

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE:
AN INTERACTIVE GUIDE TO ONLINE WHITE SUPREMACY

by

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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Masters of Digital Media

in the program of
Digital Media

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020
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Abstract

White supremacy and its values are not new, but the ways they recruit are ever-changing. These communities have found places to thrive online and, shrouded in anonymity, have developed new and sinister ways of attracting new members to their ideology. While it is certainly an uncomfortable topic, it is important to understand how these groups work, recruit and communicate with one another in order to understand how to quell their activity and influence. Through a combination of leaked Discord server chats, personal indoctrination stories and academic studies, this interactive fiction project will seek to make the tactics employed by white supremacists clear and easily understood, by allowing the player to experience the deterioration of relationships encouraged in white supremacist groups, and engage with a breadth of research in-game.

Keywords: white supremacy, extremism, online indoctrination, hate groups, white nationalism, neo-nazis

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Richard Lachman for his support and guidance throughout my research and process. With the world changing so quickly and so frequently in 2020, the importance of his understanding, expertise and kindness cannot be overstated. I would also like to thank Dr. Alexandra Bal, who has been an important figure in my academic career for several years. She has consistently encouraged and challenged me to expand my thinking, and I will be forever grateful. Further, I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the researchers and journalists who came before me, doing the important work of understanding and dismantling white supremacy. It is not a pleasant path to walk, and I am endlessly humbled to be even a small fraction of such important work. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends, family and cohort for all of the support, laughter and love they have offered me throughout such heavy work, I would be truly lost without them.

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Introduction

White supremacy and its values are not new, but the ways used to recruit converts are ever-changing. These extremist communities have found places to thrive online, and, shrouded in anonymity, have developed new ways of attracting new members to their ideology. While it is certainly an uncomfortable topic, it is important to understand how these groups work, recruit, and communicate with one another in order to understand how to reduce their activity and influence. Through a combination of leaked Discord server chats, personal indoctrination stories and academic studies, this interactive fiction project will seek to make the tactics employed by white supremacists clear and easily understood. The goal is to allow players to experience the deterioration of relationships encouraged in white supremacist groups, to better prepare populations to resist the tactics in their interpersonal relationships. The choice of interactive fiction arose from a desire to make a convoluted and often upsetting conversation easier to navigate while also making it easier to access for a larger audience. Twine is the chosen platform, because it is easy to publish work publicly and the mechanics are intuitive and easy to learn, which helps reduce the barrier to entry for an audience that may not be familiar with more complex gameplay.

The research the player can interact with in the game ranges from podcast suggestions to academic paper summaries, all of which are generally focused on the ideologies of the alt right and how they work to recruit. This research includes the writing of journalist Robert Evans, who

has been covering the far right for many years, Umberto Eco, noted anti fascist author, Data and Society contributor Rebecca Lewis and many others. The narrative itself, on the other hand, is largely inspired by exit accounts, which the player will only encounter if they choose to engage with the research in the game. These stories from former white supremacists served as the inspiration for the examination of interpersonal compassion as means of deradicalizing extremists, particularly young men. Sources, when possible, are accessible through the game via hyperlink to ease the player into engaging with full form texts on the subject of the far right. The structure of the interactive narrative is not meant to be enjoyable, but rather emotional and instructional: if the player attempts to take the shortest route out of the narrative, they will be met with the complete dissolution of their relationship, it is only through engaging with uncomfortable topics and conversations that the player can hope to salvage their relationship with their in-game son. The associated paper will explore the breadth of literature that inspired and is integrated into the game, as well as a discussion of the development of the narrative itself and the intent behind the platform choice.

Literature Review

Background of the Alt-Right

In 2008, the term “alt-right” was coined by Richard Spencer as a means of defining a new style of right leaning politics that takes a much harder stance against things like immigration and multiculturalism than more moderate conservatives do. However, the term incorporates not just self identity, but also a way for more extreme ideas to fit into mainstream discourse (Lewis, 2017). While the alt-right and other online right extremists may claim to be separate from old forms of white supremacy, their beliefs often amount to little more than repackaged extreme conservative values (Nagel, 2017), as will be discussed below. It is also worth noting that, when engaging with members of the extreme right, they will often semantically separate themselves to create the illusion of separation, even if their values are almost indistinguishable. For example, historically, fascist states have operated in different ways, under different leaders but they still hold a “family resemblance” because “one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist” (Eco, 1995). The Southern Poverty Law Centre has identified over 900 different hate groups in the United States in 2019 (SPLC), which can be categorized into a handful of general world views, including, but not limited to: white nationalists, neo-nazis, anti-muslim, anti-Islam, Holocaust denial and general hate. While the

SPLC expends significant effort into categorizing these groups, members frequently agree with other hateful sentiments across groupings, even if they are not explicitly tied to them in an organized manner. This creates a rather unsettling Venn diagram of hate. Many of these commonalities are old ideas, and foundationally built upon white supremacist hierarchies, often with fascist in-group tendencies, but the ambiguity of the term “alt-right” itself is intentional. Alt-right, as a term, is broad enough to cover the aggressive trolling of infamous Reddit messageboards /b/ and /pol/, with all their referential in-jokes and ironic commentary, while simultaneously indicating a more mainstream association to blogs, podcasts and Twitter personalities who tout similar conservative views of the world (Lewis, 2017). Lewis observes that this ambiguity is imperative to members being able to dissociate themselves from the movement when something particularly unsavoury happens, like a mass murder, while still being able to promote the values of the movement, often under the guise of jokes and irony (Lewis, 2017). This tactic of veiling cruel ideas in humour has a tendency to attract young men who feel disenfranchised, especially those who feel alienated from mainstream groups, cultures and trends (Lewis, 2017). The combination of the accessibility of the “edgy” humour and the sense of belonging created by understanding them make the alt-right particularly appealing to young, white men, and while it is impossible to determine due to anonymity on many forums, economic inequality likely also plays a role in the intensity and fervor that is sowed in these groups (Lewis, 2017). In one account, a mother explains that much of the appeal for her son was that he was taken seriously by adults and treated like a peer when he was struggling in social groups at school (Anonymous, 2019). In other instances like the case of Derek Black, he was simply raised in a white supremacist household, eventually being abandoned by his family for disavowing their

world view, proof that even the most extreme cases can be deradicalized with the right combination of factors. The exploitation of isolation and feelings of alienation is what radicalization strategically exploits in young, often white, men (Lewis, 2017), and it is imperative that demographics other than the one targeted by radicalization understand these tactics so that intervention can be taken on an interpersonal level. If it is isolation and social disenfranchisement that make these young men easy targets for recruitment

The alt-right is a digital form and logical extension of groups that have existed for much longer than the Internet, most notably, the Ku Klux Klan (the KKK). The KKK was founded after the civil war, originally with the claim to provide excitement and adventure for former soldiers who were no longer needed for service (Eckstrand, 2018). Compared to other movements, such as George Lincoln Rockwell's attempt to make Nazism mainstream in the United States, the KKK has survived for over 100 years, and has been readily accepted in many communities. The acceptance of the KKK is well documented across communities, law enforcement and the media across its active eras (Eckstrand, 2018). While some white supremacists maintain that the historic popularity of the KKK stems from a cultural need for a white ethnostate, there is an argument that much of their success was due to violence and intimidation, even intimidating other white Americans to join their ranks (Evans, 2019). It should also be noted that membership was not free, and even operated on a tiered payment system, based on how many different people a recruit could convince to join, not dissimilar to modern multi level marketing schemes. It is not unreasonable to speculate that numbers may have been falsely inflated through intimidation, but this is not to discount the genuine terror the KKK wrought against Black Americans. Many White Americans would attend lynchings, often to

watch as a spectator while members of the Klan would carry out the public torture and murder of Black Americans (Eckstrand, 2018). This history, as well as colonization and the legal oppression of Indigenous people and Black people are the foundation that modern movements like the alt-right are built upon.

It is also worth exploring the notion of the Overton window (Lewis, 2017) when discussing the rise and prominence of the alt-right. The Overton window is the important concept of shifting where the perceived “political centre” is in mainstream discourse. This shift is evident as many current, common alt-right talking points would have been unimaginable to see on mainstream news outlets only a few years ago, like mass deportations for the sake of “cultural unity” and encouraging modern forms of segregation. Part of the work the alt right has successfully done is shift perceived norms of what is “centrist”, politically speaking. This is an effective tactic, because not only does it mean that the alt right gets mainstream attention, but also that they can increasingly push more and more radical ideas, all the while seeming to be just right of centre. This is a deliberate shift in public discourse to make their own radical views seem closer and closer to the centre, while relatively innocuous left of centre political ideas like universal healthcare and higher taxes on the wealthy seem increasingly radical. There are many other ways media can be manipulated into shifting the Overton window, which include but are not limited to weaponizing participatory culture, strategic amplification and framing and creating automated bots to amplify specific messages (Lewis, 2017), many of which are successfully employed by the alt-right. While many people who make posts genuinely believe the things they say, there is also a much more despairing reason people share disinformation and conspiracy theories: money (Lewis, 2017). This monetary motivation is reflected across the political

spectrum, with websites like LibertyNewsWriters.com using “rumors, hyperbole, and exaggeration in their stories to appeal to a pro-Trump, anti-liberal audience because it nets them more than \$40,000 a month in advertising revenue” (Lewis, 2017). Some institutions, like Breitbart, operate from a monetary and ideological standpoint, with its late founder Andrew Breitbart describing the site's purpose as to “wage information warfare against the mainstream press” (Mayer, 2017). This manipulation is carried out by many people, but alt-right messages are particularly potent when used on interpersonal platforms, like Twitter, Reddit and 4chan. These users are often referred to as “trolls”, or users who purposefully sow discord and seek emotional reactions from other users, can use more specific, rhetorical tactics to elicit a reaction from others. This tactic is, more often than not, to say whatever will upset someone in the moment, regardless of their own beliefs (Danskin, 2019). While this can range from relatively harmless or pointless debates, it can also quickly escalate to much more nefarious ideas, particularly the style of trolling created and honed on 4chan which includes “the use of deliberately offensive speech, antipathy toward sensationalism in the mainstream media, the desire to create emotional impact in targets and the preservation of ambiguity (Lewis, 2018). This deliberate ambiguity is described by Poe’s Law: “Without a clear indication of the author’s intent, it is difficult or impossible to tell the difference between an expression of sincere extremism and a parody of extremism” (Aikin, 2013). It is also important to note that much of the time, engaging with strangers who espouse these ideas online is an unproductive way of confronting alt-right ideas. The many reasons why it is unproductive, even when many of these people state views that are in direct conflict with one another, is described comprehensively in Ian Danskin’s (Innuendo Studios) video “The Card Says Moops”, a video included and linked to

in the narrative. For Danskin, the newest recruits who still lie on the outer edges of radicalization, who “troll for the lols” largely operate from the perspective of “maintaining [the] ignorance of one’s own beliefs”, that is to say, choosing to never engage with the real world implications of the things they espouse online. While it may be appealing to have a discourse with someone who disagrees with you online, these trolls rarely enter in good faith and have no intention of listening to anything you say. Rather, they are there to say whatever will “win” the argument, even if it is in direct contradiction with things they have already said. In short, “they don’t care what they believe, but they know what they hate and they don’t want to think about why they hate it” (Danskin, 2019). Unfortunately, this rhetorical style appeals to some people, often the same young men who are targeted by more deliberate forms of radicalization. This style of discourse also appeals to the reactionary, angry young man who feels cast aside and needs somewhere to direct his anger. Danskin observes that in many of these situations, it is equally possible that this young, angry man could be brought to the left, becoming angry against social inequality and capitalism, but the right works very hard to make sure he finds them first.

The Alt-Right Identity

While the term alt-right can sometimes feel, and deliberately is, nebulous, there are certain traits, values and sensibilities that ultimately bind people who identify themselves as being affiliated with the alt-right. Colloquially, this is seen as a penchant for trolling, and a predominantly white and male base, which supports individualism, free market capitalism, white supremacy and other extreme versions of more “traditional” conservative values, but an ongoing effort to document the self reported identities of the alt right has been undertaken in recent years.

In the paper “Alt-White? A Gendered Look at “Victim” Ideology and the Alt-Right”, Boehme and Scott explore the underlying sense of victimhood that white supremacy is built upon, observing that “white privilege is not solely about the dominance of White people over nonwhite people, but White men over all others”, further accentuating why young men are targets of radicalization; the system preached always benefits them above everyone else. This focus on a male demographic is also demonstrated in the fact that “70% of 4chan users are male, and 4chan is the second most frequently credited website in red-pilling stories” (Evans, 2018) and the platform was once used as a recruiting ground and a funnel to send users to its much more extreme philosophical sibling, 8chan. This connection between masculinity and white supremacy is not new, as far back as 1998 Abby Ferber observed the intersection of race and gender in instances like interracial relationships, where a Black man’s relationship with a white woman interfered with a white man’s dominance over her body. In 2000, Mitch Berbreir wrote about the victimhood white supremacists perceived themselves as suffering from, with people like David Duke portraying whites as “both innocent victims and benevolent champions of equity and justice”. Berbreir also observes how this position of victim creates a dialogue among white supremacists which provides “justifications and excuses for actual attitudes or potential behaviours”, a shift that is easily exploited by the online right when sincerity is virtually impossible to discern. Boehme’s study also supports Berbreir’s observations of gendered victimhood, finding more men than women align with the alt-right. While there are women who identify with the movement, it could be speculated that the different ways these feelings of victimization are manipulated could be due to longstanding heteronormative ideas in the United States (Boehme, 2019). This concept of gendered victimhood is particularly apparent in certain

online fringe groups that are not necessarily associated with the alt-right, like incel forums.

“Incel” is shorthand for “involuntary celibate”, a term co-opted by angry men on the internet to share misogynistic, often violent thoughts and stories. If one were to spend much time on these forums, it would become apparent why it would be considered fertile recruiting ground: the idea of victimhood, of being denied something that they are entitled to is already ingrained in the incel world view, it simply needs to be broadened or redirected to include race, rather than only gender, to radicalize them to white supremacist ideas. This is part of the reason “alt-right” is can seem so nebulous when it comes to values and beliefs; they recruit from all over, from any community that may give some sense of comfort to young men who feel cast aside and unify them under their sense of victimhood and inherently, their sense of entitlement. As one fascist describes it, “if you can get some guys [red-pilled] through UFO stuff I’m not complaining” (Evans, 2018).

While it can be difficult to survey a largely anonymous group, a comprehensive analysis of self-reported values in over 1000 Trump voters who were asked about their alt-right affiliations found that “alt-right supporters were significantly higher than non-alt-right non-Trump supporters on (a) purity concerns, dark-triad traits, authoritarianism, SDO, the internal and external motivation to express bias toward Black people, hostile and benevolent sexism, nationalism, and blatant dehumanization of derogated and opposition groups; (b) support for Trump and his policies, such as the Muslim ban and building a wall between the United States and Mexico; (c) concerns about security, discrimination against in-groups (i.e., discrimination against Whites and men), political correctness, and restrictions to conservative speech; (d) trust in alternative media and business; and (e) opposition to BLM and support for

White collective action. Alt-right supporters were significantly lower than people who did not vote for Trump on (a) the number of people they reported trusting; (b) support for removing confederate statues; (c) concerns about liberal issues (i.e., discrimination against Black people and women; climate change); and (d) concerns about restrictions on liberal speech and trust in mainstream media” (Forscher, 2019). Like any self reported data, these responses should be considered an imperfect representation of the community at large, but when compared with colloquial stories, personal experiences and even the things being said by conservative pundits, it is hard to be surprised that these values would be the unifying, and mainstream version of what ties the alt-right together.

One of the more puzzling parts of the alt right identity is its relationship to religion, specifically, Christianity. Where traditional conservatism is commonly linked with different versions of Christianity, through both values and faith, the alt right is an ethno-cultural movement, meaning there is no consistent religious base across its members (Shaw, 2019). Despite the prominence of atheism on the far right, over time the alt right has appropriated Christian, Germanic and Greco-Roman iconography as symbols to rally around (Shaw, 2019) and have even created this own fake religion known as “esoteric Kekism”, though irony once again muddies the waters of sincerity in the case of practitioners of “Kekism”. This use of religious iconography is curious because of the alt right’s frequent alignment with new atheist ideals of aligning world view with scientific thought and logic (Shaw, 2019), and the self reported atheism among members as described by Richard Spencer (Shaw, 2019). This relationship can be explained through prominent alt right figure Vox Day’s description of the pillars of the alt right as being Christianity, the European nations and Greco-Roman legacy in an

attempt to connect “culture, nationhood and religion to construct the idea of a uniquely white identity” (Shaw, 2019). Ultimately, the alt right identity distances itself from organizing religion while still perpetuating old values and stereotypes associated with conservative Christianity. This separation from Christianity, as with many things in the alt-right, eventually finds its way back to antisemitism: association to religion, particularly Judaism, though Islam is often included as well, is seen as weak, and religion itself seen as a tool of social control (Shaw, 2019). This is also tied to the misappropriation of Nietzschean “slave morality” which is a common argument in alt-right and other right wing circles (Ross, 2017). This tendency towards atheism in the group appeals to a “logical” approach to the world that many trolls and pseudo-intellectuals of the alt right employ, and use Christian values not as an argument in of themselves, but as “series of white martial archetypes around which to mobilize” (Shaw, 2019). As such, Christian iconography and morality suits the alt-right more as a way to distinguish themselves from non-white groups, rather than as a religious movement.

Incremental Indoctrination

On the spectrum of the online right, the alt-right is generally considered to be too moderate by those on the extreme right, but it is also understood by the same group to be an important recruiting ground, often mocked and valued in the same breath. The alt right is associated with these more extreme groups ideologically, yet it has also managed to garner significantly more mainstream attention and clout than other much more outwardly violent groups like Patriot Prayer and Atomwaffen, both of which hold explicit, hyper violent goals (SPLC). By presenting similar ideas, like a white enthostate but with more “moderate solutions”, such as mass deportation and boarder walls rather than genocide, alt-right messaging has made

its way into the mainstream in the form of pundits and YouTube personalities. Personalities associated with the alt right, sometimes referring to themselves as part of the “intellectual dark web” are frequently interviewed by more mainstream sources and popular podcasts. For example, the popular podcast The Joe Rogan Experience has hosted a breadth of pseudo intellectuals like Ben Shapiro, controversial, misogynistic professor Jordan Peterson and the Proud Boys SLPC designated hate group founder Gavin McInnis under the pretense of “open and civil debate”, with little accountability and acknowledgment of the implications of giving these people mainstream attention and air time. This mainstream attention is not only one of the biggest differences between the alt right and other more extreme groups, but also one of its greatest strengths. While the alt-right is often disparagingly called the “alt-light” by more radical members (Lewis, 2017), many people on the right recognise it as an important step to recruiting members to more extreme, violent and conspiracy laden ideologies. In recent years, there has been some effort by large platforms to limit the reach of these conspiracy theories, the most prominent example being Alex Jones, who was banned from YouTube, Spotify, Facebook and the Apple App Store in 2018. Jones was once one of the most cited sources of red pilling on the right (Evans, 2018), with both his YouTube videos and website ranking in the top 3 sources of red-pilling.

While there is no singular, linear story of what indoctrination looks like, the first step for new recruits often begins with hate, disguised as humour. In *Kill All Normies*, author Angela Nagel explores how memes and trolling became so prominent on the right, a political alignment which has historically been more closely related to conservative, puritanical values. She observes that ultimately, while these tactics may seem shocking at first, they really boil down to a new

way of marketing very old ideas. The alt-right, and online right in general, hinges on “its ability to assume the aesthetics of counterculture, transgression and nonconformity” (Nagel, 2017) to create its appeal in the early stages of radicalization. Nagel also compares this modern version of transgression of the right style to the writings of Marquis de Sade, for whom “excessive behaviour without purpose, which also characterizes the sensibility of contemporary meme culture in which enormous human effort is exerted with no obvious personal benefit, was paradigmatically transgressive”. This transgressive quality, this edgy humour, is how the online right has successfully repackaged very old white supremacist and conservative values to make them appealing to a younger audience. The forbidden fruit of offensive humour, combined with the lack of any social or institutional punishment from unmoderated, anonymous chans eventually dulls, and users will seek more offensive, more hateful things to say. The barrage of content is also necessary, as it numbs the user and someone who once didn’t “know what they believe, but clearly have some fascist leanings, [doesn’t] need to be convinced of nazi rhetoric, they just need to be submerged in it...they’ll make their way right on their own” (Danskin, 2019). As discussed above, these tactics often appeal to young men who feel cast aside by more mainstream ideas, but as the alt-right rises in popularity, they feel increasingly vindicated in their beliefs, or rather, the beliefs they frequently find themselves espousing online. At the beginning of indoctrination, many users start out simply because they have found a community at long last. As one red-pilled fascist puts it, “I saw [sic] ppl negging Jews so I joined in as a meme first off. Then all of a sudden it stopped being a meme” (Evans, 2018). The process of indoctrination is only incremental when viewed from the outside, for the radicalized, it often feels sudden, like a great realisation. This is also why the defense of irony or “for the lulz” should never, ever be

taken at face value: “the takeaway is not only that you can’t tell the difference between a bigot who doesn’t know they’re a bigot and a bigot who knows but won’t tell you, but that there is no line dividing the two” (Danskin, 2019).

One of the most important collections of alt-right data, which has been drawn on repeatedly in this paper, is Robert Evan’s compilation of comments and self reported observations of “red pilling” in his article “From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascists Got Red Pilled” from 2018. In the article, the exposed fascists self report many platforms and personalities that red pillled them, and one of the overarching themes is that these videos and personalities were accessible, and often closer to mainstream than conspiracies like outright holocaust denial, with YouTube being the most cited platform of initial red-pilling (Evans, 2018). The cognitive phases of indoctrination that these red pills trigger are outlined by PhD candidate Luke Munn, which he describes as “normalization, acclimation and dehumanization”. As with many ideological shifts people on the alt-right undergo, these stages have no guaranteed order. Normalization is the repackaging of racists, xenophobic and sexist ideals into internet culture, irony and “edgy” humour as key components to this stage (Munn, 2019), and it is frequently, though not always, the first stage. The normalization stage gives way to acclimation, which is the “result of psychological habituation rather than a set of rational affirmations” (Munn, 2019) and this stage is the logical extension of extreme messages being normalized. Part of the reasons new users in extreme communities become acclimated is that when humans are bombarded with such an intense collection of information and claims, they simply cannot keep up and the user becomes desensitized (Munn, 2019). This establishes a new baseline within the user’s mind for what is acceptable and expected within conversations, which results in the final

stage of full dehumanization: the use of violent hate speech, language that deliberately others anyone who doesn't fall into the white, male, cis, heterosexual ideal of white supremacy (Munn, 2019). One of the alt right specific terms users often adopt is the use of "NPC" or "non playable character", a term borrowed for video game characters a player might encounter, because "the NPC perfectly epitomizes the broader populace who have not yet been red pillled—generic clones with no agency who do what they are programmed to do" (Munn, 2019). This mockery exists almost strictly as disdain for anyone who is not seen as a potential recruit but also doesn't fall into the "social justice warrior" realm of targeting for the right. The term NPC is also used as a cultural cue to potential recruits by using language and terms they are familiar with to mock others, making the recruit feel like part of the in group, mocking an obvious, and oblivious, out group.

End Game, or The Jewish Question

As explored above, the alt-right is the mainstream, or perhaps politically acceptable version of the extreme right by today's standards, and yet it is derided by some on the more extreme right, who identify with much more radical beliefs, as the "alt light", a tepid version of what the right truly ought to stand for. The purpose of incremental indoctrination may seem to be to convert trolls into members of the alt right, but ultimately, the pipeline to the extreme right goes much deeper than that. The right, and fascism in general, relies on the fact that the members of the movement somehow feel besieged (Eco, 1995) in order to construct their identity around something as simple as nationalism or race. As a user goes down the rabbit hole, they are exposed to new conspiracies and take new red pills along the way, but it is possible to be red-pillled on one topic and not another. As such, red-pilling is a gradual, non-linear process and

with each new red pill a user accepts, they go deeper into the extreme right, they find “an obsession with plot, possibly an international one” (Eco, 1995). With each new revelation comes the assurance that this is, indeed, the final layer, that everyone behind the recruit is asleep and they are superior because of their understanding of the world. While there is no technical definition for a fully red-pilled person, the general consensus on the online right is the acceptance of the “Jewish Question” or the “JQ” (Evans, 2018), a centuries old conspiracy and suspicion that somehow the Jewish people are in control of the world banks, the media, entertainment and any other perceived source of social ills. There is also plenty of evidence that this extreme view, and inherent antisemitism associated to it, should not be taken lightly. From the Poway synagogue shooting, to the Charleston church massacre to Christchurch, many of these messages have been laced with conspiracy theories and, particularly the former, with memes. It cannot be stressed enough that this is entirely intentional; the function of the alt right is to be “non-ironic Nazism masquerading as ironic Nazism” in the words of The Daily Stormer’s founder Andrew Anglin (Lewis, 2017). As with indoctrination, memes are imperative to distracting and derailing conversations. When a mainstream news outlet, or even a far left group begins to engage with these referential, memetic texts released as manifestos, it becomes incredibly easy to mock such an endeavour. Outwardly, because the right can easily point out the absurdity of considering memes to be fuel for massacres and inwardly, using Poe’s law, the inevitable point at which outsiders will not be able to tell sincerity from irony, to their advantage (Lewis, 2017). Robert Evans, whose work has been a major source for this paper and project, is an American journalist who has been covering the extreme right, 4chan, 8chan and online right culture for Bellingcat for years now, and in his work he grapples with the question of what

should and what should not be taken seriously when engaging with these ironic, meme laden manifestos. His answer: “The Nazi stuff. Take the Nazi stuff seriously” (Evans, 2018). The use of memes, irony and in jokes has never been an accident. Rather it is a tactic employed to derail conversations away from the hateful messages the jokes are built upon. Manifestos are filled with “‘shitposting’ — internet in-jokes meant to distract authorities and the media and make 8chan’s /pol/ board seem less threatening, and less worthy of serious concern” (Evans, 2018). The proof that these memes and jokes need to be taken seriously comes from the notion of “real-life effortposting”, or the forum’s version of egging users on to commit real life acts of violence against people deemed “invaders”, “animals” or other in any way (Evans, 2018). There is also a term called “siege-posting” which refers to the book *Siege*, a collection of racist, xenophobic ramblings from notorious American neo-Nazi James Mason. The book, much like the influential white-nationalist novel *The Turner Diaries*, urges decentralized, autonomous terror attacks on American cities as means of creating division, and eventually the destruction of American society, with the ultimate goal of a new civil war (Evans, 2018). While it can seem frivolous to engage with memes, slang and tasteless humour, it is imperative that it is taken seriously because “jokes on /pol/ have a nasty way of turning into real-life violence” (Evans, 2018).

Interactive Fiction as Intervention Training

With all this research and context in mind, it is worth exploring why this project took shape as a fictional story, when there are so many real world examples of radicalization. The first reason is the ongoing emotional response fiction can have on a reader, long after the main text itself is completed and, when well executed, can even lead to feelings of identification with the

characters in the narrative (Mar, 2011). Written fiction, as opposed to film and television, also demands more cognitive power to process and as such, it has been speculated that literature will draw less of an escapist audience, due to the work involved (Mar, 2011). By having an audience ready to engage themselves in a meaningful way, not only can identification occur, but the development of empathy for characters as well (Mar, 2011), meaning rather than wanting to become like the character, the reader but feels for the character as someone they might know. Fiction is a powerful emotional tool that allows readers to emotionally and cognitively experience things outside their own views and reality, and this does then beg the question: why interactive fiction? Quite simply, because this project is not intended to be a solely emotional experience, but an instructional one as well. Interactive fiction has the benefit of integrating autonomy into the emotional experience of storytelling (Seegert, 2009). While Seegert does distinguish between hypertext fiction, such as Twine and it's more interactive text input fiction like Inform 7, both of these procedural styles of storytelling allow the player to progress through a single narrative on several different paths, meaning the odds of 2 players having the exact same experience are small. With linear storytelling, the "reader oscillates between retrospection and anticipation" (Seegert, 2009), but in interactive fiction, they not only contribute to their own anticipation through choice, but also experience consequences they directly caused due to their own choices. This combination of choice, instruction and autonomy creates what Ian Bogost would call a "persuasive game". These games can exist in many different realms, from traditional education to politics, but are unified through their procedural rhetoric that encourages a reader to come to a certain conclusion, without being overt about its intentions (Bogost, 2007). Persuasive games are not inherently interactive fiction, as games like "Papers, Please" are more

traditional video games in form, but often operate on moral mechanics rather than complicated gameplay mechanics. The main inspiration behind this project was not actually the academic studies and research, but rather personal experiences and exit accounts of former white supremacists. Perhaps the most detailed and high profile exit account is that of Derek Black, son of Stormfront founder Don Black and godson of former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke. His departure from being the public face of “polite” white supremacy is outlined in Eli Saslow’s 2018 book, “Rising Out of Hatred”. At an unnervingly young age Derek began hosting a radio show with his father where they discussed and spread white nationalist messages and as a high school graduate, Derek eventually decided to attend a relatively small, and quite liberal university in Florida. His assumption was that because his beliefs were measured and, in his mind, logical, he would be unaffected by the liberal politics of the school, and probably even change minds with his ideas. Once Derek’s identity was shared around the school, he was scolded, challenged and rejected by most. The exceptions of this rejection were people who had befriended him over his time at the school, prior to being outed as a white supremacist, which included a South American refugee and Jewish friends who regularly hosted him on Fridays for the shabbat. Over time, Derek came to realise that there was no version of white supremacy that made exceptions for his Jewish friends, his friends of different nationalities and the romantic relationship he hoped to pursue with a left leaning woman and he defected, moving states and changing his name. Saslow’s book was the first time he was interviewed after his departure from the movement and became the main source of inspiration for my project. Black’s story shows that even someone who has literally never known anything other than white supremacy can learn to see a diverse world with love and compassion. Black’s story is also, not an outlier. As right

wing violence ramps up and tensions run high, more and more people are coming forward with exit stories, discussing what attracted them in the first place and what finally convinced them to leave. The video by YouTuber Faraday Speaks (Caleb Cain), “My Descent Into the Alt-Right Pipeline”, describes his small town American life that eventually descended into extremist views, racism and hatred. Like stories much more common than Black’s, Caleb’s story is one of life changes and confusion that left him feeling lonely and isolated. One of the most telling moments in his self reflection on his radicalization is that he observes that being challenged and called a racist was far more likely to push him even further into the clutches of the right, rather than make him snap out of it (Cain, 2018). What prompted him to post the video was the 2018 Christchurch mass murder carried out by a white supremacist and upon reading his manifesto, realised the shooter had been posting all the things he had once believed and shared. Ultimately, what leads him to abandon the path he was on was not arguments or accusations, but rather, compassion, meeting people outside his increasingly narrow definition of “good” and being treated like an adult who was capable of experiencing empathy. There are an increasing number of these stories as major figures defect from the movement, allowing a glimpse into how radicalization works, often confirming the research that is publicly mocked by members of the online right. The purpose of this project is to put the player in the situation these stories outline, rather than the abstract experience of reading about something so foreign. The hope is that by being an active participant in watching someone be radicalized, even fictionally, will allow the player to come away with a set of experiences and tools that helps them interact with white supremacy from a more educational perspective and be able to recognize radicalization in their interpersonal relationships.

Methodology

Using a research creation method, I collected research largely focused on the tactics employed by the online extreme right to desensitize new recruits to their vulgar, hateful speech as the first step in having them eventually accept and preach those same values. This weaponization of humour, irony and apathy are well documented by research collectives like Bellingcat and Data & Society, which quickly became the foundation of my research. This research was also contextualized with research into the foundations of white supremacy, particularly American white supremacy like the KKK and George Lincoln Rockwell. Conversely, the texts that informed the choice to create a narrative interactive fiction project was *Rising Out of Hatred* by Eli Saslow. It was the story of Derek Black defecting from a vocally racist upbringing that caused me to reassess my direction and focus on intervention, rather than just understanding the tactics that are employed. Naturally, Black's story is an exceptional one, but as my research continued, the reasons he chose to leave behind his white supremacist roots were not exceptional, but rather the norm for former white supremacists and neo Nazis. This led me to several accounts from both former white supremacists and family members who watched a loved one become radicalized, which became the base of the narrative. The situation outlined in one anonymous article written for the *Washingtonian* served as the foundation for the events that lead to the radicalization of the player's in-game son, and these real life examples informed the consequences of the choices the player makes throughout the story. After having collected several accounts told from both former recruits and their loved ones, I collected research that outlined how alt-right identifying people see themselves: often as victims, being punished by

actions taken to level the playing field for people of other cultures and ethnicities. By combining the research of personal stories with the self described identities of the alt-right, it became easier to understand how the characters would need to develop in their situation over time and throughout interactions with one another. Through creating this narrative, I gained a significantly more emotional understanding of many of the concepts I understood cognitively. Not only did this allow for a better understanding of the characters, their motivations and the set up required to create a situation where indoctrination would be possible, but it also allowed me to adopt a different voice when summarizing work. Not only did viewing the research through a more personal lens change my emotional understanding of it, but it also allowed me to present it in a much more digestible way than many traditional academic summaries would.

Development

Writing

After the research phase, inevitably writing had to begin. As a relative novice to working on Twine, this was a strange and somewhat evolving ordeal. The initial writing took shape as a short story with three different endings, but it quickly became evident this was not a functional way of inputting a narrative into Twine: each time a character makes a choice, a new pathway must emerge meaning that a single short story quickly proves to only be one path. Not only was the original structure no longer applicable, but also made it very apparent how big the project would quickly become as choices were integrated into the character's experiences. It was functionally impossible to write vaguely enough to cover all the research, regardless of order and so each research choice, or lack thereof, became its own path. This created a much larger project

than initially anticipated, totalling roughly 130, 000 words and 32 different paths. Ultimately, time constraints resulted in all 32 paths ending at one of 3 preexisting endings, as means of simplifying the writing and narrative process. This is not an ideal way for the game to be built, and further writing and edits will hopefully result in more diverse and nuanced endings, informed by the research the player interacted with, but being thematically similar. These changes will not be undertaken until significantly more playtesting has been carried out across a more diverse set of players and audiences and it has been determined that they would enrich the game experience.

Play Testing

The first round of comments that came back from play testing were essentially that players wished for more opportunities to engage with the other major characters, namely Adam, the husband and Micha, the son. More interaction with other characters would yield not only a more emotionally charged story, with meaningful relationships and character development, but also lead to more choices and potential clues of which path would be the most fruitful and peaceful for the player. The second round of edits resulted in significantly more paths being developed, as well as a third major ending being created. Another request from beta players was a more thorough integration of research into the game itself, rather than simply hyperlinks that take the player, very literally, out of the narrative. The current solution to this problem takes the form of in-game hyperlinks embedded in the text that take the player to a synopsis of the article/video/podcast so that they can gain the same context as the character without having to devote hours outside of the game. A resource list will be included with the credits for players to

find the articles, videos and other content cited in the game. It is possible this resource list will exist as a hyperlink to a publicly accessible Google Drive folder, allowing the research to be constantly updated and remain relevant. Not only will this allow for current events to be incorporated into the resources, but any previously explored areas can also remain current, such as updated SPLC extremist files.

The first two rounds of playtesting suffered from two things: a) the audience was largely people I know, and people who know what the narrative was trying to accomplish and b) people who are unfamiliar with the power and limitations of Twine. The next round of playtesting will have to be carried out by people who are completely unfamiliar with the intent of the game and the amount of research it is founded upon as means of understanding the true emotional and educational impact of the existing narrative in an attempt to remove player bias. Hopefully, the next wave of players will be familiar with Twine, but not the content, followed by a group who are unfamiliar with both the platform and the content. Second, the next set of playtesting will be sent out with a small survey as means of encouraging reasonable feedback. By outlining what is possible within Twine, the survey will hopefully empower players to express what they feel should be added and removed. With these audience impressions in mind, it will be easier to pinpoint and tackle parts of the narrative that need work, or others that ought to be accentuated for effect.

Conclusion

Implications of publication

The purpose of choosing Twine and the Interactive Fiction Database for publishing was

to make this guide accessible and free to whoever may find it or wish to suggest it to someone they know. While it focuses on a relatively traditional nuclear family structure, the lessons and observations should be transferable to any interpersonal relationship. The narrative serves to instruct the player through cues of social upset, changed behaviour and self isolating from family and friends on an emotional level combined with concerning consumption of reactionary personalities across the right. The desired effect is that upon completion of the narrative, the player will be already familiar with many of the concepts and sources when they are met with a comprehensive resource list for further exploration and research. By making the game free and publicly available, this list of resources will not only be contextualized and collected, but academic papers that exist behind a paywall can be summarized and integrated into the game for the player to learn from, regardless of access to the actual paper. The ultimate goal of the narrative is not simply to make a curated research list available to people who may not know how to begin engaging with far right digital tactics and behaviours, but also to encourage empathy and compassion for those who fall prey to such attempts. White supremacy is alarming, violent and in its digital form, often hard to pin down in concrete terms, but time and time again, personal exit accounts tell us that aggression from people who disagree in interpersonal relationships does nothing but push a person further and further into extremism. It should also be stressed that the lessons in this narrative are not intended to be employed in more large-scale instances, such as politics, random interactions on the internet or protests. There is little to no evidence that engaging with someone behind a keyboard will result in any change but wasted time. By appealing to compassion and encouraging the player to take social, empathetic steps and remind them that whenever they are confronted with extremist ideas, they are still talking to

a person. The human element is not only necessary to the story as a work of fiction, but to helping create productive real life conversations about extremism and its root causes.

Limitations

While Twine is easy to access and intuitive, it is also a relatively niche space, meaning people unfamiliar with the platform are unlikely to stumble upon the game of their own accord. There are many gaming platforms that are more popular, but the game also suffers from the constraints of interactive fiction, in that it must tell a coherent and complete narrative to be playable, but also means the experience will not be completely universal. And, as with any large group of people, the extreme right also has exceptions to its general rule of whiteness, heterosexuality and cisgendered members, this narrative chooses to focus on the most common recruit to the movement: an angry, disillusioned young, white, male. The limitations of an interactive narrative also mean that it can only include so many scenarios and is incapable of predicting the complexity of human interactions in real life. This narrative is not meant to provide a script for interactions with loved ones, but rather give players a background of digital white supremacy and the tools to confront it constructively through encouraging love, community and understanding. Also, compared to simply writing a novel or a short story, Twine is much more complex with its choice system, which is both a strength and a limitation. While it can help to explore choices and character interactions, every choice results in a different branch, making the narrative exponentially larger and more complex. A simple series of choices and results in well over a dozen different paths and endings, which can both be fruitful, but when taken too far, also overwhelming.

Summary

In summary, this game is built upon a thorough understanding of the history of white supremacy, how the alt-right came to mainstream prominence and the tactics members employ to radicalize new members. By combining this context with a focus on interpersonal relationships and intervention, the project sets out to give people who are unfamiliar with the alt-right the tools to recognise radicalization and intervene. By immersing themselves in the game, users will engage with real world research in a cathartic way, helping them build a strong understanding of white supremacy and how to quell its growth in their personal relationships and communities. By including a comprehensive collection of all the research from the game and more, the users will also be encouraged to continue learning and growing past the narrative of the game. Interactive fiction also benefits from an active online community, which will not only help with distribution, but will allow players to connect with others who have played or experienced similar things to reaffirm the importance of relationships built on compassion.

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