GAMING DEMOCRACY

HOW SILICON VALLEY LEVELED UP THE FAR RIGHT

ADRIENNE L. MASSANARI

"MASSANARI SHOWS HOW THE LOGICS OF SILICON VALLEY HAVE DAMAGED DEMOCRACY—AND WHAT WE CAN DO TO FIGHT BACK."
—WHITNEY PHILLIPS

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PREFACE

The 2016 US presidential election was many things—a spectacle, a debacle, and arguably, a referendum on the viability of American democracy in the twenty-first century. Around that time, a 2013 comic by KC Green experienced new life as a meme. Circulating mostly as an abbreviated two-panel version of the original six-panel *Gunshow* comic, "On Fire" features a cartoon dog wearing a jaunty hat, sitting at a table adorned only with a coffee mug, and surrounded by flames. In the two-panel (and arguably more popular) version, the dog smiles and notes, "This is fine," and in the longer six-panel comic, he drinks his coffee and continues, "I am okay with the events that are unfolding currently," later stating, "That's okay, things are going to be okay," as the fire intensifies, engulfing the room in which he is sitting. The last frame shows the dog's face melting with the smile plastered on his face.

While meant as a commentary on Green's own struggles with mental health and general twenty-something malaise, the comic's resonance and longevity suggest something beyond his original intent.[1] At one point, an animated version of the entire six-panel comic was used as an interstitial station-identification "bump" on Adult Swim, and in July 2016, the official Republican Party Twitter account used the two-panel version as a snarky commentary on the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, amending it with #EnoughClinton (without obtaining permission

0.1   Panels from KC Green's "On Fire" comic strip. *Gunshow*, 2013, gunshowcomic .com. It circulated on 4chan and Reddit and later became a meme during the 2016 US presidential election cycle. "©KC Green, kcgreendotcom.com.

from Green).[2] Its popularity long after the 2016 election continues to imply that we might all be that dog sitting at the table attempting to have coffee in the midst of a conflagration.[3] Slowly melting, ignoring the chaos around us, and soothing ourselves with the mantra that "things are okay" despite ample evidence to the contrary, we find ourselves in a peculiar moment where everything is on fire and all we do remain calm and carry on (or "Hang in there, baby!" as the old poster of a cat hanging from a branch tells us).[4] And just maybe, we will have enough wherewithal to put out one or two small fires while there's still time.[5]

As we stand on the precipice of yet-another US presidential election cycle, I am struck by both how much and how little has changed since 2016. This book is an attempt to understand how the fires started and how we might extinguish them. It focuses on an important and often overlooked source of tinder—the ways that the culture of Silicon Valley, platform politics, and online communities intersect. In gaming circles, when characters gain new powers and abilities, they are said to have "leveled up." My use of this phrase in the book's title is a nod to the ways that Silicon Valley has helped to mainstream far-right politics in the US and globally.

In particular, I argue that the design of sites like Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter/X has implicitly amplified and mainstreamed what pundits have

problematically called the *alt-right* (an abbreviation for *alternative right*),[6] a loose coalition of misogynists, White nationalists and identitarians, far-right ideologues, anti-Semites, and Islamophobes. While the ideologies that these groups espouse are not new, they have effectively embraced social media as a means of recruitment and as a tool to harass and terrorize opponents. Additionally, these often leaderless and mostly anonymous communities have demonstrated an uncanny ability to harness the organizing potential of spaces like 4chan, Reddit, and other social media to disseminate information in a way that can easily be dismissed as a form of online play. And increasingly, their odious politics have become integrated into mainstream conservative thought (by the GOP in the US and by other right-wing political groups internationally). For those unaware of these complexities between platforms, design, and play, the ascendance of the alt-right seemed to happen almost overnight. But for those who have been studying online culture since the internet's large-scale adoption in the 1990s, this is but the most recent incarnation of a problematic and relatively untold story.

This is not a book about games or democracy, despite having both subjects in the title. It lives somewhere at the intersection of both topics, but I'm not a political science scholar. And it's not about games per se. I do play games, and I occasionally write about them, but I'm using games as more of a metaphor here. My interest is in how internet spaces structure our participation through their design and affordances (more on this later) and how the unstated values that engineers, designers, and, most important, marketeers[7] hold are crafted into these platforms. And given that games structure our everyday lives—from racking up likes on Instagram to competing against others on our Peloton bikes to tracking our fitness goals on our Apple Watches—understanding how the underlying logic of gaming has permeated social media and politics is critical. This is especially true now, when so many of the individuals we see becoming radicalized by far-right political ideology are fluent in the logic of video games and gaming culture and inhabit game-friendly platforms like Discord, 4chan, Reddit, and Twitch.

It would be easy to misread my work and suggest that I think games and gaming culture are bad (I don't) or that I blame only Silicon Valley for the rise of the far right in the US and globally (I don't). Instead, I am

suggesting that the connection between the two remains underexplored. Democracy is fragile, and it's increasingly clear that authoritarianism, nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and trans- and homophobia are no longer contained in the shadows but are operating out in the open with impunity. Without critically examining how platforms structure conversations and how they've been "gamed" by far-right operatives, how can we possibly address the obvious fires that are burning?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've been writing, thinking, and teaching about the tech space for over twenty years. I also worked in several startups before, during, and after my time in grad school. This book is born from those experiences, and in many ways represents a culmination of work I've been doing around platforms, design, games, and feminist activism for most of my academic career. But more importantly, it's the product of endless conversations with friends (some human, some animal), family, colleagues, students, and scholars (some of whom I don't know personally but admire greatly)—all of which has shaped every inch of this book. Any mistakes are my own; but any smart things I have to say here are 100 percent the result of the amazing folks around me.

Part of this book was written during the spring of 2020 when I was on research leave from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The timing turned out to be super weird because of the pandemic, but it did provide me with some space from teaching to spend time reading important things and thinking hard thoughts. I'm forever grateful to the Department of Communication at UIC for allowing me that opportunity.

This book would not be what it is without the inimitable Gita Manaktala and her amazing colleagues at the MIT Press who have championed it every step of the way. Suraiya Jetha and Deborah Cantor-Adams ushered this book through the editorial process and have my deepest gratitude.

I'm especially indebted to Rob Gehl and several anonymous reviewers who provided insightful feedback on early drafts of this work (and who probably have no idea how much their thoughts improved this project).

My colleagues at both American University (2021 through the present) and the University of Illinois at Chicago (2012 to 2021) have been inspiring in so many ways and continue to challenge me to grow intellectually and personally. Thanks are due to my GAs at American University (Kirubel Ayetenfisu, Thomas Struett, and Fritz Kessler) for their research assistance. Thanks also to JA for his keen editorial eye and amusing anecdotes in the marginalia of an early draft of this book.

The best thing about being an academic is the possibility of having friends all over the world; for me, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has made that possible. I've considered AoIR my intellectual home since I was a grad student, and many of the seeds of this book were planted during presentations or while talking with colleagues at AoIR conferences.

I am forever grateful to my fellow travelers in academia and dear friends Shira, Sharon, and Meghan, who have kept me grounded and helped me laugh despite the dumpster fire of it all. To other friends near and far: thanks as always for the support and love. To my fellow board members with the Clinic Vest Project (Benita, Betsy, Jay, Andrea, Lindsay, and Elaina): you are my heroes, and I miss your lovely faces!

My therapist, Stacia, deserves a huge round of applause for reminding me that I have an actual body, and that it's telling me things and I should probably listen to it, and for generally being a stalwart and thoughtful companion through several relationships, job changes, and this book. Likewise, my parents continue to be my biggest cheerleaders, offer endless laughs, and (occasionally) wise counsel. And my cats, Mabell and Mr. Pants (RIP), have provided hours of cuddling, amusement, and editorial assistance (by sitting on my laptop) and are continual reminders that our animal companions really are better than people.

And finally, to my fellow Sidewalk Adventurers in Chicago (Washington FPA) and DC (NOMA PP), and everywhere else who show up early on Saturday mornings to stand up for reproductive rights—you continue to amaze and inspire me. Thank you for all that you do.

1

THE GAME ACCORDING TO SILICON VALLEY

Let's play a game. It's a game designed by Silicon Valley, and we've been playing it for about twenty years. It takes place mostly online.

In this game, we're told we're all equal. We will no longer have to worry about the differences that matter in the "real world," like gender and race, because they won't matter in this game. We are assured by the game's designers that they have our best interests at heart because they are self-made entrepreneurial geeks who dropped out of Harvard so they could move to Palo Alto and start a company in a garage. We are reminded repeatedly that any attempts to bring in outside referees (like the government) to ensure this game is being played fairly will mean play will no longer be fun or free or pay the designers of this game for their hard work and genius. It's better to let the game designers be in control.

The game starts, and play begins. At first, things seem okay. Fun even. Discussion boards, personal webpages, and Usenet groups abound. Memes flourish. "Numa Numa" guy begins Numa Numa–ing.[1] People connect to others around their niche interests on discussion boards, mailing lists, and blogs. There is also harassment and flaming. But that kind of behavior is mostly contained to specific communities and often dies out quickly because there's no easy way to bridge the gap between sites like GeoCities and LiveJournal. Never mind that the *lingua franca* for this game is assumed to be English (even though players live all over the

world) or that not everyone has the technology to play the game.[2] And please ignore that the game itself is built on a closed system owned by a few large companies and not the public.[3] "Just play," they say.

The game designers decide to make things more interesting. They introduce social media. Web 2.0 they call it. Suddenly, all of us are invited to be publishers—to create content. We'll be provided with the platforms to publish our deepest thoughts and opinions—all for free! We will finally have the public square we've been longing for since the Greek agora, and the "marketplace of ideas" will ensure that only the best content will rise to the top. We're told that our social media feeds are designed to reflect our deepest (consumerist) desires but will also enshrine liberal democracy worldwide through political activism.

Play continues. We earn likes and shares by posting. We see ads catering to our interests. In exchange, we are told we can connect to our social circles and make friends in far-flung places, keep up with our hobbies, find a job, participate in political movements, and read the news of the day. But things start shifting a bit. We start getting nervous because it seems like play is no longer optional but compulsory. If we want to exist in the new millennium, we have to create and curate and participate on all of these different platforms. If we're lucky, we're told, and do a good job cultivating an audience, we are rewarded with a bit of money and fame. We start noticing that a lot of these influencers look the same, but we are reassured by the game's designers that this is just a coincidence. Still, not many of us really understand how these platforms work, and we seem to be providing a lot of personal information to the designers of this game, but we're reassured repeatedly that it's all safe and in our best interests. The game is certainly not addictive or harmful in any way. Our data is safe and secure, locked up in the impenetrable fortress of the designers' server farm. No one else can see it. Now share this BuzzFeed article, "10 Pictures of Taylor Swift's Cats Looking Like Her Exes," before you log off.

Suddenly, some things happen that seem outside of the designers' control. Or that's what they tell us. While we've been relying for some time on these social media platforms for everything from receiving relationship advice to understanding world events, we've been leaving behind digital traces that the game designers have decided to bundle up and sell to advertisers. Behind the scenes, our likes and dislikes and demographic

information and political views have also been shaping the material we see online. We're no longer certain if our feeds are the same as those of our neighbors, and that's a problem because we're told repeatedly by the designers that our feeds represent our hopes, our dreams, and our worldviews. We are becoming increasingly suspicious of the designers' intentions. They don't even seem to know what's happening. The algorithms they've created to make gameplay more fun (they say) are just too hard for players like us to understand. The designers seem to be making lots of money and acting a lot like traditional media outlets but reassure us again that this is just coincidental and that placing any rules restricting their freedom will make the game less fun for everyone.

Around this time, a few players figure out that misinformation, outrage, clickbait, and hatred are rewarded more often in this game than earnest engagement is. These players have always existed, but now there are ways for them to amplify their harassment campaigns across platforms, thanks to algorithms the designers have created to ensure our continued attention and deliver more of the content we want to see.[4] The players start to exploit this reality by gaming the game. We start calling them *trolls*, even though that's too cutesy a term for what many of them are doing. Some of us feel more threatened by these players than others. It's almost as if a lot of what we've been told about all players being equal in this game isn't actually true. When the trolls are told that what they're doing isn't fair play, they say that they're just joking, and anyway, *it's just a game*. The designers of the game shake their heads and say there's nothing they can do. These are just rogue players or bad actors, as they insist on calling them.

Another subset of players (who happen to have a far larger access to capital and resources than most) take note of what's happening. They start viewing the actions of these trolls as potentially useful but insufficient in helping them gain power as the tactics are too diffuse and don't have a political message that can be exploited. So these players create one. They provide the trolls with more messaging behind their (seemingly) nihilistic memes.[5] And they enlist other players, in the form of the mainstream media, to amplify the trolls' messages and mobilize the trolls under names—the alt-right and the intellectual dark web—that belie their intentions.[6] These players say that they're just being "objective" and reporting "both sides" of the growing divide that we're told exists.

A bunch of in-game events happen in quick succession. First, a heated US presidential election pits a well-known and qualified woman with years of experience against a former reality television authoritarian huckster with a penchant for racism and misogyny. Thanks to the hard work of the political operatives who have been paying attention to the trolls' tactics, the wholly unqualified White nationalist wins—except he doesn't, not really. But because of some screwy game mechanics[7] held over from another era when a lot of us weren't considered people, he is elected. Behind the scenes, we learn that part of his win has been enabled by the game designers themselves. They express regret, but, y'know, it was beyond their control.

We grow nervous. Instead of this being the cooperative game we thought it was, it suddenly seems like a winner-takes-all affair. Then a pandemic closes down everything, and we become more reliant than ever before on the game because we can't leave our houses. Antivaccine misinformation reigns. A civil rights movement roils the game and highlights that instead of starting on an equal playing field, as the designers insisted was the case, many of the players face institutional and structural limitations to their play.[8] But other players ignore this reality and insist that the civil rights movement is actually asking for an unfair advantage. The designers are forced to allow the bad behavior to continue, they say, because the "marketplace of ideas" will take care of things.

The game seems to be spiraling out of control. And yet most of the designers still insist they have nothing to do with its outcome. A few start splintering off, though, often publishing mea culpas in op-eds or appearing in documentaries that are streamed on services dependent on the same technologies they are decrying.[9] They admit that the technologies they've created are doing harm—especially for younger players—but remain as relatively befuddled as the rest of us are about how we can stop playing. Another US presidential election occurs, and this time, the White nationalist is defeated. But the tentacles of the political operation that vaulted him into power are still there and have fully infiltrated every institution (even those outside this game). A group of players—who act an awful lot like nonplayer characters (NPCs)[10] but insist that they're actually players—decide to attack the US Capitol. Chaos ensues, democracy falters, and we, the people, lose. The designers shrug their shoulders

and say the players ruined the game—not that it was rigged or that the designers had any role in how things played out.

Sound familiar?

The morning of the US Capitol insurrection, January 6, 2021, I was aimlessly doomscrolling, writing (mostly not writing) this book, and watching the news on CNN that was coming out of Washington, DC, as the November 2020 election results for Joe Biden's presidency were being certified in the House of Representatives. As news broke of the insurrection and perhaps as an unconscious nod to the game scenario told above, I posted to Facebook: "This game of Civ is getting a little too intense, y'all."[11] Watching supporters of Donald Trump storm the houses of Congress while doing their best (and failing miserably) to cosplay as "patriots" was not something I had on my bingo card for 2021, and yet here we were. I was shocked—not because the events of January 6 were unexpected but because they were so damned predictable. The violence that day had been clearly telegraphed for months, and yet no one seemed to be doing anything to stop it.

In the weeks that followed January 6, pundits and journalists spent a lot of time offering unhelpful variations of "OMG, how could this happen?!?" as if no one could have seen the insurrection coming. However, a large contingent of individuals who had been studying members of the alt-right and their chatter on social media and elsewhere had been raising the alarm that events like those of January 6 were all but inevitable. Many of those who had been warning us for years—about the danger of Trumpism, the emboldened far right in the US (and creeping fascism worldwide), and the real-life violence that online harassment might portend—had seen the signs in #Gamergate, an earlier digital harassment movement. Something was happening that connected these angry gamers and transformed them into a larger political force that found its figurehead in Donald Trump. The assemblage of platforms, politics, and cultures of social media combined forces into some awful hydra when it met the 2020 US Presidential election. And then it further exploded during the 2021 insurrection. It's that story that this book tells.
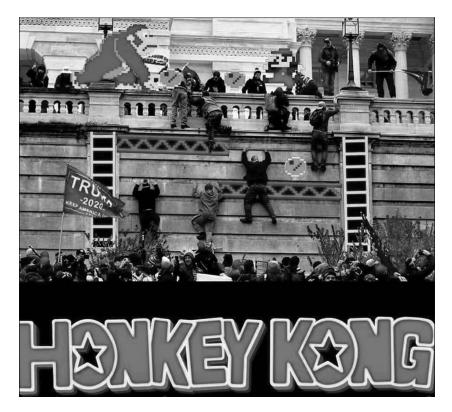
In the wake of the insurrection, social media did what it does and frantically created and shared memes about the event. Most of them emphasized the foibles of the insurrectionists. For example, images of the so-called

QAnon Shaman (real name Jacob Chansley) regularly appeared with commentary that emphasized the ridiculousness of his attire: he was shirtless, he wore a headdress made of horns and fur, and his face was painted red, white, and blue to resemble the American flag.[12] But the ridiculousness that accompanied the absurdity of seeing Chansley in the atrium of the Capitol (alongside others dressed in tactical gear, camouflage, and Punisher skeleton symbols; waving Pepe the Frog, Confederate, and Trump flags; and posting selfies on Facebook, Parler, TikTok, and Twitter) belied the violent, fascist reality of what was actually happening.[13] It was easier to focus on the absurdity of seeing someone in smeared face paint in the hallowed halls of Congress than to come to terms with the numerous violent hate symbols that were also a part of the insurrection's Stop the Steal riot.

The image that most stood out to me in the weeks that followed was a meme that reimagined the rioters scaling the walls of the Capitol steps as if they were characters in Nintendo's classic video game franchise *Donkey Kong*. The seditionists were pictured as if they were trying to climb the ladders in the first *Donkey Kong* arcade game while Donkey Kong throws barrels at Mario (in his first appearance). To reinforce the reference to the game (and the inherent Whiteness of the insurrection), the meme includes the words "Honkey Kong" emblazoned on it in a cheerful font (figure 1.1).[14]

While I was already deeply in the weeds of this manuscript when January 6 happened, the Honkey Kong image became my urtext (or ur-meme) soon after its appearance. It encapsulates this book's major argument—that gaming culture has permeated all facets of American (and global) society; that "fan revolts" like #Gamergate have paved the way for far-right/alt-right activism; that spaces like 4chan and Reddit have fanned the flames of toxicity and moved them from the fringes to the mainstream; and that the most dangerous thing we can do is to ignore the way that Silicon Valley culture has embedded itself into the social media platforms we use on a daily basis—increasingly to the detriment of our democratic institutions—and welcomed far-right activism.

I discuss three case studies—#Gamergate, Donglegate, and r/The_Donald—to offer readers a sense of how and why far-right politics has increasingly become intertwined with the culture of Silicon Valley. I demonstrate how various individuals and groups have gamed social media through play and how toxic geek masculinity has become interwoven

1.1 The Honkey Kong meme that circulated after January 6, 2021, featuring a photo of insurrectionists climbing the US Capitol building envisioned as a scene from Nintendo's classic video game franchise *Donkey Kong*.

with Trumpism. These events have taken place over the last ten or so years. In looking back over the last decade, I provide a broad context for how both the populist appeals of the alt-right in the US and the resurgence of far-right politics globally have been enabled by online platforms and video game culture, and I hope it will help us better understand how we might stop democracy from disappearing entirely.

THE FAR RIGHT IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING: DEFINING THE *ALT-RIGHT*

Over the course of researching and writing this book, the political landscape of the US has shifted dramatically as the mainstream Republican

Party (in the US) moved increasingly to the right. People like Lauren Boebert, Matt Gaetz, and Marjorie Taylor Greene (members of the so-called Freedom Caucus in the US House of Representatives) gained prominence in the wake of Trump's presidency and represented a new form of right-wing politics. The seeds of this shift were in play long before Trump's 2016 election, but for many of us, this radical move seemed to have happened overnight.[15] And in keeping with our new media environment, the anger and bile fomented online by these right-wing groups have been reflected back into the mainstream media and public discourse.

This new strain of hard-line right-wing ideology and angry, meme-laden online discourse has been referred to as the *alt-right* by both the media and proponents. This pithy, yet problematic term belies the reality of the misogynistic White supremacist ideology that exists at its core. Many have rightly suggested that the phrase cloaks the racist, misogynist, and transphobic intent of proponents who claim that it's merely an alternative to other forms of right-wing politics.[16] The phrase also obfuscates the ideology of hatred that is embodied in the alt-right and has become mainstreamed in Republican politics in the US (and populist politics worldwide). At the same time, the term has been commonly used by journalists covering Trump—his campaign in 2015 and 2016, presidency in 2017 to 2020, first reelection campaign in 2019 and 2020, and second reelection campaign in 2023.[17] As Benjamin Moffitt argues, the alt-right represents a worldview and a style of political discourse. He notes that this discursive style represents "a break from the 'mainstream' in terms of observing political conduct norms: namely, a rejection of 'civility,' an embrace of vulgarity and edgy 'humor,' and the adoption of an adversarial and often deliberately offensive approach to political opponents."[18]

The term's origins are somewhat opaque. In late 2008, paleoconservative Paul Gottfried discussed the burgeoning ascendence of a new, younger, conservative public, which he referred to as the "alternative right."[19] Later, in 2010, White nationalist/identitarian Richard Spencer (drawing on Gottfried's ideas) launched a website called AlternativeRight.com.[20] Spencer popularized the term *alt-right* in an effort to distinguish his form of White nationalism as merely an "alternative" to conservative thought.[21] According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, alt-right

adherents "eschew 'establishment' conservatism, skew young, and embrace white ethnonationalism as a fundamental value."[22] Matthew N. Lyons emphasizes its connection to ironic internet culture, arguing that individuals share "a contempt for both liberal multiculturalism and mainstream conservatism; a belief that some people are inherently superior to others; a strong internet presence and embrace of specific elements of online culture; and a self-presentation as being new, hip, and irreverent."[23] According to journalist Mike Wendling, the alt-right is an amalgam of four different groups—intellectuals (folks like Spencer), racialists (individuals from already active online White nationalist groups like Stormfront and The Daily Stormer), channers (denizens of 4chan and other imageboards), and meninists (communities dedicated to men's rights and antifeminism).[24] While the alt-right is not a phenomenon limited to the US, the centrality of spaces like 4chan and Reddit for mainstreaming alt-right communities (and their largely American, White, cisgender, and heterosexual male audiences) cannot be overstated.[25] However, the alt-right is also difficult to define because it encompasses contradictory perspectives and communities that might otherwise be at odds with each other.

Many have equated Donald Trump's presidency with the ascendence of the alt-right, but there's also a crossover with other, less explicitly political strands—especially within online spaces. For example, the manosphere—an informal collection of subreddits and blogs dedicated to the men's rights movement and more extreme spaces such as those dedicated to incels (involuntary celibates) and Red Pillers (men who dispute systemic sexism, believing themselves to be oppressed by the gains of feminism and the purported power that woman hold in heterosexual romantic relationships)—overlaps with the alt right's antifeminist rhetoric and general misogyny. However, it's hard to imagine that figures like mansophere influencer Andrew Tate or former Breitbart News editor and now-disgraced social media gadfly Milo Yiannopolous do not think that the typical incel is a sad sack who has only himself to blame for not getting laid, even if they all hate women and think "feminism is cancer."[26] And Gavin McInnes, self-described "Western chauvinist" and founder of the Proud Boys, would likely view the average gamer who was radicalized through #Gamergate as both oddly fixated on a hobby for kids and questionably dressed. What, then, connects these disparate figures?

First, they harness a particular outrage about a perceived decline of White maleness. This is rooted in a feeling of *aggrieved entitlement*—a sense shared by many White men (and some women) that they are somehow losing what they were promised because of gains made by others.[27] While in part reflecting real, long-term demographic shifts in the US (and worldwide), the alt-right harnesses a particular narrative that suggests the supremacy of the White experience and encourages adherents to feel victimized and angry. For these individuals, gains in the civil rights of minorities and the success of movements like #BlackLivesMatters and #MeToo are proof that their own identity and centrality are on the decline. Individuals who align with the alt-right not only are suspicious of mainstream arguments made by both conservatives and liberals about race- and gender-based discrimination (and deny that it exists) but think they are on the receiving end of discrimination based on their identity. This also connects to the ways in which Whiteness is discussed (or is not discussed) within the US. As critical race scholars have long argued, a kind of color-blind racism precludes real conversations about race and the privileges of Whiteness in the US.[28] In particular, it creates a kind of defensive posture, in which any attempts to connect Whiteness to larger systems of privilege are angrily denied. The alt-right takes this White fragility a step further, making Whiteness something that is under attack and threatened, suggesting it is a marginalized identity rather than a dominant, hegemonic force. And this identity becomes intertwined with a nostalgia for "traditional" masculinity.[29] Thus, the alt-right often conjoins two ideas—White supremacy/White nationalism (whether stated outright by figures like Richard Spencer or merely present in the form of racist dog whistles) and hegemonic masculinity.[30]

Second, the alt-right projects the decline in status of White men as being caused by the gains made by others. As John M. Berger argues, extremism requires an out-group (or several) to which the in-group's ire is directed.[31] For the alt-right, this includes a wide variety of targets, including immigrants, Muslims, women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, Jews, people of color, liberals, academics (especially those who work in the humanities or other "soft" disciplines), and the disabled. Many of these individuals are accused of being *social justice warriors* or SJWs—a pejorative term that gained traction online during #Gamergate (discussed

further in the next chapter) but is now frequently used by right-leaning pundits and mainstream conservative news outlets such as Fox News. A reformulation of the term *keyboard warrior*, which early online communities used to refer to people who wrote screeds against a given individual or group, the SJW is pictured as a neurotic, "feminist killjoy" who lives only to spoil others' fun.[32] In this formulation, SJW figures are both monstrous and threatening in their attempts to police political correctness.[33] For the alt-right, the SJW represents a kind of threat that connects a vast set of disparate individuals—for example, the denizens of 4chan's /pol/ (political incorrect) imageboard, men's rights activists, #Gamergate supporters, and Trump champions—who might have different political leanings but share a distain for identity politics. And while it might be easy to dismiss this trope as simply an online boogeyman, research into extremist groups suggests that over time, demonizing out-group members presents a real possibility of radical action or violence against out-group members.[34]

Third, denizens of the alt-right view these out-groups as restricting unfairly their right to speak. Invoking earlier moral panics about political correctness and the campus culture wars from the 1990s, the alt-right is suspicious about contemporary political discourse. In their formulation, liberals are overly preoccupied with concepts like civility and identity and use these concerns as a weapon to restrict certain ideas from being expressed. College campuses are seen as particular hotbeds of political correctness and thus are viewed with suspicion. University professors are portrayed as dangerous ideologues, invested in exposing their students to Marxist and postmodern thought. This so-called cultural Marxism is most often equated with the humanities and social sciences, both of which the alt-right generally views as "soft" because of the methods scholars in these areas employ (often qualitative or critical and thus perceived as unscientific or biased) and their subject matter (often messy things like values and human experience rather than pure science like chemistry, biology, and physics). And while conservatives have long made university campuses a favorite target, the alt-right has found new life in critiquing a wave of curricular changes across universities meant to reflect the important work that queer folks, women, people of color, disabled people, and indigenous individuals have produced and that has often been left out of many disciplines. Coupled with the increasing diversity of

college campuses and the fact that many Millennials and Gen Z members embrace far more liberal views on race and sexuality than prior generations, universities are a primary threat to the White supremacist project the alt-right embraces.[35]

Fourth, the alt-right's ideology is uniquely spread and amplified online. These groups engage in irony and a language of trolling or shitposting as a way to cloak and disavow the intention behind these messages. As Rob May and Matthew Feldman note, this aspect of the alt-right is not new, as "speaking in forked tongues to a wider public while signalling a fealty to committed activists has long been a tactic for the postwar far right."[36] But the speed and ease with which this material spreads *are* new. More important, the alt-right has shaped the discursive contours of online platforms. This is because conversations that happen in, for example, Reddit's r/The_Donald (a community that supported Donald Trump discussed in chapter 4) are not simply limited to those spaces. Members of the r/The_ Donald subreddit were also active participants in other subreddits and across social media more broadly. In a media ecosystem where mis- and disinformation, clickbait, hot takes, and conspiracy theories are easily disseminated, the alt-right thrives. Coupled with its members' technical prowess and creativity (hallmarks of spaces like Reddit and 4chan) and a nihilistic worldview, this chaotic coalition increasingly dominates political life online. The so-called intellectual dark web (also discussed in chapter 4) has also provided convenient, mainstream cover for alt-right ideology. Most often associated with figures like Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, and Dave Rubin, these podcasters, pundits, and provocateurs often profess a disinterest in politics (or characterize themselves as classic liberals). At the same time, they create expansive social media presences that implicitly promote ideas and feature podcast guests embraced by the alt-right in the guise of "free speech."[37]

Finally, the alt-right effectively mobilizes online mob action to perpetuate conspiracy theories and sustained harassment campaigns against its perceived enemies. Events like #Gamergate and conspiracy theories like #Pizzagate and QAnon (see chapter 2) have been used to both recruit new adherents and stoke further paranoia. Conspiracy theories, as David Aaronovitch argues, are often populist in nature and encourage believers to see themselves as the true intellects—above the "sheeple" who refuse

to see the plain truth in front of their faces.[38] Embedded in the alt-right is a sense of paranoia and cultural persecution that often finds purchase in the form of conspiracy theories that target particular groups. Extremists often make the argument that out-groups control their fate—with a shadowy and powerful elite at the helm that must be stopped at any cost.[39]

These connections are broad, general strokes. There are significant differences between, for example, an incel and someone who belongs to the American Identity Movement (a group devoted to White nationalism). The former is motivated more by sexual frustration and less by racial resentment than the latter is, but both individuals would likely share the same sort of aggrieved entitlement that they were somehow being deprived and oppressed by out-group members. Who constitutes this out-group varies, however. For the incel, it would likely be women and feminists, and for the White identitarian, it would be immigrants and people of color. What does connect these seemingly disparate groups is their embrace of geek/nerd masculinity as a marginalized identity (a point I discuss more in chapter 3) and their technical prowess and comfort with the discursive possibilities of certain online communities.

It's increasingly clear that the underlying political ideology and populist and confrontational style of the alt-right has become embedded within the mainstream Republican Party. Fealty to Donald Trump (or rather the *idea* of Trump since he does not hold political office at this time) has become a kind of litmus test for many seeking support from the GOP. During his presidency, individuals like Steve Bannon (former Breitbart News chair) and Stephen Miller (former adviser to President Trump) were the hidden architects behind Trump's politics, while the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, and other militia groups constituted its armed public face (they were prominent during the January 6 insurrection and are a continued force in linking these political ideologies to violence).[40] However, since Trump left office on January 20, 2021, the reality is that mainline conservativism *is* the alt-right. With few exceptions, the GOP has embraced a form of Christian nationalism that is almost indistinguishable from the alt-right of 2016.[41] Likewise, far-right populist politics continue to dominate in other countries as well, where many of the same nationalist, xenophobic, and transphobic appeals are becoming popularized as mainstream political discourse.

PLATFORMS AND THEIR POLITICS

The ascendance of the alt-right is due in no small part to the current online media landscape. Social media platforms have played an outsized presence in mainstreaming and amplifying the alt-right, so understanding how their culture and design intersect is critical. In addition, the larger media environment in which these platforms sit is increasingly consolidated, centralized, and monolithic, with a few media and technology companies controlling a large percentage of content shared on- and offline.[42] Simultaneously, we see platforms monetizing content created by users. While this is potentially liberating as these spaces are at the heart of what Henry Jenkins terms "participatory culture," we are also subject to new forms of digital selfhood in which we are increasingly datafied, commodified, and algorithmically organized.[43] Critically, the consequences of datafication and these algorithmic logics are not evenly distributed, as Safiya Umoja Noble and others argue persuasively; they often act as a kind of "technological redlining" depending on a person's social location.[44] This is largely a result of the way designers think about their audiences and the political and economic realities of the technology industry.

At its core, design is a rhetorical, persuasive act directed toward solving "wicked problems."[45] The word *design* is used as both a noun and a verb—as an artifact that is created and as the process by which that artifact is made. Early computer histories demonstrate a tendency for software developers (who were simultaneously responsible for these programs and their interfaces) to see design as an afterthought. Functionality was more important than usability, and so early computer programs were often utilitarian and reflected an autobiographical approach to design, where developers pictured themselves as the target audience for a given program. Users were an afterthought or viewed as a problem to be solved. As personal computers gained a foothold in homes and businesses, this kind of systems-centered design shifted. In the 1980s, Donald Norman's work foregrounded the importance of designing for those who were actually using these devices and popularized the concept of *affordances*—or the actions that we think we can take when faced with a particular set of design elements.[46] With the widespread adoption of the internet in the 1990s, this approach became formalized into user-centered design.

Designers were encouraged to research their user base or audience using qualitative approaches. These included methods like contextual interviewing (talking with potential users), personas (creating prototypical users for whom the interface is designed), and usability tests (walkthroughs of potential interface designs with users).[47] Contemporary design practice focuses more on what is known as rapid development (whereby potential designs are quickly iterated and deployed to users) and A/B testing (with metrics such as clickthrough or revenue rates serving as primary data for whether a given design is successful).

While user research and usability testing are still used in the initial phases of the design process, A/B testing is largely the norm, as it fits Silicon Valley's endless desire for metric-based decision making and mirrors its "Move fast and break things" ethos.[48] It also echoes a larger cultural shift that's been happening toward using big data and analytics as tools for personal improvement in every aspect of everyday life, from exercise to sex, and this shift is championed and embraced by the denizens of Silicon Valley (more on this in chapter 3).[49] Each of these approaches positions designers (and developers) as somehow apart from users and provides little in the way of actual audience input in the design process. Less common in large US technology firms are design approaches that equalize the power differential between user and designer. These range from relatively well-known formalized participatory design approaches (such as collaborative prototyping) to radical design, feminist human-computer interaction (HCI), and design that is oriented toward social justice.[50] These approaches are especially valuable when working with marginalized audiences or indigenous populations, but they are seen largely as irrelevant, unnecessary, time-consuming, and costly and thus rarely embraced by large technology firms. In addition, involving "outsiders" in the design of new technologies is often couched as a security risk that might threaten the ability of a given company to retain its competitive edge.

The political and economic realities of technology companies are often at odds with the goals of any design process, especially those that might enlist potential users as codesigners. For example, companies often use the proprietary, patentable nature of their technology as a rationale for why these more egalitarian design techniques are not desirable or possible to

implement. In their stead, designers must rely on other methods (like the persona approach) that often create simulations of the audience for their designs. These kinds of techniques focus on a particular type of person as a prototypical user—one who is almost always middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied, and White. While the desire to empathize as a first step toward creating a usable interface or product is ostensibly well-meaning, it can quickly become patronizing and reductionist.[51] But it might not be just the tools that are commonly used to support design thinking that are problematic. As Ruha Benjamin argues, "design [itself] is a colonizing project."[52]

Broadening out from the specific design approach taken, platforms and their politics are shaped by two larger factors. The first is their role as actors under capitalism. This is a critical component of the ways that we might understand these companies' actions (and that scholars such as Nick Srnicek argue should form the primary way of thinking about them), but this is not the focus of my analysis.[53] Instead, I am interested in the second factor that shapes platforms and their politics—the cultural backdrop in which platforms, politics, and their communities intersect. To this end, this book explores how culture, design, and platforms intertwine in a kind of *platform politics*. This phrase is inspired by Tarleton Gillespie's work on the ways that the term *platform* has been deployed by technology companies and strategically works to encourage a particular way of thinking about these spaces by users and potential regulators.[54] Like other work within science and technology studies (STS) and the social construction of technology (SCOT), this approach attunes us to the reality that platforms are not just neutral technological objects but reflect certain assumptions about how and by whom they are to be used. These ensure platforms will be viewed by the press, public, and regulators in particular ways—most often those that just so happen to work in these companies' favor. For example, YouTube insists that it is just a platform for user-generated content, despite the ways in which adults can be radicalized on it and children might be exposed to its disturbing content.[55] Rather than reflecting its realities—a complex and large-scale assemblage of advertising and monetization strategies, minimal content oversight, algorithmic logics, and a larger attention economy that almost inevitably ensures that extremist content will spread prolifically—the company

suggests any problems the press or public unearths are mere glitches or one-off issues. By minimizing these realities, technology companies implicitly welcome more of this disturbing content under the guise of simply providing a service, and they fail to acknowledge their outsized role in shaping public discourse.

This book argues that the platform politics of social media also reflect a larger cyber- and technolibertarian perspective that permeates Silicon Valley (a point I discuss further in chapter 3).[56] Hallmarks of this perspective include meritocratic explanations for success and failure, an embrace of technology as a force for social good, a disdain for technology regulation, a blurring of the boundaries between work and play, a kind of free-speech absolutism, and an embrace of capitalism and free-market economic policies. One of the defining features of Silicon Valley's cyberlibertarianism can be seen in how online platforms approach issues of speech. With few exceptions, social media companies have wielded the protections provided under section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (which in the US suggests that internet companies are not liable for the speech of people using their services) as a shield against regulation, despite the ways the Metas and Googles of the world act as de facto media companies.[57] While this approach to speech conveniently lets these companies off the hook for legal liability, it also reflects a particular technocratic belief that rational discourse will ultimately prevail in the marketplace of ideas.

This kind of ideology is present in early manifestos about the web. For example, John Perry Barlow's "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" from 1996 repeats a well-worn Cartesian fallacy (that the mind and body are split) and claims that cyberspace is ultimately free of the cultural prejudices that taint "meatspace" (and thus is more rational).[58] Given ample evidence to the contrary (including numerous privacy breaches, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the explosion of extremist content, and the rapid proliferation of dis- and misinformation online), Barlow's manifesto now reads as not only naive and utopian but patently arrogant. And the public pays the price while tech companies continue to hide behind section 230 as if it's a cloak of invisibility.[59] Unfortunately, coupled with a dysfunctional and hyperpartisan Congress, a conservative SCOTUS majority, and a risk-adverse Federal Communications

Commission heavily tilted toward free-marketeers and self-regulation, this brandishing of section 230 as a shield against regulation is unlikely to change any time soon. While countries in the European Union and elsewhere have taken steps to reduce hate speech online, make algorithms more transparent, and limit personal data collection by corporations, the US continues to lag far behind in limiting Silicon Valley's reach.

It's also important to note how Silicon Valley's general approach to free speech is reflected in specific design choices and policies. As Alexander Cho and others have suggested, assumptions about the default "publicness" of content on most social media platforms, for example, are normative, often "rehearsing a hegemonic gaze that assumes that the public is neutral terrain."[60] In turn, this logic provides a way to monetize and commodify online behaviors and requires users (particularly marginalized ones) to either conform to or work around platform designs that are fundamentally unsafe. Additionally, spaces like Facebook and Reddit often rely on a vast network of un(der)paid workers to moderate the content that flows through their networks. These individuals are often contract workers who encounter the worst of humanity daily online—animal cruelty, child pornography, hate speech, and graphic violence—while working in metric-driven environments that provide relatively little in the way of mental health resources or support.[61] And this, I would argue, is by design. If social media companies addressed the real toll this material has on their own workforce, they would be tacitly acknowledging the significant role they play in spreading and amplifying it and ultimately invite regulation.

A final important aspect of Silicon Valley culture (a concept I explore further in chapter 3) is geek masculinity. Geek or nerd masculinity, as developed by Lori Kendall and others, repudiates some aspects of hegemonic masculinity while embracing others.[62] It embraces niche technical interests (like computers, comics, video games, and programming) and eschews overt elements of hegemonic masculinity (like sports and sexual prowess). While not always toxic, many expressions of geek masculinity in fan communities often perform gatekeeping functions, and they either covertly or overtly (as in the case of #Gamergate) imply that anyone who is not a straight White cisgender and heterosexual man is unwelcome to participate. At the same time, geeks or nerds see themselves as victims of a larger social structure that valorizes the jock and the sexually successful

ladies' man. This remains true despite the reality that geeks increasingly hold significant amounts of economic and social capital, as individuals such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk demonstrate. This creates a tension that is never quite resolved: geek masculinity represents a marginalized status in relation to hegemonic masculinity but also confers a certain amount of privilege.[63]

THE GAMES WE ALL PLAY

Media coverage of the alt-right often suggests it has been made by the internet. While this argument is an oversimplification, there's no denying that the alt-right successfully mobilized the culture of internet spaces such as 4chan and Reddit to recruit and radicalize individuals. Through memes and a form of ambivalent play, the alt-right's ideological messaging has become interwoven with everyone's everyday experiences.[64] Internet-born phenomena such Pepe the Frog and terminology such as *social justice warriors* (SJWs) and *cultural Marxism* are now part of the political lexicon writ large. However, certain real-world events—like the August 2017 murder of Heather Heyer during a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol—remind us that the play that characterizes 4chan's /pol/ board or Reddit's r/The_Donald community is not about superficial online fun but has deeper roots and darker consequences. While online misogyny and White supremacy are nothing new, our collective ability to dismiss memes and trolling as mere play is both problematic and insufficient. In chapter 4, I argue that much of this material is better understood as a form of what Richard Schnecher has termed "dark play"[65] (or what game scholar Aaron Trammell might simply call play), in which only a portion of those involved recognize the goals of the game.[66]

Play and games shape our everyday lives. Early scholarship within game studies suggested play was integral to the development of culture, hence the title of Johan Huizinga's influential 1938 book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, which argues that play is distinct from other aspects of our lives (like work).[67] Later research by anthropologist Clifford Geertz underscores the way that play reflects cultural values.[68] Still, it could be easy to dismiss games and video gaming as a niche hobby—the domain

(we're told) of mostly young, White men. However, the reality is far more complex. Video games are a multibillion-dollar industry, far larger than the global box office receipts of Hollywood films.[69] This means that many of us are playing games all the time— mobile phone casual games like *Candy Crush*, action-adventure console games like *Legend of Zelda*, massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft*, and sandbox games like *Minecraft*. The largest gaming companies (referred to in the industry as AAA or triple-A studios), however, continue to imagine a particular demographic when designing and marketing their games. This core gamer is typically a young, straight, cisgendered White man. This limited perspective shapes both the kinds of games made by large studios and the ways some players think about who should play games and what kinds of games they should play. We often see this in the ways that gaming fans themselves argue about who constitutes a gamer, as if it were a singular (and marginalized) identity (a point to which I return in chapter 2).[70]

Women and girls have always played games, but their status as gamers has been fraught since the arcade days of the 1970s.[71] As marginalized media objects from the beginning, games have been legitimized by video game companies and game scholars who point to their potential educational benefits, such as encouraging young peoples' interest in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) and teaching what James Paul Gee calls "semiotic domains."[72] For a long time, this led to interest in making games that target girls and women (unfortunately, these two groups were often conflated) instead of broadening the kinds of representations and playing styles seen in triple-A titles. But the rise of independent game studios has encouraged a growing desire to diversify the gaming industry and a recognition that women, queer folks, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) all play (and make) games. These changes have not been welcomed by everyone. A small but vocal subset of the gaming community has loudly protested this diversification, as evidenced by the hashtag activist campaign #Gamergate (discussed in detail in chapter 2). This 2014 event (and the ongoing #Gamergate-inspired harassment of women game developers, journalists, and critics) has prompted a divisive conversation about the role of women and minorities in gaming communities and the inadequate responses of online platforms to those who harass, intimidate, and otherwise suppress others.

Moving beyond the actual events of #Gamergate, pockets of online culture are intensely influenced by games as a cultural product and by play more broadly. Platforms like 4chan, which is alternatively derided as "cesspool" nearly in the same breath as it is lauded as a "meme factory," are steeped in gaming culture.[73] This gaming culture familiarity takes several forms. First, these communities share an enormous amount of content that refers to games and gaming fandom. We can see this on spaces like Reddit, where numerous communities (subreddits) discuss specific video games (such as r/Terraria) or gaming culture more broadly (such as r/Games). But even moving beyond specific communities dedicated to games, conversations that occur across Reddit or 4chan assume a basic familiarity with games and geek culture more broadly.[74] Knowledge of games and gaming culture serves as a kind of subcultural capital in these spaces.[75] Second, and perhaps less obvious, Reddit (in particular) is structured as a kind of game. Reddit members (Redditors) upvote and downvote material. Individual accounts, in turn, receive what are known as karma points that mark their overall contribution to the community. Karma points, while meaningless outside of Reddit, have endogenous value on the platform. Famous Reddit accounts typically have exceptionally high karma points, are often mentioned by username, are well known across the platform, and often receive Reddit coins and awards from other users for comments found to be interesting or otherwise worthy in some way.[76] Third, and critical for this project, play inform the kinds of interactions that happen on these platforms. While humorous memes are a popular example of this play, more insidious is a kind of "dark play" (discussed in more detail in chapter 4)—a blurring of the lines between play, seriousness, nihilism, and earnestness, all wrapped up in a veneer of ironic detachment and easily dismissible as simply trolling.

One of the more important concepts (and a major sticking point) in the field of game studies has been the magic circle, formalized by game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their influential text *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*.[77] The magic circle was originally offered by Huizinga as a way to articulate the theoretical space that games (and play) inhabit and to emphasize that this space is separate from the real world. When we play a game of tag, for example, we collectively agree that the goal of the game is for one person who is "it" to tap a second

person on the shoulder, which makes that person "it." Outside of the playground, this action would be perplexing or unwelcome. Strangers in a coffee shop probably would be confused if I suddenly tapped them, yelling "You're it," and ran away. Likewise, if I tried to pay for a coffee with *Monopoly* money, the barista probably would not give me the drink. These actions—shoulder tapping and using play money—have meaning only in the context of particular games (tag and *Monopoly*, respectively) and require all who play the games to recognize them as legitimate moves.[78]

So there is some truth to the idea that games create a special, invisible space in which players agree to follow specific rules for the duration of the game. However, the magic circle concept has been critiqued by multiple scholars who suggest that it is both overly formalistic and too simplistic.[79] Mia Consalvo argues that play should be understood as an ongoing negotiation between competing contexts—a space in which issues of what constitutes legitimate play versus cheating, for example, are in flux.[80] This point becomes critical when we consider that the logic of games extends beyond simply the playing of games themselves. The kind of meritocratic, win-or-lose mechanics that characterize most games are also reproduced within the culture more broadly, as when billionaires are lauded as self-made entrepreneurs despite often being born into wealth and the poor are derided as lazy, shiftless, or unmotivated rather than as facing structural inequalities that make their success difficult if not impossible. Christopher A. Paul suggests that problematic meritocratic logics are embedded in many video games, making them "self-insulating and self-replicating."[81] And as Aaron Trammell notes, even our definitions of play and games are embedded in a system of Whiteness, presuming (incorrectly) that play is always pleasurable. He argues that play can be a tool for subjugation and that we must reckon with how our definitions of play work to marginalize BIPOC experiences.[82]

When we view play as distinctly separate from real life or as somehow not consequential, we deny its potency and power. This book's main argument is grounded in the idea that extremist groups are increasingly interested in changing the political landscape by gaming technological platforms, often using playful and easily dismissed forms of discourse (like memes). But beyond gaming the platforms themselves, the far right

is actually *metagaming* democracy (a concept I return to in chapter 5). Metagames are games about and around games. The term grew out of the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing community and originally was a pejorative for using out-of-game knowledge to make in-game decisions. For example, the dungeon master, a narrator of the gameplay, might describe a new creature as a large, almost invisible cube of goo. If players encounter this new creature and use knowledge that they wouldn't have as their characters (that is, if they say, "Oh, this is a gelatinous cube, and if I'm not careful, it can paralyze me!"), they are metagaming. In the era of video games, the term *metagaming* grew beyond simply using out-of-game knowledge to gain an advantage within the game. The term began to be used to describe things like mods or modifications (community-created add-ons to games, such as new levels and new features), play styles that circumvent the developer's original intention (such as pacifist runs or speedruns), and tools that explicitly allow players to cheat.[83] In their book about metagames, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux lean toward a more conceptual examination of metagaming by tying it to artistic avant-garde games that reflect on the nature of play and gaming culture.[84] In their closing chapter, they discuss how certain games—ones that remain true to the "ideological avatar of play"—are acceptable. But metagames that challenge the dominant nature of play—for example, by expanding calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion in games and the gaming industry—are resisted by game developers and players.

The rather expansive way I use the term *metagaming* in this book reflects the ways games have permeated our everyday lives and also gives a nod to the larger cultural and social implications that gaming social media and technical systems has for our democratic institutions and civil society. In this case, the alt-right (and increasingly the GOP and other mainstream political parties worldwide) are actively pursuing a strategy that hopes to undermine our faith in democracy entirely. From spreading misinformation, engaging in harassment campaigns, and pursuing disingenuous arguments rather than reasoned debate, the far right and its GOP enablers are playing an entirely different game than the rest of us. And unfortunately, this metagame has been enabled by the culture of Silicon Valley and the online platforms it creates.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

In chapter 2, "From #Gamergate to the Alt-Right," I offer the first of three case studies that examine the relationship between online platforms, Silicon Valley culture, and the alt-right. I introduce the concept of the alternative web—a collection of platforms and websites like Reddit and 4chan that embrace values (such as anonymity and free-speech absolutism) that are different from the values of mainstream social media platforms like Facebook. Parts of the alternative web have been especially effective in moving alt-right ideology into the mainstream. I then discuss the 2014 hashtag campaign #Gamergate, which demonstrated the ways that far-right and extremist movements have found certain fandom communities particularly welcoming to their ideology. I argue that #Gamergate underscored the relationship between platforms, culture, and politics and that subsequent harassment campaigns—such as #Comicsgate (a fan uprising against diversity and social justice in comics), #Ghostbustersgate (a fan uprising against the all-woman sequel to the 1984 film *Ghostbusters*), #Pizzagate (a right-wing conspiracy theory that a pedophilia ring affiliated with the Democratic Party was being run out of a Washington, DC, pizzeria), and QAnon—are rooted in similar misogynistic and racist ideologies. Members of certain online fandom communities also tap into what I am calling an *identity nostalgia*—that is, the belief that outsiders (such as, social justice warriors, progressives, minorities, and women) present a core existential threat to their own identity (as a gamer or fan). I argue that individuals associated with the political arm of the alt-right (such as Steve Bannon, a former White House adviser and Breitbart News executive) cannily understood why gaming communities in particular could provide powerful support. In part, this was because members of these communities were steeped in the logics of games, which provided them with the technological prowess to game the affordances of social media platforms. Bannon and other operatives were able to use #Gamergate to broaden the conversation beyond diversity in games to a larger debate about diversity in society.

In chapter 3, "Geek Masculinity and the Cult(ure) of Tech," I examine a 2017 memo written by former Google employee James Damore (a White man) that has been described as an antidiversity manifesto. I argue that

his screed represents a long history within Silicon Valley of embracing individualistic rather than systemic explanations for the failure of White women and people of color in technology. This chapter unpacks the concept of geek and nerd masculinity and the ways in which it can damage marginalized communities. As a counterpoint to Damore's manifesto, I discuss the case of Adria Richards, a Black woman and software developer who in 2013 complained on Twitter about two male conference attendees who made sexually charged jokes about the computer terms *dongle* and *forking* in her presence. This led to a series of events dubbed Donglegate by online commenters. While both Damore and Richards were later fired, Damore was welcomed into the alt-right fold, while Richards was silenced by her experience. I argue that these cases exemplify how tech culture valorizes particular bodies over others—demonstrating, as Lori Kendall suggests, that the term *nerd* conjoins the notion of technological adeptness with White, male bodies.[85] I also discuss how burgeoning spaces like the intellectual dark web (a collection of podcasters, political pundits, and journalists) have welcomed the ideas espoused by the alt-right. The intellectual dark web (and later Damore) demonstrate the right's attempt to *game* the idea of free speech.

Chapter 4, "Reddit's Love Affair with r/The_Donald," revisits the notion of platform politics discussed above and in chapter 2 and offers a case study of Reddit's r/The_Donald, the most popular, mainstream online community for Donald Trump supporters. I argue that members of this subreddit engaged in a particular kind of memetic play that is best understood as a form of dark play.[86] While it embodied elements of the carnivalesque, r/The_Donald also peddled in conspiracy theories and a common language that allowed for plausible deniability about the darker elements of the ideology that it embraces.[87] It also demonstrated how "pedes" (supporters called themselves "centipedes" or "pedes") have become a kind of fandom identity, with the figure of Trump himself as a transmedia object. Additionally, I suggest Reddit's platform politics provided fertile ground for this community to flourish. r/The_Donald was symptomatic of a much larger problem that Reddit administrators face—their reliance on unpaid moderation and community self-governance. I also discuss Reddit's role as a platform that straddles both the alternative

web (mentioned in chapter 2) and the mainstream media environment. My analysis suggests that r/The_Donald represented an attempt by the right to *game* politics through humor and play.

Finally, in chapter 5, "Metagaming Democracy," I argue that each of these case studies represents aspects of the alt-right's attempt to use technology to metagame democracy. Far-right extremist messages spread successfully in part because of the algorithmic logics and design politics of social media platforms. I argue that the alt-right has successfully manipulated spaces like Reddit and YouTube and polluted our information environment by weaponizing internet ambivalence.[88] As technology companies increasingly shape our everyday lives, the existential threat that far-right movements pose to democratic institutions grows. We must take responsibility for how these technologies reflect particular values and reconsider what role we want them to play in the future. To that end, I offer some thoughts as to how we might stop the game that the far right (and Silicon Valley) wants us to play.

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