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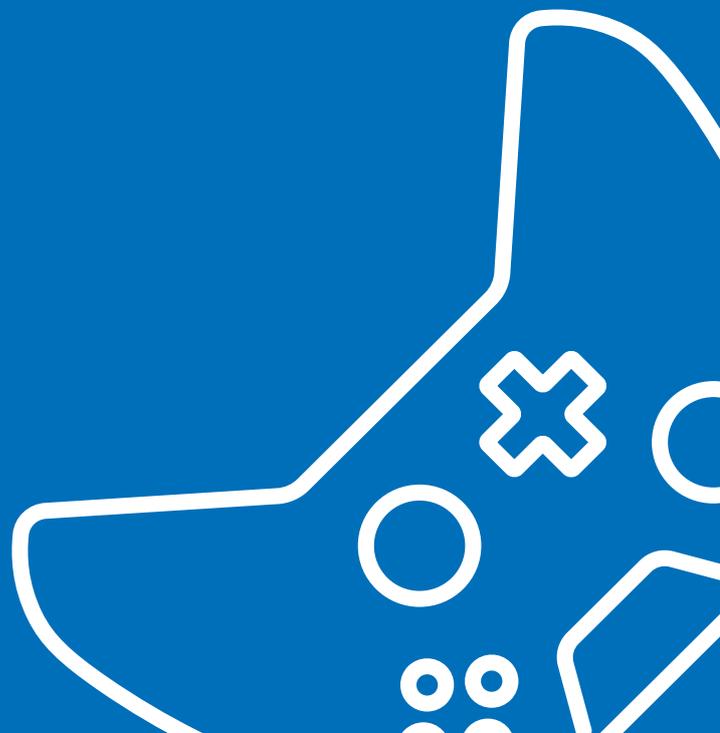
Gaming and Extremism

The Extreme Right on Steam

Pierre Vaux, Aoife Gallagher, Jacob Davey

About the series

This briefing is part of ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series exploring the role online gaming plays in the strategy of far-right extremists in the UK and globally. This is part of a broader programme on the 'Future of Extremism' being delivered by ISD in the second half of 2021, charting the transformational shifts in the extremist threat landscape two decades on from 9/11, and the policy strategies required to counter the next generation of extremist threats. It provides a snapshot overview of the extreme right's use of Steam.

Contents

Executive summary

Steam is a video game supply service, described as the "single largest distribution site for PC games".[1] At the start of February 2021 the platform set a new record as 26.4 million users signed into the platform simultaneously, breaking its previous record of 25.4 million set only the month before.

In addition to its online store and game launcher, the Steam community feature allows users to find friends and join groups and discussion forums, while also offering in-game voice and text chat. These groups serve as a means to enable connectivity around a certain subject or game, forming hubs where users with shared interests can collaborate. Often, Steam groups facilitate interaction between groups of players known as 'clans' who play together in one or more multiplayer games. However, there are a number of groups which have been created to allow networking between people supportive of right-wing extremism.

In this chapter we provide analysis of **45 interconnected Steam community groups associated with the extreme right**. This cohort is a sample of a larger network of potentially extremist groups on the platform, and as such should be seen as a snapshot indicating broader trends on the platform, rather than a comprehensive overview of extreme right activity.

Key Findings

- **The extreme right use Steam as a hub for individual extremists to connect and socialise.** The Steam groups examined by ISD, which often have members in common, span the extreme right ideological spectrum. This network connects supporters of far-right political parties, such as the British National Party (BNP), with groups promoting neo-Nazi organisations, like the Misanthropic Division.

- **Steam seems to have an entrenched and long-lasting extreme right community.** Many of the groups analysed date back to 2016 or even earlier. Steam's permissive attitude to this harmful activity means that these communities have a safe haven to promote and discuss extremist ideology and content.

- **In addition to connecting individuals who support the extreme right, some groups also provide off-ramps to ideological content and other social media platforms, suggesting that Steam is being used to recruit to specific movements.** This includes links to far-right blogs, podcasts and articles, as well as invitations to join Telegram groups and vetted Discord servers.

- **Some groups provide platforms for groups of individuals to engage in trolling and harassment 'raids' against communities deemed to be political enemies.** Users were seen naming target sites and asking fellow group members to join them in raiding or spamming them, with the result that these communities are making Steam a more toxic space for other users.

- **Our analysis suggests that gaming seems to be largely used as a means of community building rather than as a deliberate strategy for radicalisation or recruitment.** Individuals who are already engaged with the extreme right appear to use Steam as a platform to connect with like-minded individuals over a shared hobby. However, we also found examples of political games, such as 'Feminazi 3000' being used as a means of advertising political identity, as well as historical strategy games being used as a means of living out extremist fantasies, such as winning World War II for Germany.

Findings of Analysis

This section discusses several different aspects of the 45 groups studied by ISD:

- **Ideologies and affiliation:** Common ideological elements in the sample and affiliation to specific movements.

- **The role of gaming in extreme right mobilisation on Steam:** The role online gaming plays in these communities.

- **Steam groups as organisational spaces:** The use of these pages as spaces to organise broader extremist activity.

Ideologies and affiliation of Steam groups

The groups examined by ISD reflect a range of far-right ideologies, stretching from ethnonationalists still engaged in democratic processes, to neo-Nazis. At the most extreme end of this spectrum, ISD identified two groups set up either by or to promote neo-Nazi paramilitary organisations, the Nordic Resistance Movement and Misanthropic Division.

Importantly, groups analysed here were identified through their common membership, demonstrating how communities expressing support for non-violent forms of far-right extremism are nevertheless interlinked by communities affiliated with paramilitary activity and highly egregious forms of white supremacist activity.

To better understand the nature of extreme right wing activity on Steam, researchers performed a qualitative analysis of content being shared, as well as the comments and conversations of group members. Where possible, these communities where then assigned a specific sub-categorisation based on the types of groups or movement they self-identified with. Here, it is important to note that the lines between these communities are blurred and individual members within groups used specific terminology associated with other sub-ideologies – for example, we identified individuals using groups set up for white nationalist discussion using terminology associated with neo-Nazism. Accordingly, this exercise should be seen as indicative of the spectrum of ideologies identified through this exercise, rather than a strict classification of all users operating in these groups.

Table 1. Sub-ideologies of communities on Steam

Coding	Description	No of groups
UK groups	These groups are specifically related to the UK and cover a range of right-wing extremist talking points	8
US focussed groups	Groups associated with US forums, figures and movements	8
Neo-Nazi	Groups affiliated with known neo-Nazi organisations, or explicitly aligning themselves with Nazi ideological positions or symbols	6
Terrorist or paramilitary groups	Groups that are known to have engaged in acts of terrorism or been involved in paramilitary activities	2
Fascist	Groups openly praising historical fascist movements or associated with neo-fascist groups	8
White nationalist	Groups promoting a national identity based on race	4
Far-right political parties	Groups affiliated with far-right political parties that have taken part in elections	4
Generic extreme right	Groups not directly affiliated with a particular group, movement or ideology which nevertheless host extreme right content	5

Outlined below is an overview of some of the key sub-communities identified in ISD's analysis, as well as several key topics of conversation and trends.

Terrorist or paramilitary groups

Two of the groups identified are affiliated with groups associated with neo-Nazi terrorism and paramilitary activity – the Nordic Resistance Movement and Misanthropic Division.

The first is a Finnish-language group which was set up to promote the **Nordic Resistance Movement** (NRM). NRM are the only group in the sample examined by ISD known to have engaged in terrorist attacks. Swedish members of the group conducted a series of bombings in Gothenburg[2] in 2016 and 2017, and several Finnish members are under investigation in relation to both violent attacks[3] and murder[4].

The NRM Steam group does not host content related to gaming, and instead seems to act as a hub for the movement. The group's overview section contains a link to the official NRM website, and users are encouraged to find like-minded people to join the group. The group is relatively small, with 87 members, but at the time of writing, it appeared to be active and in use. Interestingly, although the group is in Finnish language, it has members in common with the English language channels identified in this analysis. This suggests that Steam may help facilitate international exchange between right-wing extremists.

The second group found by researchers is the Misanthropic Division (MD), which shares its name with a neo-Nazi organisation[5] originating in Russia and now operating in a number of countries, including the UK. MD has a close association with the Ukrainian neo-Nazi Azov movement, and also has been noted for its ties to National Action.[6]

There is very little public content on the channel, and the only comments do not pertain to any specific ideology. However, a number of users of the group use extreme right terminology in their names. Due to the limited publically available content on this group, it is difficult to determine whether it has any formal affiliation with Misanthropic Division, but based on the visible member of the group, it seems likely that it acts as a community hub connecting individuals who support neo-Nazism.

Neo-Nazism

As well as identifying two communities affiliated with neo-Nazi paramilitary organisations, neo-Nazi ideologies were evident across a wide swathe of groups without direct affiliation with extremist organisations. In these spaces, ISD observed widespread racism, antisemitism, and praise for the historical Nazi regime, as well as the use of Nazi and neo-Nazi symbols and terminology, such as "1488" — referring to both David Lane's "14 words" and an alphanumeric code for "Heil Hitler".

Among these groups, ISD saw one sharing links to articles from the influential neo-Nazi website **The Daily Stormer**, labelled as "14/88 Weekly news updates", while another used neo-Nazi slogans to promote "Aryan beauty".

Figure 1: Screenshot from Steam group

Figure 2: Screenshot from Steam group

Political movements

Several of the extreme right groups viewed on Steam, which had common membership with overtly neo-Nazi groups, were either run by or set up in the name of established political organisations. These included the British National Party, and Britain First. These political groups appear to use Steam in much the same way as any other social platform online, as just another venue to attract attention, rather than employing any gamer-specific strategies.

Historical Fascism

Another category of groups was concerned with historical fascism and Nazism. One group linked to a blog containing historical revisionist videos portraying Adolf Hitler as a heroic figure. Additionally, ISD examined groups dedicated to Mussolini's fascists and Oswald Mosley. Some of these historicist fascist pages use language echoing Italian futurism, such as Filippo Marinetti's lines from the *Futurist Manifesto* about the "beauty" of speed, violence and death, while others were aligned with the traditionalist philosophy of Julius Evola.

Anti-Muslim hatred

Although not a distinctive self-identified community coded by ISD analysts, anti-Muslim hatred was apparent across many of the groups identified, particularly those associated with far-right political parties and ethnonationalism.
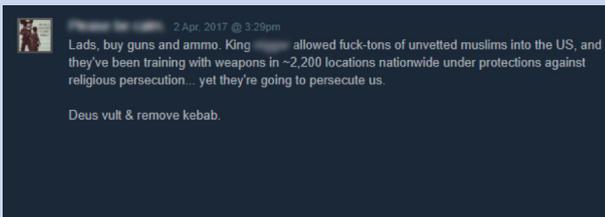

Figure 3: Screenshot from a Steam group ostensibly dedicated to a mainstream game but popular with far-right extremists.

The role of gaming in extreme right mobilisation on Steam

Beyond understanding the scale and nature of extreme right wing communities operating on Steam, we were specifically interested in the strategic and social function that gaming appears to fill within these communities. Based on analysis of these channels, it appears that extreme right wing communities on Steam use gaming in several different ways, either to promote political affiliation, as a means of roleplaying extremist fantasies, or as a means of building communities.

Games as a means of advertising political affiliation

Administrators of Steam groups can indicate that certain games are "associated" with a group. This allowed us to record which games were most popular with certain types of extreme right Steam communities, and understand how such groups function.

Two of the groups examined played what could be deemed as politicised games. While not extremist in comparison to well-known neo-Nazi titles, these did include explicitly misogynist games, and an array of games promoting Donald Trump. These groups were both actively engaged in online trolling — one of them a large "Groyper" group associated with the movement started by the American white nationalist Nick Fuentes. It is possible that these games are not played by members of the group and that their prominent placement on the group's page is a form of

defiance against perceived liberal or feminist enemies, as well as a means to provoke an angry response from such visitors.

However, this use of gaming as an outwards projection of extreme-right identity was limited, with most "associated" games being generic, widely played titles. The most frequently associated game in ISD's sample was the popular, first-person shooter *Counter-Strike: Global Operations* (CS:GO). CS:GO, published by Steam's parent company, Valve, has one of the largest user bases of any multiplayer game, with over a million players recorded by Steam in March 2021.[7] The frequent appearance of this game on extreme right Steam groups is therefore more likely a reflection of it being an extremely popular game, rather than a reflection of any ideological affinity. This suggests that although the Steam groups studied bring together supporters of right wing extremism, their primary focus on the platform remains the same as non-extremist users — to build community around the shared hobby of gaming.

Gaming as a means of roleplaying and strengthening ideology

The other genre of games that appear to be popular on many of the extreme right groups observed by ISD was historical strategy. While these games do not contain any extremist content, they do possess an appeal to the broader extreme right worldview, by allowing users to play out fantasies of destroying Muslim factions during the Crusades, or winning World War II for the Nazis. These included the popular *Total War* series published by Sega, and many of the strategy games released by Paradox Interactive, such as *Hearts of Iron IV, Europa Universalis,* and *Crusader Kings*. Some of these games also allowed for alternate history scenarios, catered to by moderators, some of them designed[8] by white supremacists.

The largest of all the Steam groups examined by ISD was in fact dedicated to the *Crusader Kings* series. The extreme right membership of this group was made clear by responses to a discussion thread, asking other users whether they were in the group because of their feelings towards Muslims, or whether it was just an interest in the Crusades. Out of the 18 replies to this question from users, four admit to racism against Muslims as a reason for joining the group.

Although this does not point to a systemic trend across the channels analysed, it nevertheless highlights how – for at least some users of Steam – gaming fills the function of allowing them to role-play broader extremist fantasies.

Games as a means of community building
The most common way in which these groups appear to use gaming is more broadly in line with the way non-extremists use it – to fill a social function and allow for the building of communities. Across most channels present, the games linked to were not ideologically relevant to right-wing extremism or presented as such. Instead, groups linked to popular titles enjoyed by millions of people globally. This would suggest that the primary function of these channels is to ensure that individuals who support the extreme right are able to connect and game with other extremists.

Beyond the broader use of gaming as a means of community building, we also identified two servers where this was incorporated into a broader recruitment strategy. One Steam group associated with a well-known alt-right podcast is described as a place for "fascists to play vidya" (video games), with a note that an admin "is still looking for guys to be in his racist shitposting CSGO clan".

There are a wide range of games mentioned in discussions on the group's page. These include users organising multiplayer sessions of games including both first-person shooters like *Arma 3, Squad* and *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, and strategy games like *Europa Universalis IV* and *Civilization V*. Some of the discussions describe racist approaches to gameplay, such as organising a "right-wing death squad" on *DayZ*, or killing black characters in *Grand Theft Auto*.

Another gaming group, described as a community for nationalist gamers, is more focused in its strategic community building. This group demanded that users prove their "membership" of their fascist community. The page links to a now-defunct Discord server, which was archived by an anti-fascist organisation and contained a chatroom dedicated to gaming.

The ideological bent of the community is clear. One topic called 'Mandatory Watching Material' links to a now-deleted YouTube video apparently containing pro-Nazi content. A comment in the thread states: "After watching this video, it's difficult to understand why people still believe that the National Socialist ideology is immoral. Hitler wanted every German to be happy and healthy."

The games associated with this group are almost all historical strategy titles, particularly Paradox titles, with a number of posts in both the Steam forum and the Discord server about organising multiplayer matches.

While both groups are examples of existing extreme right entities creating a Steam presence in order to facilitate gaming, the functionality of these groups differed. The first functions as an open space for meeting, with users funnelled into related media outlets, whereas the latter controls access to their Steam group to ensure it is only for "verified" members.

Nonetheless, many of the comments or discussion posts on second group were users asking how to join the organisation, so the offer of gaming with likeminded individuals was clearly appealing to extreme right believers who came across the page, and it therefore proved effective as a recruitment tool.

Steam groups as organisational spaces
ISD found a number of different ways in which these groups were being used to organise various types of activity, from raiding, recruitment and raising donations, to directing users to other extremist spaces online.

Raiding
One function of these Steam groups is the organisation of 'raids' – coordinated trolling activity against their political opponents. An example of this can be seen in a white power music group sharing a link to an Israeli Steam group, encouraging other members to "help me raid this juden [German word for Jew] group". The comments section of said target group show that neo-Nazi and antisemitic comments were consistently posted in the group just two minutes after the instruction had been posted in the extremist group, highlighting the swiftness with which racially motivated harassment can be directed online.

In another group, users are encouraged to post negative reviews on games in the Steam store which they feel "silence criticism, manipulate scores, maltreat employees and push SJW [social justice warrior] agendas."

Such activity is not unique to communities on Steam, and is a long standing tactic employed by extreme right internet trolls as a means of harassing individuals and communities whom they consider to be political opponents,[9] as well as by supporters of Islamic State on Facebook.[10] What this does demonstrate, however, is how users of extreme right groups on Steam fit into broader patterns of extremist mobilisation associated with forum culture.

Off-ramping users to other platforms
A number of groups were observed encouraging members to join conversations on outside platforms. These include links to Telegram channels connected to white supremacist marches, and media outlets, forums and Discord servers run by neo-Nazis.

ISD also noted signs of the groups being used for recruitment. For example, a comment from a member of one group, posted in May 2018, asks for people who can "make high quality videos or others who live in Europe... for a new organization."

This off-ramping activity demonstrates how rather than sitting in isolation, Steam fits into the wider extreme right wing online ecosystem, with Steam groups acting as hubs for communities and organizations which span multiple platforms. Accordingly, although the platform appears to fill a specific roll in the building and strengthening of communities with similar hobbies and interests, it is suggested that analysis seeking to determine the risk of these communities should focus on their activity across platforms.
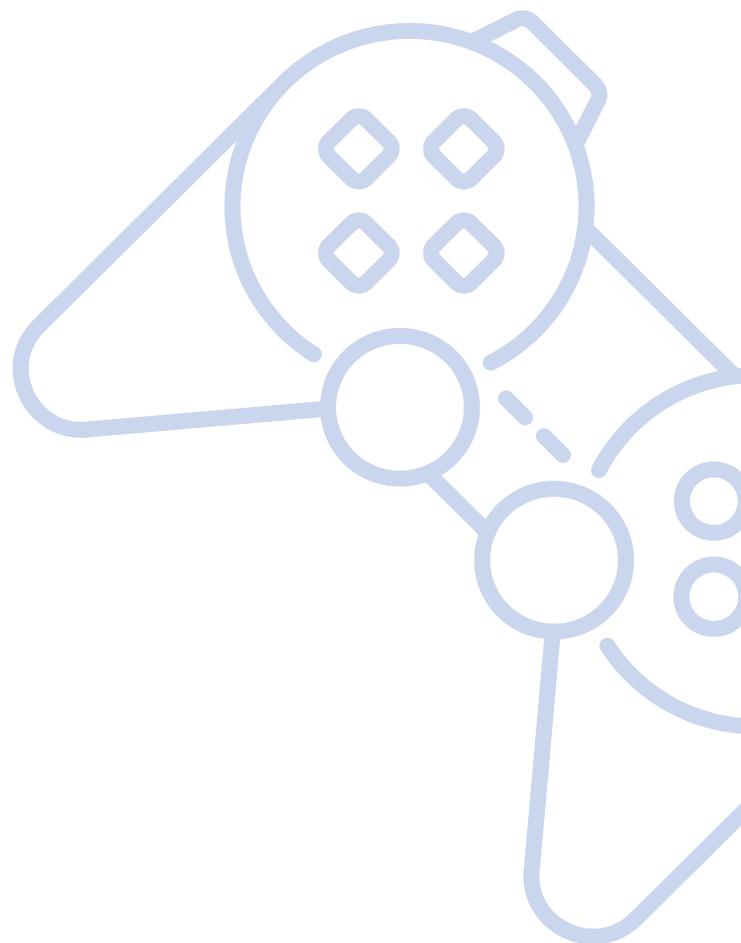
Conclusion

The research conducted for this project suggests that Steam groups have been used by the extreme right for a number of years. The variety of groups found – from role playing groups dedicated to re-enacting moments from history, to groups dedicated to specific neo-Nazi movements – show that the platform is being used by a wide range of such movements that could provide a variety of pathways towards radicalisation for gamers. The fact that a number of these groups contain links directly to websites associated with extremist movements also highlights how gamers can be exposed to more specific ideological content through using Steam.

Lists of associated games in certain groups provide some insight into the use of gaming within these communities. It is noteworthy that many of these games are popular titles, such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, with a particular tendency towards historical strategy games, especially those from Paradox such as Hearts of Iron and Crusader Kings. Only a small number of the groups tied themselves to overtly politicised games, such as the Feminazi series or those promoting Donald Trump. While the appearance of such extreme right groups playing popular games does raise the suggestion of entryism for the purpose of radicalisation or recruitment, there is no available evidence to suggest that such practices are taking place. Given their settings, a more likely explanation to this is that these titles appeal to radical individuals' pre-existing interest in gaming.
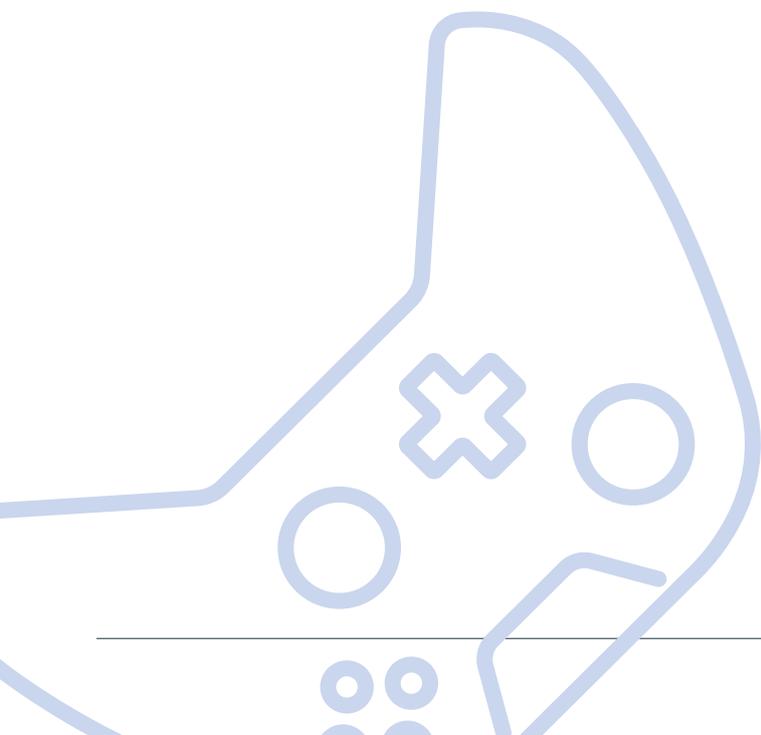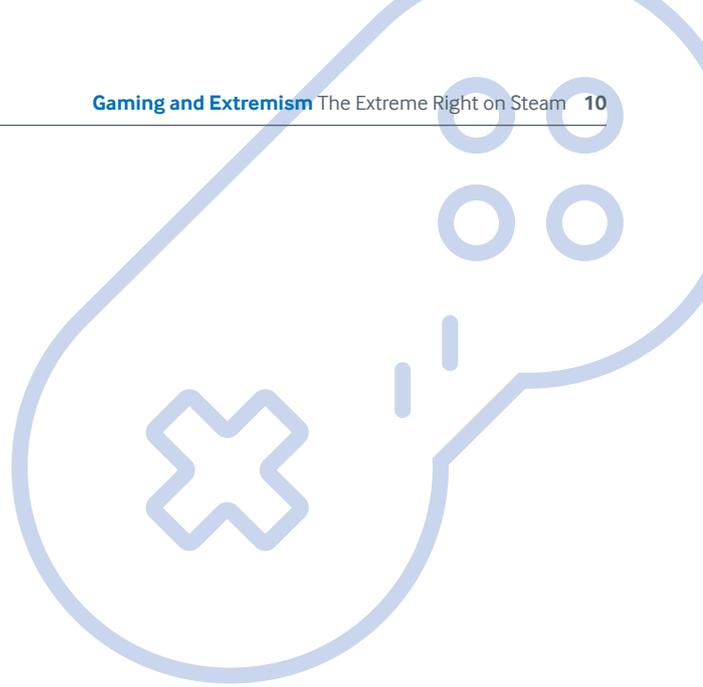
Methodology

ISD employed a four-stage methodology to determine which Steam groups were selected for ethnographic analysis.

Firstly, in order to identify Steam groups associated with extreme right groups or ideologies, ISD conducted a keyword search using a curated list of keywords associated with extreme right wing ideology and organisations. Using these keywords, ISD identified an initial list of 36 Steam groups.

Steam's architecture means that the members of any group are publicly visible, and if a user has made their profile public, all the groups that they are a member of are also visible. Therefore, the second stage of identification consisted of ISD identifying the URLs of the profile pages of those users belonging to the original 36 groups. This allowed us to see which groups in the initial list had common members.

Thirdly, ISD examined all of the groups each of those users was a member of, providing a wider picture of these extreme right group members' activity in Steam groups, their interconnectedness, and relative significance within such communities. Overall, ISD collected the URLs of 8,720 users and 35,151 groups.

Finally, ISD ranked the groups by the number of users they had in common with the original list of seed groups. The ranked groups were then assessed and coded for relevance to extreme right mobilisation, based on the content available.

ISD assessed the top 200 of these ranked groups for content relevant to far-right extremism, finding that 38 of the 200 groups (19%) expressed support for extreme right activity, whilst the remainder were associated with non-extremist gaming activity.

In addition, to avoid overlooking groups relevant to the UK that might have smaller memberships, ISD produced a smaller subset of data by performing a similar recursive search on group membership of users who had joined groups identified as focussed on the UK. ISD evaluated the top 300 of these groups by number of users common with the known UK-focussed groups, and found an additional 7 groups relevant to far-right extremism that had not been picked up in the first round of coding.

Through this process we were left with a cohort of 45 groups which hosted extreme right communities. The largest of these groups had 4,403 members, the smallest had 7 members, and the average number of members across these groups was 329.

We then engaged in qualitative analysis of these groups, reading through any publically available content, exploring outbound links, and recording the number of users listed as members.
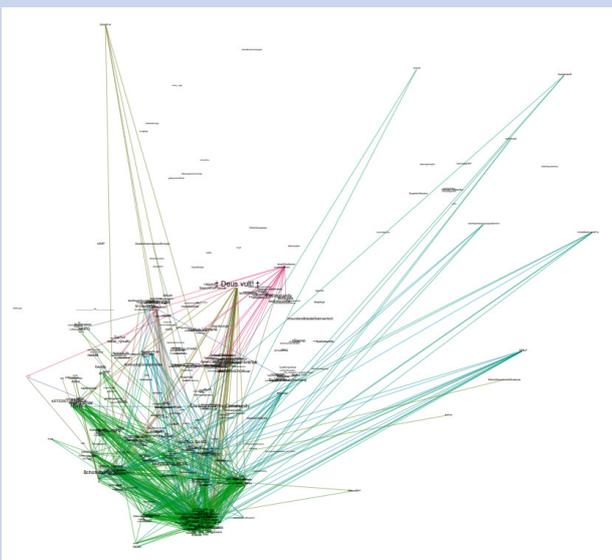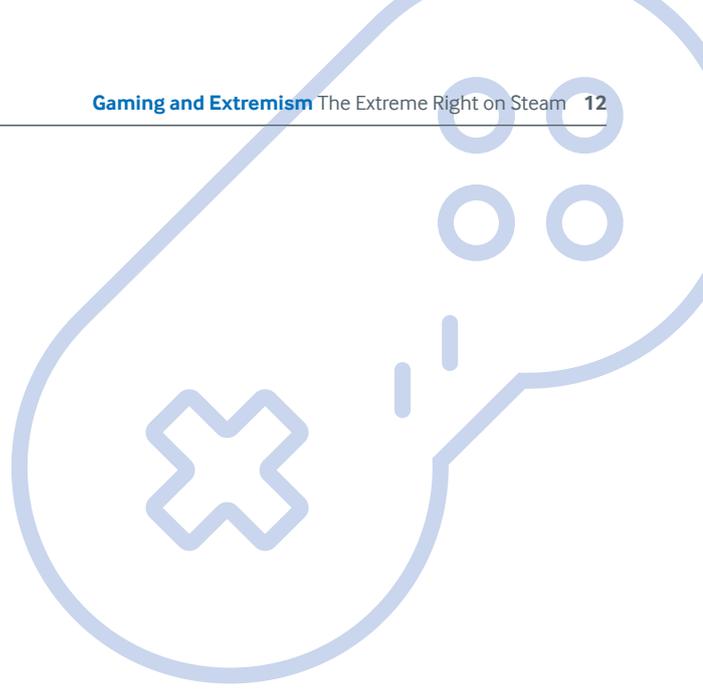

Figure 5: This visualisation displays the network of users and groups collected by ISD, filtered to display only those entities with at least 20 connections by membership

Limitations

Steam groups serve as a means to enable multiplayer collaboration around a certain subject or game, therefore the majority of communication takes place within in-group voice chats, which were not monitored in this research. Although groups contain sections for announcements, discussions, and comments, many groups have little content in these sections. The content visible in many groups is often dated, although many of these groups appear to still be active according to the number of members using the in-game and in-voice features at the time of writing. This research is therefore based on the limited content visible within these group, including group name, avatar, announcements, discussions and comments.

Furthermore, while ISD only coded the top 200 groups ranked by the number of common users with the initial seed list, there were many thousands more groups in the dataset that could contain relevant material. Nor are these 200 groups ranked by overall size. A different ranking system, using the total number of users in each group could produce a very different 200 for analysis.

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