Himmler’s esoteric conceptions of the SS (The New Order Fandom Wiki: “Valery Yemelyanov” n.d.).	1960s (alternative Cold-War scenario)	2021

Title	Setting / content	Time period in game	Year of release
<i>Red Flood</i>	It is based on a fictional story in the universe of the <i>Kaiserreich</i> mod but evolved into its own alt-history scenario (r/Kaiserreich 2025). It portrays a world caught up in "a prolonged crisis of modernity" in which Russia won the war with Russia in 1905 and Germany became a Socialist Republic during WW I (Red Flood Wiki, n.d.). Compared to <i>Kaiserreich</i> , it focuses on more esoteric factions and chaotic geopolitics further removed from reality but often referencing real-world counterparts. ⁴	1930s (Alternative post-WWI period)	2022 (current version), 2020 (old version)
<i>The Fire Rises (TFR)</i>	The game takes place in an alternative contemporary setting at the beginning of the Corona Virus epidemic. It portrays a version of reality in which real-world geopolitical conflicts are amplified and addresses contemporary topics like social tensions within nations and the prospect of a multipolar world order (The Fire Rises Wiki n.d.). It includes fictional versions of real political figures like Donald Trump, Joseph Biden or the founder of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Klaus Schwab.	2020s	2024

Most of the *HOI4* mods reproduce the central gameplay of the original game that focuses on warfare and aggressive geopolitics (Pennington 2022: 3). In terms of worldbuilding this reflects an understanding of global politics as a sphere of conflict rather than diplomacy and cooperation. This view is especially relevant for mods like *TNO* or *TFR* that aim to transpose gameplay

4 For example, a central ideology in *Red Flood* is called "Accelerationism", a label that is more often associated with contemporary philosophers like Nick Land or Mark Fisher but in the world of *Red Flood* includes historical artistic movements like Futurism and Surrealism as well as pagan "Neo-Folkism" or "Technocracy" (Red Flood Fandom Wiki: "Ideologies#Accelerationism" n.d.).

beyond World War II. But even mods set around the World Wars like *Red Flood* often present a heightened version of history in which various conflicting factions fight for ideological hegemony. In comparison, as one user on Reddit suggests, “[o]ur timeline would probably come off ad [sic] really dull and unintesting [sic] in terms of geopolitics and ideologies.” (r/RedFloodMod 2022)

3.1 Good Guy National Socialism

Fig. 1: Meme adopting culture war tropes to make fun of the ‘wholesome’ Goebbels path in *Red Flood*.



While some mods like *Kaiserreich* are presented as serious ‘What-if?’-scenarios and consequently invite community discussions on historical accuracy, other mods are seen as fantasy games in which the player is enabled to play any scenario whether it is realistic or not. *Kaiserredux* distinguishes itself by allowing either so-called ‘schizo’ or ‘wholesome’ paths in the game. ‘Schizo’ paths are defined by the playing of fringe or fictional political move-

ments which are often authoritarian or violent (see r/Kaiserredux 2023a). Contrary, wholesome paths tend to focus on the success of equally fringe but more peaceful ideologies, often leftist, liberal or moderate in nature. However, in practice, this distinction is not always clear. The *Kaiserredux* submod *Roter Morgen* for example introduced a path that has Joseph Goebbels turn Germany into a "National Marxist" country, meaning a mixture between Nazism and Marxism akin to the real ideology of National Bolshevism (Steam Workshop: "Roter Morgen" 2024). Even after this path was removed from the main version of *Kaiserredux*, Goebbels name is occasionally brought up as a meme when discussing 'wholesome' paths in *Kaiserredux* and other mods (see r/Kaiserredux 2023b, Fig. 1).

Despite this difference of the role of alt-history both *Kaiserreich* and *Kaiserredux* present a world without Nazism and its consequences. Therefore, they circumvent the moral quandary of directly turning historical atrocities into play, which has already been a point of contention in discussions regarding the *HOI4* base game. While the player can still take the role of a conservative, imperialist or, in the case of *Roter Morgen*, alt-fascist German empire, the moral issues of racism and antisemitism largely remain unaddressed. The mod *Führerreich* presents an alternate timeline within the world of *Kaiserreich* in which Germany lost World War I but Nazism still did not appear as it did in real-world history. Instead, the German right follows an ideology called "Val-kism" which as a user puts it, is "like nazism without the extreme racism and genocide, so basically good guy national socialism. I think it's an interesting take." (r/Fuhrerreich 2018a) There are discussions on Reddit on the role of antisemitism in the world of *Kaiserreich* but seemingly there is no consensus on this topic (r/Kaiserreich 2019). As one redditor who claims to be an author for *Führerreich* writes regarding the role of Jews and antisemitism in the mod's lore:

Alright since I am the dude that wrote the majority of the lore for Germany I guess its time to answer this. I tried to keep the status of the Jews in Germany as vague as possible **to avoid certain things**. [...] Of course Jews are not liked and encouraged to leave Germany in favor of the jewish Commonwealth. (r/Fuhrerreich 2018b, Ed. A.N.)

These "certain things", meaning the issue of antisemitism and the ideological roots of the extermination under Nazism, are intentionally left blank which may help to make the nationalist parties in *Kaiserreich*, *Kaiserredux* and *Führerreich* seem like a more agreeable version of German imperialism or fascism res-

pectively.⁵ Not only are the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities omitted but they are erased from the fictional timeline suggesting that far-right and proto-fascist groups would not be as bad if only real-world Hitler did not exist.⁶

It is of note that the idea of the ‘good fascists’, as opposed to the bad Nazis, resonates with certain ideas of the European New Right who broadly reject Nazism while praising thinkers of the so-called “Conservative Revolution” like Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt or Oswald Spengler (Sedgwick 2019: 15). This tactical move of separating proto-fascist ideas from actual historical fascism in Germany aims to rescue fascism from its taboo status and its association with exterminatory racism. For example, the Russian New Right author Aleksandr Dugin attempts a similar manoeuvre to separate fascism and racism in his book *The Fourth Political Theory* when he writes

Racism is what caused the collapse of National Socialism in the historical, geopolitical, and theoretical sense. This was not only a historical, but also a philosophical collapse. Racism is based on the belief in the innate objective superiority of one human race over another. It was racism, and not some other aspect of National Socialism, that brought about such consequences, leading to immeasurable suffering on both sides, as well as the collapse of Germany and the Axis powers, not to mention the destruction of the entire ideological project of the Third Way. (Dugin, Soral 2012: 33)

Red Flood uses anachronistic and fringe political ideologies as part of its alt-history that often resonate with an understanding of far-right ideologies that is much more contemporary. Factions like the National Bolsheviks or Accelerationists stand in for the dominant far-right factions in the real world (r/RedFloodMod 2023a). Like *TNO* it also includes allusions to esoteric, pagan ideologemes like the mythical continent of Hyperborea (r/RedFloodMod 2025b) and geopolitical imaginations like the concept of (right-wing) Eurasianism (r/RedFloodMod 2023b). While these movements are partially modeled

5 This can be seen as an extension of the problem of playing as Nazis that Schnabel/Berendsen (2025) and Wegener (2022) already pointed out for the *HOI4* base game.

6 In the gameplay of *Kaiserreich* Hitler is irrelevant and it is debated whether he died before the start of the game (see r/Kaiserreich 2024b, r/RedFloodMod 2025a). His pseudonymous counterpart “Adolf Polzl” is described as follows: “According to the Lore I read of Adolf Polzl, he is so because his mother did not die and therefore in the end he took his mother’s surname in addition to his being accepted into the School of Art. So... Technically he is a ‘Nice Hitler’ so to speak.” (r/RedFloodMod 2025a)

after real political ideologies, they appear to be made distinct from their real-world counterparts. In that sense no singular ideology in the game seems to be representative of real-world fascism.⁷ In its community guidelines r/RedFloodMod disallows discussions about real world politics but given the appropriation of existing (fringe) ideologies and figures the borders between in-game discussions and real-life political discussions are not always clear. For example, in a discussion on the accelerationist factions in *Red Flood* several users compare it to and differentiate it from its real-world counterpart:

[W]hen I think IRL Accelerationism I picture Alexander Dugin in Russia. Look into him and his ideas for some IRL Accelerationism that could actually have a lasting impact. (r/RedFloodMod 2025c)

[R]eal acceleration irl is usually associated with some pretty evil groups like O9A or Atomwaffen. In red flood it really depends, there are accelerationists who you could say would probably be pretty good to live under like Guido Keller Fiume but there are also accelerationists who living under would be an absolute nightmare (ibid.).

Generally, the in-game representation of (pseudo-)fascism and consequently the discussions within communities are often kept vague in their historical references. Especially more 'schizo' mods like *Kaiserredux* or *Red Flood* seem more interested in creating far-right factions based on esoteric and occult ideologies, mixing and matching elements to create simulacra of fascism. But even the more serious alt-history mods tend to eschew the role of historical Nazis in favour of various flavours of right-wing factions that represent different aspects of real-world fascism. The lack of a clear in-game referent for (exterminatory) fascism and Nazism may impede criticism of posts and memes that reproduce reactionary views by referencing in-game factions and figures, some of which are based on real-world fascists. The notion that there are 'softer' versions of fascism and the ironic stylization of 'schizo' campaigns that let players act as fictionalized versions of real Nazis and fascists may serve to misrepresent and trivialize historical atrocities, muddle political discourse and potentially allow far-right actors to join the community and intersperse their real

7 As one poster on *Red Flood* subreddit writes: "Fascism basically does not exist as a term in Red Flood beyond San Marion. Most real life fascists are split between Accelerationism, Despotism, Reactionism and sometimes Vanguard Socialism." (r/RedFloodMod 2021)

world political ideas into the community discourse under the pretext of jokes or post-ironic role-play (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Graphic in a 'fashwave'⁸ style featuring the popular far-right symbol of the Black Sun posted on the TNO meme subreddit r/NPPfunny. The post is titled "Clerical Fascism/ Burgundian System unity I guess." referencing the fictional TNO faction Order-State of Burgundy.



8 Fashwave was a style of online graphic design from the late 2010s / early 2020s that combined with far-right texts and visual codes with 'retro' graphic design, especially referencing 1980s popular media and graphics.

3.2 The Speer Hoodie, Alt-History Memes and Kiwi Farms

According to a primary member of the development team, Jakob Zaborowski, *TNO* was conceived as a dystopian vision of a fascist victory (del Callar 2020). However, a small group of players latched onto the stylization of fascism in the game as an opportunity for 'edgy' role-play and memes. This appropriation by players celebrating far-right ideologies, in addition to cases of bullying and doxing in relation to the fork *TNOredux*, has garnered *TNO* and its community the reputation of being controversial (r/hoi4 2024).

One of the most infamous moments in the history of the *TNO* community that blurred the line between role-play and political expression was the so-called 'Speer Hoodie' meme posted on October 1st, 2020, on r/TNOmod. A user on Reddit posted a picture of a hoodie that featured the Nazi architect Albert Speer⁹ in a graphical style that resembled online memes (see Fig. 3). The meme suggests that wearing the face of a Nazi is acceptable as a form of post-ironic adoration. The Speer Hoodie meme was immediately met with push-back from the community, suggesting that an implicit line between acceptable and unacceptable role-play had been crossed. This is exemplified by a response of one of the subreddit's moderators:

Holy shit. I have a moral obligation to tell people to not do this kind of shit. Don't get fucking hoodies with an actual fucking Nazi's face on it, oh my god. People might actually think you're a fucking nazi. (TNOpedia: "Memes#Speer_Hoodie" 2024)

Several users later expanded on the meme, and it has become a symbol of a more 'edgy' time of the *TNO* community where users were not afraid to push the boundaries of acceptable speech (r/TNOmod 2023). As such the meme, on the one hand, exemplifies the negotiation processes around political speech within these communities and, on the other hand, showcases post-irony and humorous transgression as part of a process of normalizing the posting of far-right content.

9 In *TNO* Speer is one of four possible successors of Hitler and is described as a "reformist" of the Nazi party (The New Order Fandom Wiki: "Albert Speer" n.d). As a fictional (meme) figure he stands for an alternative, agreeable version of Nazism that celebrates the German Reich as a world power while distancing itself from orthodox Hitlerism.

Fig. 3, Fig. 4: Image of the Speer Hoodie originally posted on r/TNOmod in a post titled “My Speer Hoodie arrived today” and a person wearing a variation of the Speer Hoodie shaking hands with the Polish far-right politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, posted on r/NPPfunny under the title “real”.



This ultimately led to the TNO subreddit disassociating from meme subreddits like r/DSRfunny and r/NPPfunny and introducing more content moderation on the mod subreddits. Nowadays the rules on r/TNOmod explicitly disallow real-world political discussions as well as ‘excessive LARPing’ (Live Action Role Playing). However, memes referencing the Speer Hoodie and other memes that (post-ironically) celebrate Nazi figures in TNO could still be found on ‘shitpost’ subreddits like r/hoi4memes, r/NPPfunny or the now defunct r/DSRfunny (see Fig. 4, 5, 6).

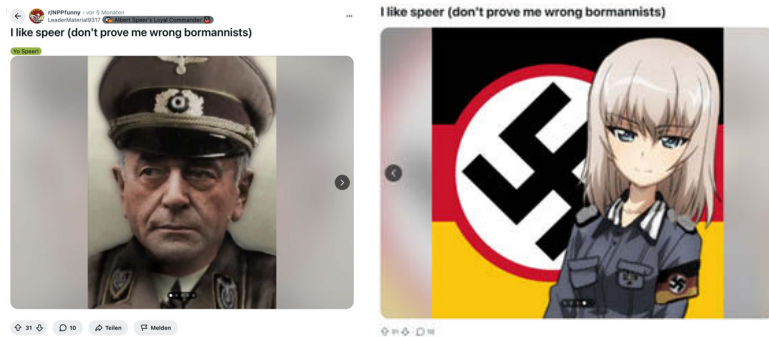
These meme-focused subreddits adopt a language and aesthetics that is reminiscent of websites like 4chan¹⁰ with memes often being categorized as “brainrot”, “shitposts” or “schizo” (see for example: /NPPfunny 2023, r/

10 4chan.org is a website consisting of several image boards / discussion forums created in 2003. 4chan is generally associated with cultivating (the more extreme forms of) contemporary meme culture and, especially on the political forum /pol/ forum, with the idea of the alt-right. For example, many of the memes associated with that movement (Pepe the Frog, Wojaks, Kekistan) and early Trumpism / MAGA were first popularized on 4chan.

TNOmod 2023a, r/Kaiserredux 2023a). This 'edgy' humour coupled with post-ironic references to Nazism and fascism, here justified by their relevance to the game, mirrors the visual language of early alt-right memes in which crassness and esoteric references often superseded any direct political messaging (Askanius 2021, Price 2025). Just as on other platforms that feature transgressive memes humour creates plausible deniability and opens a larger space of what is deemed acceptable speech:

This ironic distance is an attempt to shield the joke teller from accusations of racism, deflecting critics as humorless, and enabling individuals to say things that would otherwise be considered inappropriate (Pérez 2013). It allows the joke teller to test the waters of the acceptability of exclusionary and supremacist sentiments in a manner that presents as unserious (Pérez 2022). At the same time, it serves to normalize such sentiments by signaling to audiences that such expressions are acceptable [...]. (McSwiney, Sengul 2023)

Fig. 5, Fig. 6: Series of images featuring the Nazi architect Albert Speer and the character Erika from the anime Girls und Panzer in front of a Hakenkreuz flag posted on r/NPPfunny.



In the case of memes in the context of alt-history mods this effect is then doubled because not only is it 'just a joke' but it also all happens within a context of ironic (or 'schizo') role-playing. Thus, whoever takes the Speer Hoodie seriously as an act of political expression is not only humorless but a 'tourist', i.e. it signals that they do not understand the context within the (meta-)narratives of the game and its community. This again mirrors a discourse strategy of the alt-right:

It is the production of the in-group through laughing at others and using jokes that others will not understand that allows us to see online far-right communities engaging in homesteading practices. Kinnvall (2019) has written on the role of 'homesteading,' whereby certain spaces are actively bordered off for the sake of in-group wellbeing, and this production of a specific bounded home is based on a transgressive humor that challenges the acceptable. (Price 2025: 5)

While many users on r/TNOmod reject the promotion of far-right ideologies and share the designer's understanding of its world as dystopian, the game seems to, at one point, have attracted a group of players that genuinely identified with playing fascists. According to users on r/TNOmod the aforementioned doxing incident led to a split not only in the development team but in the community and "the Kiwi Farms drama drove out most of the weirdos." (r/hoi4modding 2023) Comparing the posts on Reddit to those on the effectively unmoderated thread on Kiwi Farms confirms that far-right hate speech in the context of TNO and alt-history mods is very much alive there. The difference in the proliferation and (lack of) moderation of hate speech between Reddit and Kiwi Farms is readily apparent and suggests that it is true that different parts of community have split between these different forums according to the proclivity for far-right ideas and hate speech. The users on Kiwi Farms often employ internet far-right and conspiracy codes creating an esoteric and insular form of discourse amongst a small in-group of radicalized individuals. For example, two Kiwi Farms users reference a discussion on the (more mainstream) Reddit forums as follows:

[User A] Why are these retards obsessed with fantasy nazis again? Isn't that just a special breed of glownigger?¹¹ Because this whole subreddit community sounds like some astroturfing.¹²

[User B] They're obsessed with exacting bizarrely specific revenge fantasies against them. It's very Jewish behavior. (Kiwi Farms #6,037)

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- 11 "Glownigger" or "glowie" are alt-right terms, originating on 4chan, describing undercover government agents that infiltrate far-right online spaces (Khazan 2021).
 - 12 Astroturfing describes the idea that certain groups or political movements that appear as genuine grassroots movements are actually created and/or sponsored by actors in places of power to fabricate a fake notion of public will (Institute for Strategic Dialogue n.d.).

Posts on Kiwi Farms, due to the apparent lack of rules and moderation, are also more likely to go on tangents away from in-game topics and instead discuss their political opinions directly:

Lesson off [sic] the Day: Learn from the OG sources (Mein Kampf) Rather than drink the Kool Aid of people who want the age off Consent lower (Daily Stormer)¹³,specailly if you are a retar.[sic]

Also is not modding that corrupts man,is that modding shows the true colors off everyone because HOI 4 Modding is a good mirror/screen into the minds off it's developers. (Kiwi Farms #14,307)

Nowadays *TFR* appears to be the more respected mod by the users on Kiwi Farms who consider *TNO* and its community to be too politically correct. In comparison to *TFR*, *TNO* is characterized as liberal with Kiwi Farms users giving it derogatory nicknames like "TrooNO"¹⁴ (Kiwi Farms #13,876, #14,958, #11,654). At the same time users discuss the notion of *TNO* as a "deradicalization tool", supposedly promoted by the mods developers, contrasting it to the idea that in reality *TNO* has helped to popularize far-right terms and ideas:

I've always found it curious that *TNO* was made as "le nazis... le bad!" neoliberal grimderp slop project but it has only served to popularize esoteric hitlerism and make shit like the black sun and hyperborea common knowledge. In a way it's funny on both ends, shitlibs are so bad at creating propaganda that they can't even make the crumbling, bloated corpse of nazi germany + a number of retarded neo-nazi warlod pedophile rapist russkies look dumb, and the black sun larper fags only know about this because of a hoi4 mod made by a bunch of tranny liberals. Peak comedy. (Kiwi Farms #11,850)

[A]lso tno has "radicalized" more people than any other mod despite the tno devnigger's claims that it's a deradicalization tool. For example the nigger shooter, HonoraryYakubian said he was inspired by tno (could've

13 The Daily Stormer is a far-right online platform associated with the alt-right.

14 This name refers to the transphobic internet slang 'Troon' for trans people. While this may be in reference to parts of the community and the development team identifying as trans, it is arguably meant more as a generalized insult to differentiate between the socially conservative values of far-right users on Kiwi Farms and the supposed liberal values of the *TNO* development team and (the majority) of the community on r/TNOmod.

been trolling tho, but still funny that the police probably had to research what TNO was. (Kiwi Farms #13,893)

That's the best part of TroonO. It was supposed to be a "deradicalization tool" but it instead kickstarted the popularity of Hyperborea memes back in 2020 to 2021, and now it's mainstream. (Kiwi Farms #14,963)

Thus, the discourse on Kiwi Farms, at least in part, paints a contrasting picture to those users on Reddit that argue that memes and fascist roleplay in TNO and other mods are inherently apolitical.

On the one hand the reactions to the Speer Hoodie incident and similar boundary-pushing memes show an ability of (parts of) the TNO community to moderate itself by excluding people who go 'too far' in their political speech, be it genuinely or post-ironically, which subsequently makes those people join more 'edgy' and insular sub-communities like Kiwi Farms or r/NPPfunny. On the other hand, this does not mean that r/TNOmod is entirely free of controversial humour and references to alt-right meme aesthetics that walk the line between roleplay and political expression. The identification with 'schizoposting' can be understood as a constitutive element of communities for mods like TNO or *Kaiserredux* that themselves are often exaggerated and, to an extent, make light of (pseudo-)historical violence. Even on the moderated subreddits this humour in the style of 4chan can occasionally lead to reproducing elements of alt-right speech and aesthetics. Thus, regardless of the subreddits rules, it appears impossible to fully separate the mixture of meme culture and discussions of alt-history from real-world political speech. Additionally, as we have seen, a radical far-right minority of players persists on alternative forums and may 'come back' (if they ever really left) and latch onto the ambiguous humour on the more public-facing subreddits to subtly promote their own worldview, as can be seen in some examples on r/NPPfunny presented here (see for example Fig. 2, 4, 5, 6). While the danger of far-right agitators influencing public online discourse is omnipresent in our times, these communities that center around (political) ambiguity and dark humour can be especially prone to creating a platform for far-right agitators (see Reinhold, Prinz in this publication).¹⁵

15 As we have already seen in the case of the alt-right and early MAGA movement that utilized "Reddit or 4chan where the borders between irony and earnestness are precarious." (Dafaure 2020: 4)

3.3 From Alt-History to 'Schizo'-Present

So far, the article has primarily focused on mods that reimagine historical time periods. These mods have developed their respective worlds by modulating historical conflicts (World War I, World War II, the Cold War) based on the idea that small changes to history would lead to radically different outcomes. Consequently, discussions in these communities sometimes address real world events but discussions center primarily on the idea of 'historical accuracy / probability' by speculatively comparing real history to the game world and discussing the viability of certain alt-historical timelines. A few users, especially on Kiwi Farms, may link (alt-)historical fascism to contemporary far-right ideas but contemporary political topics largely do not factor into the discussions on the main subreddits of *TNO*, *Kaiserreich* or *Red Flood*.¹⁶ While there is a real risk of these discussions introducing moments of historical revisionism, especially in cases where real-world figures exist as variations in the game (e.g. Goebbels, Speer, Himmler), members of the community are quick to point out that the in-game characters and the memes surrounding them should not be taken seriously (see r/TNOmod 2022). Furthermore, the idea of becoming ideologized through alt-historical *HOI4* mods is itself often understood as a post-ironic meme¹⁷ (see Fig. 7, 8). This disavowal of any 'real' political content or effect creates an ambiguous space where certain speech that is otherwise considered unacceptable is normalized through ironic distance.

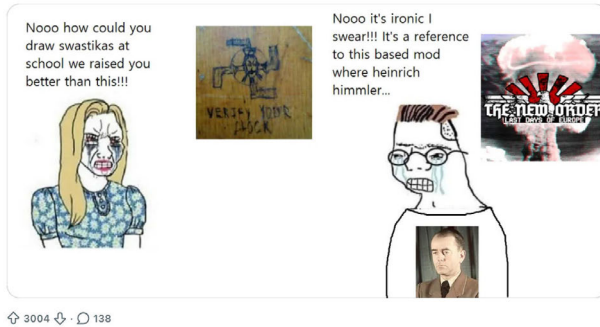
This relationship between in-game role-play, community discourse and real-world politics becomes much more complicated in the context of *The Fire Rises*, which is set in an alternative present timeline. Its world centers around multipolar geopolitics and a fictional Second American Civil War. It employs a variety of real-world events and conflicts as part of its world-building. In that sense it takes the idea of alt-history and transposes it to the present, creating a slightly modulated version of our reality that is fictional yet not entirely distinct.

16 Even where real-world political (fringe) ideologies are invoked, they are usually described as separate from their in-game counterparts (see r/RedFloodMod 2025c).

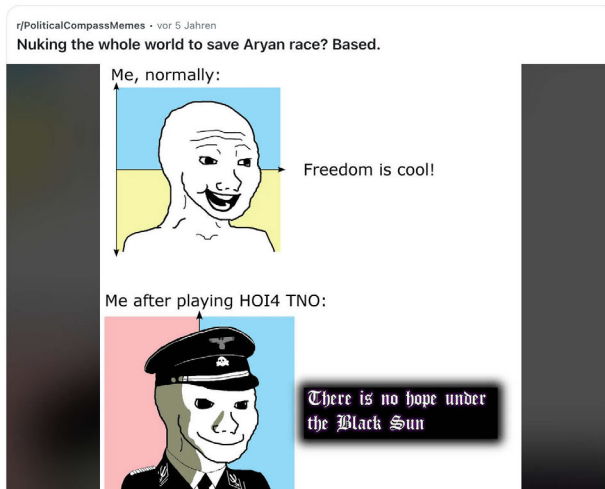
17 Conversely, members of meme communities like r/NPPfunny, r/KRCJ (Kaiserreich circlejerk) or, to an extent, r/HOI4memes, characterize the main subreddits as places for humourless 'normies' that are afraid to commit to transgressive role-play and speech (see r/HOI4memes 2024).

Fig. 7, Fig. 8: Post-ironic memes suggesting that TNO introduces players to far-right ideas. Both posted on TNOmod in 2020.

TNO mfs be like



He has become enlightened



Just as alt-historical mods fictionalize historical figures, *TFR* fictionalizes various living people, amongst them many far-right public figures. These include, for example, white nationalists like Thomas Rousseau, Brandon Russell, Jordan Jereb, or Aleksandr Dugin who are also the frequent subjects of memes on *r/TheFireRisesMod* (see *r/TheFireRisesMod* 2025b, *r/TheFireRisesMod*

2025c, r/TheFireRisesMod 2025d, r/HOI4memes 2025). The community also makes post-ironic references to contemporary right-wing conspiracy theories like QAnon¹⁸ (see r/TheFireRisesMod 2025e) and the "Eat the Bugs" conspiracy (Moore 2025), usually stylized as "Eat ze bugs" (r/TheFireRisesMod 2025f). The latter is part of a common in-joke that centers around Klaus Schwab, founder of the WEF, and (potential) in-game leader of the Ultraglobalist faction. The game takes place during the Covid Pandemic and includes references to the "Great Reset" (r/TheFireRisesMod 2025g), a program by the WEF that is often the subject of conspiracy theories (Robinson et al. 2021). It can be connected to similar conspiratory narratives like the New World Order, the Great Replacement and the existence of a group of evil 'globalists'. These narrative tropes featuring a minority group directing political and social developments from the shadows to realize a secret agenda perpetuate xenophobic and specifically antisemitic stereotypes (Römer, Stumpf 2019: 141). In the context of *TFR* and its community discourse they enable a perpetuation of such stereotypes under the guise of 'in-game' jokes. Given its contemporary setting, it is no surprise that this often includes tropes of "culture war" (see Liemann in this volume).

These examples show how the *TFR* communities on Reddit post-ironically reproduce contemporary far-right narratives and aesthetics. This can be productively compared to the analysis of Valencia-García (2020: 14) who points out the structural link between alt-histories and conspiracy theory. In the context of *TFR* this suggests a qualitative change in how communities engage in-world discussions in relation to real-world politics. What happens for example when real-world political figures acknowledge their portrayal in the game, and this is discussed or even celebrated in the community as an acknowledgment of themselves (The Fire Rises Wiki: "Acknowledgment of The Fire Rises by People or Organisations featured in the Mod" n.d.)? In one post a user shared a link to a video by Jordan Jereb, leader of the US white supremacy group Republic of Florida Militia and fictional leader of the Christian faction of the far-right Atomwaffen Division in *TFR*, in a thread titled "Jordan jereb endorses tfr" (r/TheFireRisesMod 2025h). In the same thread a post on X by Jereb is quoted:

18 QAnon was a loose online group that formed around 2017 and was based around a supposed government insider under the pseudonym Q that shared supposed secrets about government conspiracies (especially in the Democratic party) involving Satanism and paedophilia (Bleakley 2023).

I am going to be making a video about The Fire Rises HOI4 Mod. I'm a character in this game, And I want to talk about why I think the game is significant. (ibid.)

Here it becomes obvious how the *TFR* community (approvingly) engages with real-world far-right actors through the filter of a fictional game world. Far-right figures and factions are simultaneously understood as playable pieces of an imagined game world and acknowledged as real-world actors. And, conversely, the community and game are understood by far-right actors like Jereb as sites for metapolitics to popularize, normalize and aestheticize far-right ideas.

As an outsider, allusions to far-right ideology are certainly more legible in the case of *TFR*. Instead of referencing early 20th century rhetoric and aesthetics like other mod communities, the *TFR* community is engaging with the aesthetics of late-stage capitalism and meme culture in a self-referential manner. This goes so far as to allowing for hyperreal versions of memes and notions of culture war, which themselves are largely defined by self-referentiality and (post-)irony as part of the game discourse. In other words, while a member of the *Kaiserredux* community might role-play as a historical far-right person **via** the internet, *TFR* allows users to role-play as a contemporary far-right person **on** the internet, becoming effectively indistinguishable from a far-right 4chan post. This discourse is made possible by employing two layers of deferral when faced with the critique of reproducing far-right political speech or aesthetics: Not only is it a 'schizo' joke but it is a joke within the context of a fantasy version of reality. In that sense even a post that is indistinguishable from far-right political speech may appear impervious to critique.

4. Conclusion

The research has shown that far-right sentiments are present in alt-history gaming communities. The extent to which this becomes prevalent depends on both the mods themselves, i.e. how they allow for identification and glorification of far-right factions and figures, and on the discourse practices in each community, including rules and moderation.

It has also become clear that these discourse practices are a dynamic process that is shaped by certain events in the history of communities. For example, in the case of *TNO* more transgressive moments in the past like the Speer Hoodie meme have led to stricter rules regarding real-world po-

litical discussions and memes. The shutdown of r/DSRfunny where memes in the style of Speer Hoodie were posted regularly also suggests that more extreme forms of speech will eventually become subject to regulation. Generally, explicitly far-right posts are met with pushback by the community on subreddits like r/TNOmod, r/Kaiserreich and r/RedFloodMod. This does however not mean that all kinds of transgressive post have disappeared from the more mainstream communities. Not only have newer meme subreddit like r/NPPfunny adopted a style of posting similar to r/DSRfunny but transgressive humour that plays with irony and ambiguity is still present in the main subreddits of alt-history mods. This however, as I hope some of the quotations have shown, is qualitatively different from a forum like Kiwi Farms where a group of players, supposedly originating from Reddit, openly express far-right ideas and regularly post hate speech. This happens to a lesser extent than on Kiwi Farms but still notably so the *TFR* community has normalized a kind of speech and memes that often resembles those of the alt-right and 4chan. Reading all these aspects together it becomes apparent that alt-history games and their communities are a place where far-right metapolitics occur, often subtly but sometimes explicitly. While a website like Kiwi Farms platforms hate speech in a way that is blatantly obvious, the various subreddits that often walk the line between being outward-facing and insular present us with more ambiguous forms of political speech. On the one hand, the communities on Reddit (with some exceptions) tend to moderate themselves to seemingly discourage hate speech and (fascist) LARPing. On the other hand, it is that claim of moderation that marks tendentious forms of speech as acceptable when they are not removed or marked by moderators. The fact that it is often difficult to accurately differentiate far-right opinions from ironic roleplay underlines the ways ambiguity may work as a political strategy for the far-right online. The communities of alt-history mods become sites of toxic behaviour not primarily, albeit possibly, through direct forms of attacking others but through normalizing 'playful' versions of reactionary thought, hate speech and conspiracy theories that always provides an out for those that express them. Often these forms of post-ironic and transgressive expression become signifiers of belonging to the community. Deciphering layers of irony and responding correctly is key to becoming part of alt-history mod communities that venerate expertise in the specific lore and in-jokes of the games and the communities themselves. In its most extreme form this may create a self-reinforcing toxic structure in which affirmative notions of historical and (as in the case of *TFR*) contemporary far-right ideologies are suspended in a hyperreal

state of play. The fact that sites like 4chan have become the breeding ground of the alt-right as a political movement has shown how humour and a sense of community online can draw (especially young) people towards far-right ideas or at least reinforce a socially conservative worldview. But whereas 4chan's transgressive humour hardly obscured the real political sentiment underneath, the communities discussed here present a more ambiguous relationship to real-world politics via the notion of fiction and play. It is not only humour but also the claim of fiction and play that allows certain forms of transgressive speech to become acceptable. The findings of this research have shown that far-right ideas and hate speech do occur in parts of these communities and that moderation (where it exists) only serves to rein in the most explicit cases.

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