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A critical discourse analytical approach to Metacritic game reviews

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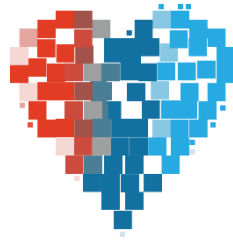Lund universitet
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Abstract

This thesis examines user reviews of the video game *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (Machine games 2017). From a total of 560 reviews, 176 reviews engaging with social and political issues in the game was selected for a critical discourse analysis.

A close reading of the games politics of gender and race being negotiated in the reviews show how performances of (successful) masculinity and (believable) femininity by the characters are taken as signs of a 'feminist/left culture war' on games – a discourse popularized in the 2014-2015 Gamergate movement. The games portray of racism is similarly dismissed as an unrealistic representation of social reality. I argue that a specific nihilistic neoliberal imagination of politics underlies both positive and negative reviews in what I call a discourse of apolitical gaming. In a close reading of the politics of anti-Nazism, my analysis shows how the games Nazi enemy in the reviews is desired as a military rather than ideological enemy, which I interpret as an aestheticization of politics.

From a frequent narrative of white masculine victimhood and an appropriation of a language of oppression, I suggest that the reviews express ideological affinities with the Alt-Right and Manosphere. Lastly, I suggest that a feminist emancipatory project in relation to masculinized gaming also should examine complex intersections of marginality.

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Introduction

Amidst the 2010s social and political turn to the right, one year after the election of Donald Trump and the subsequent inflated confidence of the American Alt-Right, a video game about fighting Nazis was released by the Swedish game developers Machine Games. Reading the news, the following sentence caught my interest:

> Far-right online activists rage against the new video game Wolfenstein 2 which they claim "dehumanizes Nazis". (Sundell 2017, para. 1, my translation)

This odd sentence from the Swedish public service SVT introduced me to the strange and intriguing tale of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (Machine games 2017). The risk-averse high-end games industry (called AAA-industry) which generally follow the rule of 'not politicizing games', had made an interesting exception.

The release of Wolfenstein II converged with the tragic events of Charlottesville, USA in late August 2017 where the 'unite the right rally', a demonstration by white supremacists, white nationalists, Alt-Right, neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists ended in the murder of Heather Heyer. Wolfenstein II's publisher Bethesda Softworks, rather than shying away from the 'controversy' of anti-Nazism, defied expectations and started an online market campaign referencing Trump's weak condemnation of the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville. This put Wolfenstein II publisher Bethesda Softworks in the aims of the growing American Alt-Right and, in my view, lead to somewhat of a crisis in hardcore gamer culture.

The first-person shooter (FPS[1]) Wolfenstein II is uniquely positioned at the intersection of anti-fascism, masculinized gaming and the new far-right. I approach these tensions as a feminist and anti-racist opportunity to study gender and race within gaming. Therefore, in this study, I turn to a central place in games culture for discursive contestation – user reviews on Metacritic.com. Reviews are means to express the consumers experience and satisfaction with a product, making them a rich source of discursive and ideological contestation, and a site of political struggle involving real world politics – ideal for a critical discourse analytical approach.

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[1] A genre of video games featuring a first-person with an emphasis on weapon-based combat.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine ideological struggles in relation to Wolfenstein II's politics of gender and race, and how these struggles can be understood as ideological processes with affinity to the contemporary online far-right within an overarching neoliberal rationality. What is at stake on Metacritic is, partly, who a gamer is and what a game is or should be, and thus in extension also what place ideological projects such as anti-fascism, anti-racism, feminism and politics in general has in gaming. From this perspective, the purpose is to examine the particular social and ideological dynamics in what I call masculinized gaming.

The **research questions** driving my analysis are:

1) How is the signification of Wolfenstein II's plot and characters an arena for ideological struggles regarding politics of gender and race?
2) How are representations of 'us' and 'them' constructed in review-texts in relation to Wolfenstein II's 'politics'?
3) How can beliefs, narratives and discourses in the reviews be understood as ideological practices in relation to the Manosphere and Alt-Right within an overarching neoliberal rationality?

The first question is addressed in the first analytical chapter where I examine closely a politics of signification (Hall 2005) of the game and its characters. The second two questions both are addressed in the second analytical chapter where my analysis turn to ideological language (van Dijk 2000, 2001, Wodak 2001) attempting to establish social representations of 'us' and 'them'-groups along multiple axes of power.

Background

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

The Wolfenstein series has been around since the early 1980s and has with the reboot *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (Machinegames 2014) successfully established itself within the high-budget AAA-industry which has a central standing in the games industry, especially in relation to its hardcore audience. The Wolfenstein series is set in a fictional reality where Hitler's high-tech Nazi Germany won the second world-war and the protagonist William Joseph "B.J." Blazkowicz, an American of Polish and Jewish descent, struggles alongside a crew of resistance-fighters to take down the Nazi empire. Wolfenstein II specifically takes place in Nazi-occupied USA during the 1960s where the protagonists struggle against the Nazi regime attempting to spark an anti-Nazi revolution. The tone of the game is both serious in its depiction

of extreme cruelty, torture, and gore, as well as celebratory of human diversity, love and silliness in contrast to the Nazi ideology. The series may be placed in the history of cultural texts commenting, criticizing and mocking Nazi ideology such as for example Charlie Chaplin's *The great dictator* (1940) or more recently *Jojo Rabbit* (Waititi 2019).

The outrage Wolfenstein II's Nazi-killing sparked among the American Alt-Right movement (Backe 2018, para. 3) is telling of the recent surge of far-right ideology. However, while the non-gamer reader might not be surprised by the Alt-Right's outright sympathy for Nazism, I believe that the uneasy and divided reactions from within gamer culture in relation to the games politics is an opportunity to study a normalization of far-right sentiments in common gamer spaces and the ideological underpinnings at play in this situation. To better understand the controversy around Wolfenstein II in relation to gamer culture and the American Alt-Right, we must first understand the context of how gaming culture came to change drastically with the mid-2010's hate campaign #Gamergate. The complex and thorny story of Gamergate plays a central role in my analysis as the beliefs, narratives and discourses popularized with it is salient in the reviews studied – motivating a brief account of its story.

The politics of Gamergate, the Manosphere and Alt-Right

Gamergate marks a historical moment where games culture took a dark turn towards normalizing hate and abuse online. While there is conflicting accounts of what Gamergate was, an academic understanding generally describes it as an identity based project to 'save' gamer identity from the invading other – mainly played out along the social axis of gender (Braithwaite 2016, p.1). Proponents of Gamergate, on the other hand, claim the movement had more noble aims of defending 'ethics in video game journalism' rather than defending gender-based privilege (Braithwaite 2016, p.1) and that the many acts of harassments where not supported by the 'true' Gamergate movement (Mortensen 2016, p. 794). However, outside commentators of Gamergate like the magazine *Newsweek* found that the 'ethics in journalism-claim' made by proponents of Gamergate was poorly supported by the fact that women tended to be disproportionately attacked, doxed[2] and swatted[3] and forced to flee their homes during the campaign (Braithwaite 2016, p. 4). Gamergate, despite not necessarily being understood as

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[2] Disclosure of personal information such as address and phone number online.
[3] Harassment technique to trick militarized police to break into someone's home.

harassments by its proponents, from the outside looked very much like misogynistic harassments.

As the oft-told story goes, Gamergate started in late 2014 with allegations against game developer Zoë Quinn put forward by their ex-partner Eron Gjoni in (amongst others) "The Zoe Post" – a blog-entry accusing Quinn of cheating on him with a games journalist for a favorable review of the game *Depression Quest* (Quinn 2013) (Braithwaite 2016, p. 4). Despite evidence disproving Gjoni's accusations, the story of Quinn and the 'corrupt' games press refusing to report the 'scandal' circulated in various online spaces such as 4chan[4] and reddit[5] (Braithwaite 2016, p. 4.) In August 27, 2014 the actor Adam Baldwin coined the term 'Gamergate' in a Twitter tweet linking two videos attacking Quinn, and with around 190 000 followers at the time (Chess & Shaw 2015, p. 210) the campaign was named and propelled into various online spaces.

After the initial events, a wave of games journalists discussing the problems of gamer identity would come to feed the flames further. These articles brought up the "great distance between people who happen to play games and people who identify as gamers" (Mortensen 2016, p. 792) thus questioning the imagined rigorous white-male demographic of people playing games. With that, gamergaters was armed with justification in the belief that their very identities where under attack by the 'corrupt games press' colluding with feminist activists and cultural Marxists set at destroying male gaming.

Torill Elvira Mortensen (2016) and Adrienne Massanari (2017) emphasize the lack of clear leaders in Gamergate – a trait it shares with other contemporary online activists such as Anonymous (Massanari 2017, p. 334). The leaderless movement allows for a "swarm-like behavior" (Mortensen 2016, p. 789) protecting the movement from allegations of harassment by a simple 'not a true gamergater' defense (Massanari 2017, p. 334. Mortensen 2016, p. 794). While it is safe to say that Gamergate "marks a paradigm shift in the public discourse about games" (Backe 2018, para. 15), estimations of Gamergate supporters vary between less than 10

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[4] 4chan is an anonymous online space notorious for its 'laissez-faire' attitude towards regulation. Gamergate discussions was however sensationally banned from 4chan because of its systemic harassment of women, resulting in Gamergate largely migrating to the similar site 8chan.

[5] Reddit is a discussion site where registered members submit posts and comments that is upvoted or downvoted in a score-based system. Reddit features various 'subreddits' – which effectively are forums for specific topics or groups.

000 by moderate accounts and over 100 000 from Gamergate-supporting estimators, but there exists no rigorous method[6] of establishing these to any certainty (Mortensen 2016, p. 790).

Especially important for this study is how Gamergate functioned to radicalize gamers towards the far-right. To understand this, the ideological content of the movement must be examined further – specifically its notorious misogynistic core and its connection to the Alt-Right and 'the Manosphere' (explained below). As the controversy took off in 2014, some right-wing figures outside the gaming sphere where quick to capitalize on the controversy for a free career boost. Milo Yiannopolous is a notable example of a far-right figure who used Gamergate to shoot to celebrity-status writing for the far-right website *Brietbart* (Mortensen 2016, p. 790). The ideologies being produced, reproduced, shared and recommended in this socio-technical system centers around the idea of a 'culture war' being waged against white masculine subjectivity and as we shall see, is effectively incorporated in a wider system of far right discourse of white male victimization.

In understanding Gamergate as part of a larger contemporary far-right, I follow the taxonomy suggested by Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall and Simon Murdoch (2020, *Figure 1*).

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[6] See Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) for an interesting methodological attempt at tracing a period of Gamergate quantitatively over various online-platforms.

The alternative right

Figure 1. Overview of the Alternative Right based on Hermansson et al. (2020)

The Alternative Right, or Alt-Right, runs parallel to and sometimes overlap a broad online movement mobilized around opposing feminism – popularly labeled 'the Manosphere' (Hermansson et al 2020, p. 163). Debbie Ging (2019, pp. 639-640) locates the emergence of this term just before 2010, later being popularized by a porn marketer in a self-published book called *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* (2013). The Manosphere is a term that to some degree has been adopted by the groups affiliated to it as well as by the considerable media reporting during the 2010s (Ging 2019, p. 640). Central to the Manosphere is the 'red pill' philosophy which Gill describes as…

> […] an analogy which derives from the 1999 film The Matrix, in which Neo is given the choice of taking one of the two pills. Taking the blue pill means switching off and living a life of delusion; taking the red pill means becoming enlightened to life's ugly truths. The Red Pill philosophy purports to awaken men to feminism's misandry and brainwashing, and is the key concept that unites all of these communities. (Ging 2019, p. 640)

This quote aptly captures the broad ideological core of anti-feminism that connects the otherwise loosely affiliated groups of the Manosphere. The feminist project is within the Manosphere imagined as 'promoting misandry' (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 163) rather than equality between people – serving as a justification for violent anti-feminist resistance. Coming to terms with this harsh reality of men's subjugation is what is known as 'taking the red pill'.

A quick overview of some of the notable groups and identity-formations in the Manosphere shows nuances in relation to a similar anti-feminist core thematic. In general terms, incels regard themselves as the rejected 'beta-males' doomed to suffering and loneliness in a sexual economy ruled by women, while pickup artists (PUAs) works towards perfecting the 'craft' and techniques of making women want to have sex with them. Mens rights activists (MRAs) 'Men Going Their Own Way' (MGTOW) seek to distance themselves from the society which they regard as harmful to men while other groups like traditional Christian conservatives (TradCons) seeks a societal return to traditional gender roles. What connects, quite literary, these movements besides the anti-feminist politics is the centrality of online spaces in reproducing and facilitating the movements. Major online platforms like YouTube running algorithms designed to keep a user on a near endless loop of similar content of course plays an important role given "the level of cross-pollination between the Manosphere and the alt-right" (Nagle 2017, p. 94).

This thesis focusses on a subset of what I consider closely related to the Manosphere and Alternative Right, a gamer rationality that I call masculinized gaming which largely is informed by the ideological assumptions of Gamergate. In the red-pill worldview, gaming is yet another right of men that is being taken from them and destroyed by feminism. Self-victimhood and entitlement, as we shall see, is central to these movements mobilized around white male loss and anger (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 182).

While it might be tempting to consider misogyny 'merely' problematic but less dangerous that outright eugenics and racism, I follow researchers that believe online spaces and meme-culture can function as a gateway to a more reactionary ideological environment (Marwick & Caplan 2018, p. 554, Marwick & Lewis 2017, p. 36, Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019, p. 5008) and more

extreme conspiracy theories (Hermansson et al 2020, p. 171) that draws much power from the insecurities and problems of a fast-changing, globalized and networked world.

Summing up

In this thesis, I am privileging a certain entry into the vast and complex rise of the far-right – namely that of culture and cultural criticism as an arena for ideological engagement. The analysis that I present in this thesis is one that contributes to the study of the Manosphere and Alt-Right with an empirical account of gamer discursive practices around a game whose plot aptly is about resistance to white supremacy. I have chosen to focus on Wolfenstein II precisely because of its unique history in relation to the Alt-Right and its position as an anti-fascist cultural artifact at the intersection of the far-right and games culture. Studying how constructions of gender and race operate in discursive contestation of the game through Metacritic reviews allows for a unique empirical account of contemporary ideological struggles.

Previous research

Feminist and gender perspectives on gaming

Gender perspectives on Gaming and Gamergate

Simply put, Gamergate was a series of collectively organized personal attacks, harassments and vilifications targeting mainly females and minorities within the field of gaming, peaking in 2015 after critical discussions[7] about social issues in gaming surfaced in the early 2010s. A central body of research to my study are the numerous studies and articles written since the events of Gamergate which generally brings in the perspectives of both gender and the far-right. Gamergate and the misogynistic harassments it incited drew a lot of academic interest, not least because of the campaign actively involving and targeting feminist game scholars as documented by Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw (2015). I refrain from describing the complex and lengthy events of gamergate further as they are well documented by amongst others, Torill E. Mortensen (2016), Andrea Braithwaite (2016) and Michael Salter (2018).

Gamergate, as it generally is understood within academic discourse, identifies a male entitlement derived from a "geek identity" (Blodgett 2020, p. 187) as the driving force behind the campaign. The Gamergate narrative frames feminist intervention in gaming, not as a genuine discussion about social issues, but as an "encroachment of feminists on geek space" conspiring to "fundamentally alter what games were and who they were for" (Blodgett 2020, p. 187), featuring a "heavy deployment of 'us vs them' mentality and rhetoric" (Blodgett & Salter 2018, pp. 136-137). Gaming is within a Gamergate narrative framed as a 'last bastion' (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 115) of the male nerd now under attack by the gendered other. Sociologist Katherine Cross captures the gendered dynamic in the following:

> […] Mom doesn't want to take our games away. She wants to play them. And in so doing, many male gamers fear, she will ruin the experience forever – never mind that women have been here from the earliest days of gaming, as players, artists, developers, and designers. (Cross 2017, p. 181)

In understanding this violent defense of male privilege, many academics within games studies and the study of the wider Manosphere uses sociologist and gender theoretician Michael Kimmel's concept of "aggrieved entitlement" (Blodgett 2020, p. 187, Bratich & Banet-Weiser

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[7] Anita Sarkeesian's (2013-2015) video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* notably received widespread attention (sparking also my personal interest for a feminist intervention in games culture).

2019, p. 5018, Ging 2019, p. 640, Condis 2018, p. 98) placing Gamergate "on a continuum of male behavior […] to use violence to reclaim privileges seen as rightfully belonging to men" (Braithwaite 2016, p. 7). Thus, the core narrative of Gamergate is that a "culture war" is being waged by feminists trying to destroy what rightfully belongs to a male identity (Salter 2018, p. 255). Sarah Banet-Weiser captures the ahistorical construction of an imagined marginalized white male subject in this 'war':

> […] the injuries caused by centuries of structural racism and sexism are turned on their head so that it is white men who feel these injuries most deeply in the contemporary moment. This white masculine identity denies structural racism, seeing white individuals as uniquely injured. (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 39)

Thus, the outlook of Gamergaters and online anti-feminist generally assumes that they are suffering injury in the feminist 'culture war' – explaining largely the self-victimization of these communities. Angela Nagle (2015), widely regarded as one of the early theoreticians of the contemporary online 'culture war', writes that:

> [The anti-feminist online counterculture] is not typically interested in political struggles around rights or equality, but primarily around culture. It is more a style of cultural politics than a political movement and many of its battles are not linked to demands or articulated political goals. (Nagle 2015, pp. 28-29)

As such, the online anti-feminism that Gamergate is an example of, is understood by Nagle (2015) as a form of "cultural politics" rather than an political movement – an outlook which I assume as well, but analyze instead in terms of ideology (see theory chapter). This framing of the online anti-feminism prevalent today also motivates my approach to (gaming) culture as an entry point to online anti-feminism and far-right ideology.

Jesper Juul (2010), in an influential study of the changing games industry shows convincingly how the increasingly popular casual gaming has shifted the demographic focus of the games industry in significant ways. Juul argues that "the rise of casual games has industry-wide implications and changes the conditions for game developers, pushing developers to make games for a broader audience" (2010, p. 7). The massive gendered implications of this shift away from a narrow male gamer demography is a development which of course is important for my study examining ideological contestations invoking other explanations than simply an industry in change.

The Social Justice Warrior

I now turn to previous studies of the 'discursive work' from Gamergate resulting in new concepts and imaginations, focusing on the figure of the Social Justice Warrior (SJW). Megan Condis (2018) in a study of contemporary masculine gamer culture draws attention to when the phrase 'Social Justice Warrior' was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015:

> Defined as derogatory noun to describe "a person who expresses or promotes socially progressive views," it entered the mainstream after years of use in the gaming subculture, where it was a popular shorthand way to discredit and dismiss anyone who presented views that contradicted the straight white male majority. (Condis 2018, p. 1)

Condis points out the SJW catch-all phrase as a convenient way of discrediting dissidence. The phrase made its way from its gaming roots to the mainstream where it today is widely used "to describe individuals […] overly invested in identity politics and political correctness" (Massanari & Chess 2018, p. 526). The SJW figuration is thus central to understand how social issues around gender, race, sexuality etc. are reduced to 'political correctness' politicizing an otherwise 'neutral' medium. My study relates to earlier research of the 'SJW' figure through an analysis of this discursive construction as a 'social enemy' within the frames of (far-right) ideology.

So far, I have accounted for studies of gaming from gender perspectives where a theoretical problem is to explain how a male norm permeating gaming culture is weaponized in online anti-feminist campaigns such as Gamergate.

Right-wing extremism and gaming

Contemporary gaming culture has been studied from the academic field of right-wing extremism as part of the growing, overarching Alternative Right and the online Manosphere (see *Figure 1,* p. 12). A central work mapping these movements that have guided my approach is Hermansson's et al. (2020) mapping of the contemporary "Alternative Right" as it manifests online and offline:

> [The Alternative Right's] distinctiveness is derived from the fact that it is a conglomeration of existing political and social movements that when fused together, created something new and different. It is, at its core, a convergence of three broad groups: the European New Right and Identitarian movement, the American Alternative Right and Online Antagonistic Communities (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 3).

A main issue in this field is thus to explain how the 'new' far-right (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 6) is to be understood in a world where modern information technology is being deployed partly for spreading 'old' fascist and far-right conspiracies and fostering new alliances. Hermansson et al. (2020, p. 7) calls for a multidisciplinary approach and criticizes the existing body of research for being too divided between the perspectives of far-right and fascism research on the one hand, and communications and digital research on the other. The problem the authors identify is a gap between these disciplines which risks either "[failing] to grasp the importance of the online spaces" in traditional far-right research, or "[de-historicizing] and [overaccentuating] the novelty of the movement" in communications and digital research (Hermansson et al 2020, p. 7). My study positions itself in between these perspectives, aware of this problem identified by Hermansson et al (2020).

George Hawley (2017) accounts for Gamergate's relation to the Alt-Right, arguing that Gamergate must be understood, not simply as part of the Alt-Right, but rather as separate movements (2017, p. 45). Gamergate, peaking before the election of Donald Trump and the inflation of the Alt-Right, rather attracted the attention of the far right because of what it managed to accomplish – showing "that an army of anonymous activists and trolls can have a substantial and lasting impact on realworld organizations" (Hawley 2017, p. 48). Marc Tuters (2019) makes a similar point:

> Gamergate may be understood as having pioneered a new model of right-wing activism centred around a fundamentalist defence of free speech, neo-reactionary and traditionalist notions of identity politics and a series of online harassment tactic referred to as 'brigading'[8]. (Tuters 2019, p. 44)

Besides the methods pioneered by Gamergate[9], Tuters (2019, p. 44) argues the movement also demonstrated an unprecedented politicization (or 'red pilling') of "previously relatively politically unengaged internet users in the service of a cause" – the cause being a just war against the 'SJWs', 'globalists' and the 'Cultural Marxists'.

Important for my study in this previous research of gaming and the far right is how a gender perspective can explain how the Manosphere and Alt-Right movements form productive relationships. Here, a male entitlement promoted at the center of the identitarian projects

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[8] An online effort at systemic manipulation by organized action such as mass commenting.
[9] Also covered in detail by Mortensen (2016) and studied with a quantitative approach by Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández (2016)

(Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 70) of the Alt-Right and Gamergate is understood as central for their affiliation:

> […] the alt-right has broadly sought to appeal to gamers by presenting gaming culture as a "last bastion" of white male hegemony under threat from feminism and cultural Marxism. (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 115)

Furthermore, sociologist Hanna Bergman describes the Alt-Right self-victimization as a basis for attacking gender equality:

> By attacking feminism and liberal notions of gender equality, the Alt-Right has "created a culture of vitriolic defensiveness among young white males, which aims to establish a common belief in white male victimhood". (Bergman cited in May & Feldman 2019, p. 34)

Thus, white male victimhood as a central social dynamic, aligning various groups in anti-feminist and oftentimes racist politics, is central in academic attempts at theorizing the Manosphere and the Alt-Right. While the research accounted for here shows the complex connections and affiliations between gamer spaces and far-right projects, much work remains to understand these complexities better, especially in relation to an overarching neoliberal rationality. My study contributes with a focus on a detailed account of ideological struggles over a single event, allowing for an understanding of the contestation and contradictions emerging in a specific case in the intersection of gaming and far right activism. The main contribution this study makes to the field of right-wing extremism is through an empirical account of far-right beliefs, narratives, and discourses in the everyday interaction of game reviews. My approach shows how an everyday space in gaming culture (Metacritic.com) can feature racist and sexist beliefs as well as far-right conspiracies of white male victimization, thus normalizing far-right ideology as a valid perspective. In analyzing these social dynamics in relation to neoliberal conceptions of politics, I seek to contribute to an understudied perspective in both feminist game studies and far right research.

Previous research with similar empirical focus

In my literature review, I have not found any previous research that has looked at reviews of games in a social analysis of gamer culture. A notable exception is Cross (2017, pp. 181-182) who in an essay briefly analyzes user reviews of the game *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company) on the site GOG.com to examine how the story about its lesbian characters is opposed by angry gamers. While this is not part of a rigorous research methodology, it is

nonetheless the only instance of analyzing discourse in user game reviews in a similar way that I do, that I am aware of.

Game reviews have not been widely studied and I have found no academic interest in gamer user reviews[10]. However, José P. Zagal, Amanda Ladd and Terris Johnson (2009) has studied 120 randomly selected professional game reviews arguing that the textual genre should not be considered merely as "shopping guides" (2009, p. 215) but rather as a form of video game journalism that plays a central role in games discourse. Notable in this research is the finding that "almost every single game review analyzed referred to other games in some way or another" (Zagal et al 2009, p. 219) as a feature of the game review genre – a tendency which is salient in my material.

Studies and academic discourse on the video game Wolfenstein II are similarly scarce. Hans-Joachim Backe (2018) is the only academic article I have found discussing the game. Here, Backe contributes with a reading of the game which I agree fully with:

> Developed at the height of #Gamergate, the game is interpreted as a response to reactionary discourses about gender and ability in both mainstream games and the hardcore gamer community. The New Colossus replaces affirmation of masculine empowerment with intersectional ambiguities, foregrounding discourses of feminism and disability. (Backe 2018, para. 1)

Backe further interprets the game as a reaction to the Alt-Right and Gamergate presence in games culture by how "the masculinity, whiteness, and able-bodiedness of the player character are problematized and reframed in the light of contemporary sensibilities about gender, race, and ability" (2018, para. 5). My contribution in relation to academic discourse on Wolfenstein II is how this unique game which "presents in itself a critical engagement with the politics of its genre and its player base" (Backe 2018, para. 1) in turn is received, negotiated, and discursively constructed by its players.

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[10] I use the term 'user reviews' refereeing to individual gamers accounts of games as opposed to reviews from professionalized games journalism.

Theory

The world has to be *made to mean.* Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced. (Stuart Hall 2005[1982], p. 64, emphasis in original)

In my analysis of ideological language use, language as a practice of social power has a central position in my theoretical outlook. With a critical discourse analytical approach (CDA), I am interested in how social groups, in this case gamers, use language in ways to legitimize certain social and material arrangements and denounce others. A power-sensitive understanding of "semiotic technologies" (Haraway 1988, p. 579) is central to how I understand the relation of language and social power. Donna Haraway, in her theoretical displacement of the human subject, deeply inspires my view of language as a political technology which just recently entered a digitized realm in mutual transformation with its (post)human wielder.

Central in theoretical accounts of language of power has been the notion of discourse. The critical examination of 'big discourses' of sexuality by Michael Foucault (1990[1976]), influencing later critical works of discourse on sex/gender (Butler 1999[1990]) and racism (Said 2003[1978]) has all deeply informed the way I approach power in language. The study of discourse by these authors examine how subjects come into being through social practices; naturalized within systems of knowledge. In this framework, subjects, identities, and groups does not simply exist pre-discursively, but is rather brought into being through language use, in for example social projects such as feminism (Butler 1999, p. 5). It is with this understanding of subject-producing language that I turn to gamer subjectivity in the Wolfenstein II reviews.

Ideology, meaning-making, and politics of signification

In this study, ideology is a central theoretical concept to conceptualize social functions in language-use, focusing heavily on practices of self and other-representation (van Dijk 2001, p. 103). In connecting language-use to a theory of ideology, I rely heavily on Teun van Dijk's (2000, 2001) theoretical framework of ideology and Ruth Wodak's (2001) methodology of CDA, but I also find much theoretical inspiration in Stuart Hall's understanding of ideology in culture. In an influential essay outlining the 'rediscovery of ideology' within the critical paradigm, Stuart Hall (2005[1982], p. 65) proposes that "ideological power [is] the power to signify events in a particular way". Hall further writes that:

> […] the power to signify is not a neutral force in society. Significations enter into controversial and conflicting social issues as a real and positive social force, affecting their outcomes […] Ideology, according to this perspective, has not only become a 'material force', to use an old expression – real because it is 'real' in its effects. (Hall 2005, p. 65)

The concept that I focus on in Hall's understanding of ideology is the social act of signifying – that is, in discursive practice making claims about how things are, potentially changing material as well as mental worlds. Thus, different 'ways of seeing' is at the core of how I conceptualize ideology manifesting itself in social practice, and I understand signifying practices as ideological when they seek to produce a reality which aligns with the interests of a social group, mainly in establishing or defending social power.

Hall comments on the classical notion of ideology as formulated within Marxism – that the bourgeois ideology under capitalism represent *material* economic relationships not as contingent and political ('as they really are'), but as "outside history: unchangeable, inevitable and natural" (2005, p. 72). Ideology within the Marxist tradition understand ideology as the economic interest of the ruling economic class and therefor might suggest ideology is something 'others' have. The ideological concept that Hall proposes, on the other hand, and which I adopt in this thesis, goes beyond this narrow conception, and instead sees ideology as present in various social projects. In this study, I for example understand the ideological content of Wolfenstein II as aligning with emancipatory social projects like feminism, anti-fascism, and anti-racism within a general framework of human rights, as opposed to the Nazi ideology. Thus, a more general understanding of ideology allows for more movements, groups, and their language-use to be understood as ideological in a way that includes feminism and anti-racism as well as the Alt-Right and Gamergate. This understanding of ideology resonates with the definition proposed by van Dijk:

> […] I define ideologies as the basic social representations of social groups. They are at the basis of the knowledge and attitudes of groups such as socialists, neo-liberals, ecologists, feminists as well as anti-feminists. They probably have a schematic structure that represents the self-image of each group, featuring membership devices, aims, activities, norms and resources of each group. (van Dijk 2001, p. 115)

Van Dijk here describe how ideologies also, crucially, in a schematic way carries stories and narratives, that is representations, of 'the self' and 'others'. Attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge here play a key role in how ideologies manifest as social, mental, and discursive practice.

The power of signification granted by taking language seriously as social-material practice brings (popular) media into question with its technologically enhanced range of

communication. Hall takes television as an example of a medium that (especially in the pre-internet 80's) has enormous ideological implications through "the reality effect" (2005, p. 70) – a promise of showing (or signifying) "things as they really are" (2005, p. 71). I suggest that the video game medium has an additional ideological 'reality effect' through what Ian Bogost (2008) calls "procedural rhetoric" – the claims about the world that games uniquely make through process. Rather than merely 'observing reality', video (and analogue) games allow players to act within 'possibility spaces' which when mirroring real-world systems, like for example capitalist social relations, naturalizes concepts such as labor and debt (Bogost 2008, pp. 122-123). Reading Wolfenstein II through the concept of procedural rhetoric, I suggest the game constructs a naturalization of legitimate violent resistance against fascism and Nazism. The processes of the game in an active way *shows* the contradictions of fascist ideology and the necessary conditions of violent resistance for the 'undesirable' subjects of the Nazi ideology to survive. Such a reading adds a layer of interpretation to discursive attempts at resisting the 'leftist' ideological content (or propaganda, as is the preferred phrase by many reviewers) that is commonly referred to in the negative reviews. Hall's (2005) concept of 'politics of signification' is central in my interpretation of the ideological struggle playing out on Metacritic – illustrating how games matter as social and political artifacts.

Summing up, I use the concept of ideology mainly to focus on two social practices in the material – the politics of signification in relation to Wolfenstein II struggling to fixate 'how it really is', and ideology as the social representations of social groups such as gamers, feminists, communists, antifa, SJW, men, women and so on.

The gamer 'us', neoliberalism, and aesthetical politics

In understanding Wolfenstein II reviews as ideological practice, I regard the core gamergate (and broader Manosphere) narrative of male victimization as grounds for group membership. On group formations, van Dijk writes:

> […] a *shared problem*, or a *common fate*, in which people may become *mutually dependent*, and may want to act *collectively* to overcome their plight, may be […] criteria for the formation of a group. More generally, various kind of social *conflicts* between collectivities of people typically create groups. (van Dijk 2000, p. 141, emphasis in original)

Masculinized gaming, opposing feminist intervention in 'their' medium, clearly fits van Dijk's (2000) emphasis on a "common fate" and a shared "social conflict" as a basis for an ideological group membership. Therefore, my analysis is highly sensitive to discursive practices of labeling

'us' and 'them' in an overall strategy of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk 2001, p. 103, Wodak 2001, p. 73).

As a theoretical framework to examine masculinized gaming within the ideological backdrop of neoliberalism, I turn to Wendy Brown's (2019) theorization of a nihilistic attitude towards politics caused by a neoliberal rationality:

> If there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and families oriented by markets and morals, then there is no such thing as social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence, let alone subjectivity at the sites of class, gender, or race. (Brown 2019, p. 40)

From this understanding of the neoliberal ideological context, I make use of Browns concept of 'dethronement' to examine the "politics of revenge" towards "those blamed for dethroned white maleness" (Brown 2019, p. 177), which I find maps accurately on the social dynamics of masculinized gaming. Brown's understanding of politics within neoliberalism accompanied by Shean Phelan's (2019) focused analysis on the SJW figuration as a politics of antagonism in relation to neoliberalism, helps me think about the paradoxical project of making political claims from an apolitical imagination.

I also turn to Walter Benjamin's (1969[1935]) influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" discussing the fascist move to represent politics as an aesthetic, rather than the organizing of social and material relations:

> Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. […] The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. (Benjamin 1969, p. 241)

I find this concept useful in illuminating how the politics of anti-Nazism in Wolfenstein II, enacted through the violence against the Nazi enemy, is being desired not for its ideological content and the social implication it prescribes, but rather quite literary as an aesthetics. I use this concept, not so much to analyze politics through Marxist terms of base and superstructure (as Benjamin does), and neither to claim that someone particular is being a fascist, but rather as a concept allowing a heightened sensitivity about an ideological desire for the apolitical. Crucially, I suggest Wolfenstein II could be understood as an example of "politicizing art", which Benjamin (1969, p. 242) calls for in response to fascist politics.

Feminist theory and concepts

Gender and race as analytical categories

Within emancipatory project of subverting relations of dominance, feminism has a long and broad history of theorizing and resisting the male universal. Theoretical contributions of power relations in dialogue with various academic fields has made feminist thought a very productive site of theorization of social power. On the relationship between feminism and CDA, Michelle Lazar writes that:

> As feminist critical discourse analysts, our central concern is with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group. One of the aims is to show that social practices on the whole, far from being neutral, are in fact gendered in this way. (Lazar 2005, p. 5)

In my analysis of game reviews, gender plays a central role in the discursive struggles over the game and the ideologies informing them. However, as years of intersectional feminism has argued convincingly, systems of power functions not according to a singular rationality but are rather articulated in intersecting, complex ways. This motivates a feminist skepticism against the usefulness of any singular analytical category, such as gender (McCall 2005, p. 1771) in understanding a complex social situation. The rich theoretical framework of intersectionality, introduced in the Swedish academic context by Paulina de los Reyes, Irene Molina, and Diana Mulinari (2002), thus encourage us to imagine analytical categories beyond reductionist notions of social categories and instead strive for analyses that represent the complexities of social reality more accurately. For example, the historical division between men and women, writes Molina (2016), must from a queer and post-colonial analysis be problematized as not to obscure the complexity of oppression. Regarding gender, "it is not as simple as every woman being oppressed by every man" (Molina 2016, p. 34, my translation). This intersectional approach plays a vital role in understanding masculinized gaming as a type of gendered dynamic and identity along various axes of subjectivity and social power. Thus, rather than dealing with the analytically coarse categories of 'men' and 'women', following a feminist intersectional theory of gender, my outlook accounts for different constructions of masculinities and femininities that always are at least racialized and marked along several other axes. This is particularly important for the argument I make at the very end of this thesis – that gamer spaces should be examined as potential places of complex marginality, especially in relation to an understudied class perspective.

Performativity and queer failures

As discussed briefly above, gender, as theorized by Judith Butler (1999), is not a stable condition that exists as an attribute of bodies or identities. Rather, gender is best understood as 'performative' as it is brought into existence by discursive and non-discursive social action. Thus, rather than treating gender (or any other social system of naturalization) as an analytical category 'affecting' the social, an analysis of discourse tuned to gender-dynamics allows for the most mundane interactions to speak loudly about the gendered world.

A premise of feminist CDA is that discourse as social practice is important in most social interactions, even though it might not be apparent to the participants – indeed, a gender order is hegemonic when it does not appear as domination at all, but rather as commonplace, everyday interaction (Lazar 2005, p. 7). The theoretical notion of performativity informs how I understand gender and race as 'acted out' in the reviews, rather than merely being an 'objective' factor in the social situation. It is from this theoretical view that I think of hegemonic gaming in terms of 'masculinized gaming', rather than 'male gaming' or similar, to point out how this gendered gaming is brought into existence by an active 'doing' rather than a passive 'being'.

Another way that the performativity of social subjectivity informs my view on the material is through Jack Halberstam's (2011) theoretical interest in failure. Halberstam suggests that the concept of failure is far from neutral or objective – emphasizing the frames of social power that largely decides what success looks like. I make use of this perspective on failure to illuminate the contestation over successful masculinity in Wolfenstein II where the conventions of masculinized gaming historically have promoted a male power fantasy (Habel 2018) with minimal frames of 'gendered success'. The queerness of failing is a valuable perspective that opens for reading feminist strategies of the game that I suggest contests the frames of masculine success.

Methodology and empirical material

No analysis of language can possibly cover all structures of discourse, but has to make active choices and selections in what to study and what to leave out in an analysis that will always be partial (van Dijk 2001, p. 99) Early in the process of selecting material, one such choice was my decision to only focus on those reviews engaging with politics, excluding all reviews of the game not meeting my set of criteria (see material section). What this selection left me with, excluding about two thirds of the total reviews, is a body of texts whose topic solely or partly is politics and social issues in relation Wolfenstein II and gaming.

What interests me about these reviews are how they are saturated by "ideologically biased discourses" and engage heavily in the practice of "polariz[ing] the representation of 'us' (ingroups) and 'them' (outgroups)" (van Dijk 2001, p. 103). However, while it to me is clear that there *are* important social practices playing out discursively in the material, the tools with which to study these are not obvious. In this chapter, I set out to describe the rationality and approach with which I interact with the reviews of Wolfenstein II from a methodological standpoint of critical discourse analysis, relying heavily on the ideological analysis of discourse proposed by van Dijk (2000, 2001) and Wodak (2001).

Performing an analysis of ideological discourse

While many social practices such as war, trade and city planning can manifest ideologies, discourse is unique in that it can formulate ideological beliefs directly (van Dijk 2000, p. 193). It is through discourse that much "ideological socialization" (van Dijk, p. 193) takes place and it is largely with this in mind that I read the reviews of Wolfenstein II as an ideological struggle of preferred interpretations. This 'pedagogy of seeing', both towards the game and the wider social situation, is thus the basis of the analysis of ideological discourse proposed in this thesis.

My approach to reading and understanding discourse focuses mainly the semantic level of discourse. Thus, I exclude to a large extent 'surface structures' of language-use such as sentence structure, spelling, syntax, and graphic elements which lies closer to the empirically observable as opposed to the semantic level of meaning-making (van Dijk 2000, p. 204).

The overall process might be thought of as "mapping of ideology on text and talk" (van Dijk 2000, p. 206), here concluded by van Dijk:

> Ideological beliefs need to be inferred, hypothetically reconstructed, from actual discourse, for
> instance by comparison with repeated (contextually different) discourses of other group members.
> (van Dijk 2000, p. 284)

From this perspective on ideological beliefs, the reviews of Wolfenstein II are suitable for an ideological analysis in their focus on the very same game, situations, characters, etc. The genre and local context of video game reviewing creates a tight restricting frame which I find very helpful in the method of comparing "repeated discourses" of different group members, as described by van Dijk above.

Three stages of analysis

In the first part of my analysis, I analyze discourse on the game as an ideological arena in a 'politics of signification' (Hall 2005). In this analysis, following Wodak (2001), I ask:

> How are persons named and referred to linguistically? […] What traits, characteristics, qualities
> and features are attributed to them? (Wodak 2001, p. 72)

This focuses the very concrete linguistic practices struggling to establish certain truths of Wolfenstein II and the social situation. Here, I make close readings of words, metaphors, strategies, and interpretations. I repeatedly use the concept of 'strategy' in analyzing ideological speech, here described by Wodak:

> […] 'strategy' […] generally mean a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of
> practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political,
> psychological or linguistic aim. (Wodak 2001, p. 73)

In repeated discourse involving large scale proposition and repeated implied meanings such as 'Wolfenstein II went full SJW', these 'truths' about the characters becomes implied in discourse. These high-level propositions are understood as "macro-topics" (Wodak 2001, p. 66), which is helpful in identifying ideological positions.

The second stage of analysis focuses 'self' and 'other' representation relating to different social groups such as a 'true gamer us' and 'feminist, SJW them', exploring how these are somewhat malleable categories depending on the current strategy. Here, the same questions proposed by Wodak (2001) above are helpful, with the addition of:

> By means of what arguments and argumentation schemes do specific persons or social groups try
> to justify and legitimize the exclusion, discrimination, suppression and exploitation of others?
> (Wodak 2001, p. 72)

In the third stage of analysis, I work from the local level of discourse – the immediate interactional situation, to a global level of discourse – "the social, political, cultural and historical structures in which a communicative event takes place" (van Dijk 2001, p. 108). Here, I examine contradictions and tensions in the systems of beliefs represented in the reviews and trace them to the ideological projects of the Alt-Right and Manosphere within an overarching neoliberal rationality.

As an methodological approach of CDA suggested by Wodak, I have also during this study performed a measure of "fieldwork and ethnography" (2001, p. 69) by emerging myself in the contemporary fast-evolving language and discourse of gaming in various online spaces[11].

Methodological challenges

A methodological problem I identify in my approach is accounting for social groups in a digital environment without being able to distinguish any demographic traits. As formulated by Debbie Ging (2019), the "transnational nature" of online spaces like the Manosphere complicates theorization with its "overlaps between local, regional, and global configurations of practice" (2019, p. 642). Concretely, the two main issues I identify in my approach is firstly how to think about discourses as geographically situated in nations (with specific histories, social orders etc.) and at the same time as transnationally situated in online (gamer) spaces (also with very specific social orders, etc.)[12]. Secondly, the ideological affinity of the authors remains obscure. The claim that the Alt-Right review-bombed[13] Wolfenstein II (Moseman 2017) is here especially problematic as this raises the question whether my approach accesses discursive practice of mainly gamers, the Alt-Right or a mix of these surely overlapping groups.

While I acknowledge these issues, I also think that this low resolution at the ethnological level of analysis is best approached through an CDA methodology, as I am mainly interested in specific discursive practices of signification and ideological processes in discourse, rather than the intentionality and aims of speaking ethnographic subjects. Based on my position as a life-long gamer, I also have a (fallible of course) sense of reviews written by gamers (in the sense of having played the game), as games review discourse often is a quite specific genre (Zagal et al. 2009). Based on this, I make the estimation that *most* negative reviews likely is not from Alt-Right non-gamers.

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[11] For this study, I have spent a considerable amount of time on the subreddit KotakuInAction and KotakuInAction2, as well as on 4chan, YouTube, Steam community and various game industry sites.

[12] A few reviews are for example clearly written in another language than English and later machine translated.

[13] An online activist tactic seeking to harm commercial success by systemically submitting negative reviews.

Shortly on feminist reflexivity…

My voice in this study comes from a not so uncomplicated position of 'gamer' – not out of identity but rather practice, which of course has an enormous impact on how I approach this project. As proposed by Adrienne Shaw, "being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games" (2013, para. 1), and various (polite) interactions in academic rooms has been an opportunity for me to discover myself to be an 'unexpected gamer' in the eyes of feminism – admittedly a bit reassuring.

This polite recognition is however not a fully satisfying resolution as it leaves intact the core gamer identity which few feminists, perhaps gamer or otherwise, has an uncomplicated relationship to (Shaw 2013). In feminist spaces, 'coming out' as gamer can be a fine line between queering gaming in a moment of subverted expectations, and a feminist disappointment based on a (reasonable but reductionist) view of gaming as a questionable patriarchal practice. Being a feminist gamer is a position of unrest – demanding critical reflexivity and inviting precious few moments of pleasurable play for both the feminist and gamer within. Wolfenstein II is, for me, in many ways one of those moments.

In this study, I approach gaming through a feminist ethics of emancipation deployed *from* a position of (feminist) white masculinity, *towards* a site of white masculinity – a project I have not seen widely represented in the field of games studies. At the very end of my analysis, I make particular use of my positionality in a feminist negotiation of masculinized gaming.

Empirical material – User reviews of Wolfenstein II

On the 30th of January 2020, I recorded all at the time available reviews of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (Machinegames 2017) on Metacritic.com under the four available platforms[14] PC, PlayStation, Xbox and Switch. Excluding non-English reviews, this made a total of **560 user reviews**. In deciding what reviews to include or exclude as empirical material for this study, I made the following set of **criteria**:

Necessary conditions:
- Submitted in English
- Submitted between 27 October 2017 (release date) and 30 January 2020 (time of recording).

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[14] Gaming platform refers to the software and hardware-system that runs the game. The major contemporary gaming platforms are Sony PlayStation, Microsoft Xbox, Nintendo Switch and the personal computer (PC)

Sufficient conditions:

- Explicitly mentioning the social dimensions of the game regarding racism and white supremacy, sexism, etc. (often characterized as 'politics').
  - Expressing a negative sentiment about the game being 'too political'.
  - Expressing a positive sentiment about the game making 'a political' statement.
- Engaging through a review with other reviewers that comments on 'the politics'
- Mentioning real world neo-Nazis or Nazism.
- Mentioning real world political groups.
- Using derogatory speech and slurs.

I followed these **guidelines** in unclear cases when selecting reviews:

- When a review is unclear regarding the criteria above, I include it rather than discard it. These cases where few.
- I exclude vague undertones, like describing the resistance leader (a woman of color) as "annoying" or "cringy" without explaining why, because of its inadequacy for my analysis.
- I exclude remarks about the story being 'odd', without explicitly referring to social or political dimensions further.
- I exclude reviews that only referred to other reviewers as 'idiots' or similar for giving the game low or high ratings without engaging further with the social and political discussions.

After categorizing[15] the 560 reviews, I was left with **176 reviews meeting the criteria**, here visualized[16] in F*igure 2*.

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[15] As a digital tool, I have made extensive use of Nvivo 12 in managing, reading, and coding the material.
[16] See *figure 15* for more a more detailed statistical account of the material.

Figure 2. Illustration of empirical material

The process of selecting material resulted in the following **set of reviews**:

Total positive reviews = 86

Total mixed reviews = 20

Total negative reviews = 70

What is Metacritic?

Metacritic is one of the most popular sites for game reviews on the internet and is commonly used as the 'to-go' service to measure the success of a game – even amongst industry professionals, publishers, and developers (Orland 2011). Considering its dominant position

within gaming, I regard Metacritic as a 'geek-dominated space' (Salter 2018, p. 251) part of a gamer (sub)cultural space as well as 'consumer-space' that plays an significant role in the multi-national games industry. The platform describes its mission as following:

> Metacritic's mission is to help consumers make an informed decision about how to spend their time and money on entertainment. We believe that multiple opinions are better than one, user voices can be as important as critics, and opinions must be scored to be easy to use. (Metacritic 2020, About Metacritic)

The platform is not exclusive for gaming but also features reviews on movies, television shows and music. However, Metacritic is central within gaming and play a role in evaluations of market-success, reportedly even as a quantitative basis for "performance bonuses" for games-workers (Orland 2011), suggesting that the Metacritic is treated as a legitimate arena for video game reviews in the games industry. *Figure 3* visualizes my decisions to focus the user reviews on Metacritic.com:

Figure 3. Overview of Metacritic

Henceforth, by 'reviews' or 'score', I refer to user-reviews and user-scores. Reviews are automatically categorized into one of the categories 'negative', 'mixed' and 'positive' by the Metacritic review-system based on score as shown in *Figure 3*. In quoting the material, I add explanations for abbreviation[17] and clarifications when needed within square brackets "[]", and indicates mid-sentence cuts with "[…]". I do not use "(sic)″ for any reason in citing the reviews. The censoring of words with "*" is how the reviews are presented on Metacritic, likely due to a word-censoring algorithm.
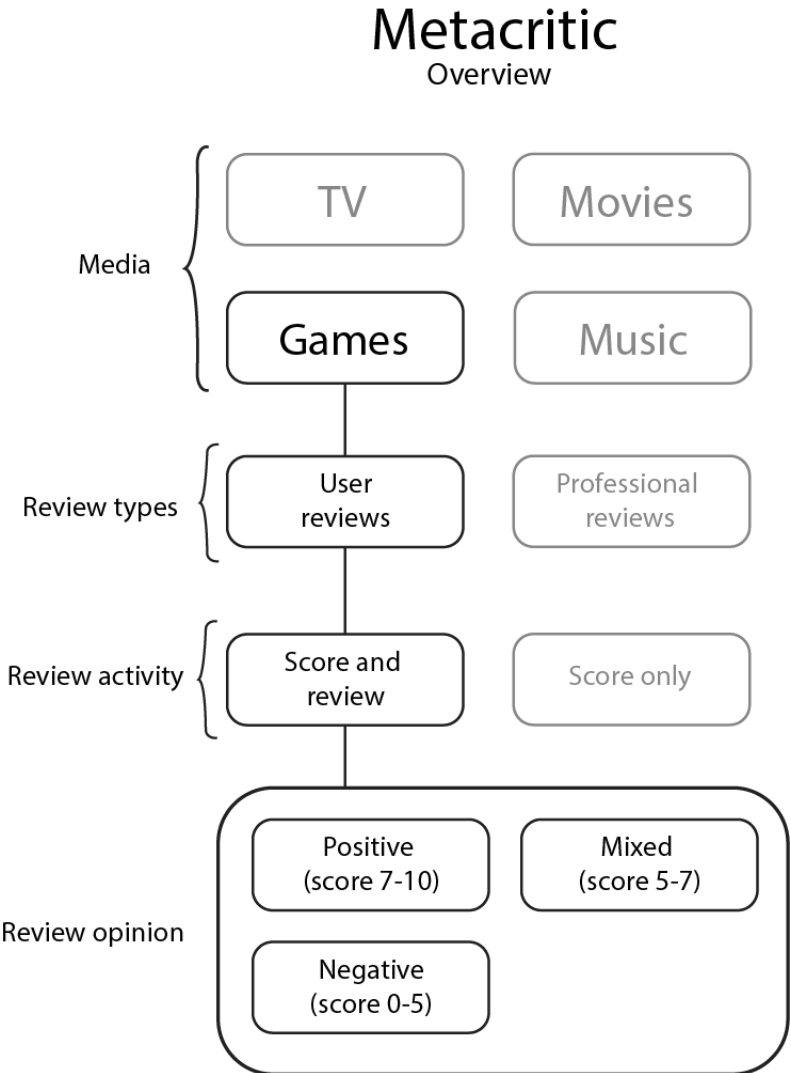
Rationality for selection

Early on in this study, I decided to look specifically at Wolfenstein II as a case in the bigger empirical context of video games and politics. An alternative that I considered was to study online spaces that are more exclusive to masculinized gaming, such as the self-appointed "almost-official GamerGate subreddit" reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/. Even though I have spent much time there during the project to familiarize myself with the evolving language and ideological project of this online space, I decided to focus on the reviews of Wolfenstein II as empirical material for the following reasons. I do however make use of empirical material found during this ethnographic work in illuminating discourses that resonating in interesting ways with the reviews.

The approach to study online spaces during a demarcated time-period has been done by Nagle (2015) in a study of 4chan and Massanari (2015) in a study of Reddit. These studies are very valuable as ethnographic approaches with a broader perspective on the social practice in these cultures. My choice to rather start from a singular cultural event (Wolfenstein II) and analyze ideological texts around this is based in the methodology of CDA. Focusing discursive practices around a specific event is particularly fitting to the CDA approach, I argue, because I am interested in studying how the very same 'event' is signified and talked about in different ways in repeated discourse, as discussed above. In this sense, I regard the reviews of Wolfenstein II on Metacritic a relatively 'rare neutral' discursive arenas in relation to the "echo chambers" (Mortensen 2016, p. 799) of reddit or 4chan, which therefore is especially apt for studying ideological struggles and dissidence.

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[17] Except those abbreviations repeatedly used throughout the thesis, such as "SJW" [Social Justice Warrior].

Ethical considerations

The Swedish Research Council suggest that ethical consideration in research largely is about weighing different legitimate interests against each other (Vetenskapsrådet 2017, p. 7), which when involving individuals means weighing the value of the potential knowledge against risks or harms to those involved in the research. The main ethical question that I will be dealing with in my approach is the protection of the individuals whose texts serves as the empirical material for this study. I also touch upon the question of research on potentially violent groups and using material protected by copyright in research purpose.

Studying human subjects or published texts?

A starting point for digital methods is to adopt a context sensitive approach rather than "focusing on the legally permissible uses of […] data" (Williams 2018, para. 3). In the following, I employ such a context sensitive reasoning to explore the potential risks of ethical implications of studying people's online activities without their explicit consent.

As a first step, I ask: to what extent can my research be said to include human subjects? As Nathan Rambukkana (2019, p. 312) writes, even in studying text as discourse, the research is ultimately about the individuals behind the text which must be subject to ethical consideration. The following discussion assumes that my study to some degree involves human subjects and not only published texts.

In digital methods on human subjects, The Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al. 2020) identifies the following principles in relation to the question of informed consent:

> […] as personally identifiable information (PID) and/or sensitive information is collected, strong steps are required to protect the identity of individual subjects and, in many cases (where possible), to obtain their informed consent to the research being carried out upon them and/or their data. (Franzke et al. 2020, p. 10)

These guidelines point out that the combination of personally identifiable information (PID) and sensitive information in empirical material, together makes a strong argument for taking further steps to protect individual subjects. In my approach, I am aware of that the reviews can be accessed online and matched with the texts quoted in this study – thereby making user profiles impossible to keep anonymous, and that discussions about political and social issues can be considered sensitive. However, as the user's profiles *only* can convey potential sensitive information through review-texts, user name or a profile picture, I think it is reasonable to judge

both PID and sensitive information as overall low in the reviews. As further context to Metacritic as an online space, I find the following points to support my judgment not to attempt to require consent from the authors:

- The material consists of little or no sensitive information or personal data (see above).
- The site being studied is a public site available without passwords or similar.
- From the nature of the texts (public reviews online) one can reasonably assume them not to be regarded by the author as personal texts, as for example posts on social media might be.
- The context of Metacritic differs from more socially oriented user generated content sites in that it does not feature social networking like 'friends' or prompt about personal data such as telephone number, workplace, family, etc.

Finally, as there is no way of contacting the users of Metacritic (as it features no direct messaging or access to email-address), I find it ethically defendable to conduct the proposed research rather than refrain from it.

In relation to similar approaches in the field I note that Condis (2015) treat messages on online message boards (also featuring social and political discussions) as published texts, even referring to the authors usernames and linking directly to the (now unavailable) texts in the bibliography. This exemplifies another ethical judgment where I instead choose to employ further steps to mitigate risk for those involved.

Studying Gamergate and far-right spaces

Research relating to Gamergate poses a few ethical questions. Firstly, it should be made clear that academic discourse on Gamergate frames it largely as a harassment campaign which is rejected by Gamergate supporters who rather claim it to be about "ethics in video game journalism" (Braithwaite 2016, p. 1). This obviously does not mean that both discourses have an equal claim to truth, but merely that an "epistemological conflict" (Rambukkana 2019, p. 313) exists, which should be acknowledged.

Secondly, game studies and Gamergate already has a history and as Rambukkana points out:

> The intimate proximities of this research often put games, communication, and social justice scholars within the crosshairs of the movement, inviting insults, abuse and – in their worst manifestations – doxxing, career interference, and death/rape threats. (Rambukkana 2019, p. 313)

Similarly, Massanari identifies scholars within the humanities and social sciences at risk "given the ontological and epistemological rationales for their research" (2018, p. 2). Except for the ethics of putting myself as researcher at risk of these harassments, the risk also extends to my

immediate surrounding, social environment, supervisor, and university department. While I can do little to mitigate this risk, I am content that a master's thesis from a Swedish university is unlikely to aggregate online mobs. The issue is however a serious one for digital methods in general. Collective ways of strengthening security for researchers in relation to antagonistic online communities is discussed further by Massanari (2018).

Copyright and video game screenshots

In this study, to improve the quality of research I use screenshots of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (Machinegames 2017) to convey a picture of what the reviewers are referring to. The use of copyrighted video game material in research has been covered in "Recommendations from the Digital Games Research Association [DiGRA]" (Lastowka & Ogino 2014). In short, DiGRA finds it unproblematic to use screenshots if it is not used "solely for a commercial and non- educational purpose" (Lastowka & Ogino 2014, p. 2). While this is based on immaterial property laws of the USA, a similar principle to 'fair use' can be found in Swedish law as 'Citaträtt' (Nationalencyklopedin 2020, Citaträtt) which similarly excludes scholarly purposes for copyrighted material.

Ideological struggles:

Contested meanings of the game and its characters

This chapter analyzes reviews of Wolfenstein II and its characters as sites of ideological contestation involving intersecting politics of gender and race. I am interested in how ideological groups claim, in a 'politics of signification' (Hall 2005, p. 66), to 'see' characters and events, and how these accounts are part of ideological projects.

Figure 4. The Wolfenstein II main characters of the anti-Nazi resistance.

Failed masculinity and feminist success

Histories and bodies that (does not) matter

William Joseph "B.J." Blazkowicz has been the protagonist of numerous Wolfenstein games since the 80s, but this is the first game featuring a deeper historization of him. The story of BJ's childhood is told with a focus on the racism and abuse BJ grows up with, and BJ's journey of coming to terms with this. In one of the first flashback scenes, we witness how BJ initially reject

playing with his new neighbor Billie (*Figure 5*) on racist grounds taught by his father. However, quickly BJ is drawn into a friendship with Billie, framed as a journey of unlearning racism and violence. I suggest that Young BJ in the flashbacks can be understood as a subjectivity generated largely at the sites of gender, race and class (Brown 2019, p. 40) – a subjectivity that is rejected as unfit for a video game hero in many reviews:

Figure 5. Protagonist BJ and his childhood friend Billie in a flashback scene.

> Why on Earth would you ever include this sensitive, emotional, and (again) political background story for BJ? He is now someone who grew up with an abusive, racist father, who did not approve of his interracial childhood friendship? This completely ruins the tough, relentless, borderline psychotic, personality that BJ had through the first couple entries in the franchise. This may not matter to some people, but to me, they softened BJ up completely and killed some of the immersion built up from the previous games.
> - Negative review

In this review, the historization of BJ is described as "ruining" a personality that BJ embodied in previous games – negatively impacting the much-desired "immersion" of gaming. Giving BJ a "sensitive, emotional and political background" is framed as antithetical to the "tough" and "relentless" qualities expected from BJ. Any positive interpretation of this storytelling is made unthinkable by the phrase "Why on Earth would you ever […]", and the perceived negative aspects of BJ are exaggerated in repeated uses of "completely". In this review extract, the failure of BJ's masculinity lies not so much in his gendered performance (Butler 1999) as a child, but rather in the developer's choice to "include" it in the game and thus "softening" him up. The issue is one of showing what should remain hidden – thus ruining the fantasy of a tough

masculinity so often constructed within gaming in various power fantasies. This, I argue, is a clear example of the types of politics of signification (Hall 2005) occurring throughout the reviews.

As is common in the genre of game reviews (Zagal et al 2009, p. 219), the next review refers to another game within the PFS genre to make a similar point about BJ:

> Doom did it right, no backstory and no character you're just a badass who kills everything in his path.
> - Negative review

Doom[18] (Bethesda Softworks 2016*)* with its recent reboot from its 90's debut is taken as an example of how the protagonist in contrast to BJ simply is "a badass" killing his foes without the burden of personality and history[19]. Read as a desired performativity of gender (Butler 1999) the review calls for a "badass" masculinity that is brought into being by the social action of lethal violence – crucially, a violence seemingly without social meaning.

Other reviews frame the historization of BJ simply as bad storytelling:

> […] BJ's backstory like my god was that awful I could really care about the back story of the murder machine who just run and guns a bunch of Nazis, why is his backstory even a thing?
> - Negative review

> […] the whole thing with BJ's childhood was totally off topic […]
> - Negative review

There is a pattern of signifying BJ's backstory as "off topic" and irrelevant for a protagonist which is suggested to only be a "murder machine". The pattern that I argue emerges from these reviews is a contestation of how BJ is "produced" (Butler 1999, p. 5) as an undesirable subject of gaming through the representation of his childhood. This show, I argue, how the subjectivity of BJ produced at various sites of social power, challenges the way masculinity generally is imagined within masculinized gaming.

Another major contestation of BJ's masculinity centers the representation of his body in the game. Waking up from a five months coma after the horrors of the previous game, BJ finds himself disoriented and weak as Nazis attack the resistance submarine hideout. This thematic

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[18] See Habel (2018) for a brief analysis of Dooms protagonist 'the Doom Slayer' and his masculinity perceived by players.
[19] In a twisted irony, *Doom*'s (2016) protagonist 'The Doom Slayer' is in fact hinted to be a descendant of BJ in a shared Wolfenstein–Doom universe. Arguably, the anti-capitalist theme of Doom further brings into question the 'ahistoricity' of Doom Slayers violence.

of "corporeality of disability" (Backe 2018, para. 42) in both mind and body is a drastic departure from FPS conventions and takes a central position in the discursive struggles of his masculinity. In one review, BJ's injuries are framed in a way revealing a contestation over his body:

> [...] if BJ's body is dying earlier in the game and he needed the suit to keep him alive why didn't they just oh I don't know fix his damn body because if they can surgically attach his head to a new body how come they couldn't fix his old one??
> - Negative review

Figure 6. BJ in the first level of the game.

BJ's injuries are here understood as largely reduced to physiological mechanics. My reading is that BJ's "damn body" cannot be 'fixed' within the frames of the story because of how his injuries are represented not just as biological, but also mental and psychological from living under Nazi rule – bringing in a political dimension to BJ's injuries. In reducing health to an equation of technology, BJ's body is deprived of its social and political context. A rejection of BJ's mental struggles is salient in reviews describing him as too emotional:

> [...] you're hearing BJ be an emo punk, **** and complaining.
> - Negative review

> From a zero-f*ck giving Nazi killing machine, Blazkowicz got turned into a little-b*tch, that constantly whines about everything.
> - Negative review

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The historization of BJ and his mental and bodily states are in these reviews largely made unimaginable as something that deepens the meaning of BJ's struggle against Nazism. Instead, his various disabilities are constructed as a diminishing force in a male power fantasy and therefore in the enjoyment of gaming. As Backe (2018, para. 2) argues, BJs damaged body, suicidal mind and fragile hope clearly contrasts with the conventions of gendered power fantasies in the context of PFS AAA gaming. However, I here want to add that the contestation to BJ's masculinity not merely is about him breaking the norms of masculinity in games, but also that he is produced as a subject (Butler 1999) at intersections of gender, race and (dis)ability in a social context where masculinity is defined largely by the absence of those social intersections. BJ does not conform to the norm of an indestructible player-character programmed for immediate 'respawn' in case of death as his injuries remains with the player as part of the gameplay and story. The masculinity desired in masculinized gaming as expressed in the reviews is one that meet no real adversaries – social, political, psychological or biological – only a military one, necessarily on a deterministic path to defeat as the game allows no other outcomes.

The rejection of BJ's history and political injuries as valid storytelling even opens for what I interpret as far-right conspiratorial explanations:

> I have recently seen an interview with Bill Whittle on Youtube called "The Left Killed Star Wars". He explains in great detail how the left is doing propaganda and using old well known IPs [intellectual property] to rewrite history (even in culture) and use it for their propaganda […] For example he says how they mostly do prequels to rewrite the story to their liking, ignoring what happened before or how characters were before, even if it completely contradicts the original lore. This game has a lot of sequences where BJs history is explained, and they do exactly what Whittle describes. Its amazing and disgusting at the same time.
> - Negative review

This lengthy extract exemplifies how the politics of BJ's character is rejected to the degree that it is suggested to be part of a scheme to rewrite history by "the left", illustrating a quite surreal politics of signification (Hall 2005). The idea of "the left" controlling the institutions of culture and history clearly draws from a far-right ideas (Hermansson 2020, p. 26) and I argue, can be understood as an attempt at 'red pilling' "previously relatively politically unengaged internet users" (Teuters 2019, p. 44).

The politics of success

A feminist reading of BJ's 'failed' masculinity contrasts to the reviews analyzed here and opens for a deeper understanding of BJ's presumed failures. Halberstam (2011, p. 5) invites us to think about the precarious models in which success and failure takes place:

> [...] gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals [...] (Halberstam 2011, p. 17)

I argue that the masculine successes expected from BJ signify failure only in the precarious models defining success in terms of the power to dominate others. The game shows how BJ's failures can be a "source of misery and humiliation" (Halberstam 2011, p. 5) but it is from the frames of Nazism that BJ suffers this humiliation:

Figure 7. The main antagonist Irene Engel humiliates a captured BJ.

BJ's strength and heroism, as represented in the game, lie in his unconditional rejection of 'success' as defined by white supremacy and patriarchy. He does not become simply 'a murder machine', but someone who in the context of Nazi oppression is *forced* to political violence. Thus, BJ's violence is not 'socially meaningless' but on the contrary is produced at intersecting sites of power through his political resistance to Nazism. Backe makes a similar reading of the game:

> Instead of flirting with ideas of white, male supremacy, the game continuously exposes Nazi rhetoric and central values of fascist and supremacist ideology such as masculine virility. (Backe 2018, para. 40)

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The game, in my view, presents the fight against Nazism on the level of storytelling not as desirable and epic, but deeply tragic. In exercising *political violence* rather than simply *violence*, BJ do not conform to the expectation of masculine success (Halberstam 2011) of a protagonist "who kills everything in his path" as expressed in a negative review.

Femininity – performing an ʼunbelievableʼ gender

Anya was introduced in the first game of the reboot *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (Machinegames 2014) as the long-time nurse and later partner of a badly damaged BJ. As the game progresses, Anya learns the ropes of warfare in joining the resistance, and by the events of Wolfenstein II is a fully fledged anti-Nazi fighter. While the masculinity of BJ generally is framed in the reviews as *failed* as examined above, the femininity of Anya is largely contested on the grounds that it is *unbelievable*.

Figure 8. Pregnant Anya assassinates a Nazi soldier.

Central to this contestation is that Anya is pregnant in the game, a fact that few reviewers fail to mention:

> pregnant woman who can killed trained nazis. Yes she can shoot, run, jump and drunk with her
> big stomach. And nazis who spent much time in war and seized all World can't kill her
> - Negative review

An appeal to realism here works to criticize both the physical prowess of Anya, but also the military weakness of the Nazis "who spent much time in war and seized all World". Other reviewers are similarly unconvinced by Anya's performances:

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During the most dangerous missions (for example the New Orleans one), Anya tags along with Fergus (or Wyatt) to help him. Now, what the actual f*ck. The U-boat is FULL OF REBELS, but instead they send Anya, who is pregnant WITH TWINS to fight the war!
- Negative review

[...] the retarded use of a 6 months pregnant wife as a front line operative, when you have a WHOLE Submarines worth of operatives who can do the job better than a frigging PREGNANT NURSE.
- Negative review

In these reviews, Anya is perceived as unrealistically skilled and as taking too great and unnecessary risks. Her background as a nurse is further used as an argument against her 'unrealistic' fighting. In her performance of 'male' (anti-Nazi) skills, Anya becomes a sore spot – especially in relation to BJ's 'failed' masculinity and her pregnancy. The performance of real and unreal gender can be understood through Halls (2005, p. 70) notion of media having a "reality effect". The charge of 'unrealism'[20] clearly functions to discipline some 'unrealisms', namely social ones, rather than those of the physical realm, and seems to disproportionally target female characters. In this, a clear cut is made between the physical and social world, where the former is entitled to vast re-imaginations and the latter is treated as eternal and unchanging. The appeal to realism is of course paradoxical for a medium rooted in fantasy, sci-fi and (im)possible worlds.

One review suggests that the representation of Anya simply is feminism at work:

Feminism:
BJs girlfriend is displayed as a complete uber-woman, saving his life all the time, while being in the last few weeks of pregnancy. One scene is so ridiculous and obscene that I even fear this gets censored when I type it out. Lets just say it involves her saving BJ again, ripping off her clothes and then letting out a Rambo-yell while killing dozens of Nazis and getting showered completely in Nazi blood while grinning like a lunatic. Yes, you see it all.
- Negative review

Anya is here again framed in a discourse of realism by being "a complete uber-woman", suggesting in extension that feminism similarly make 'unreal' representations of women. The 'obscene scene' laid out here to represent Anya as deranged is discussed in several reviews:

[...] dont forget about the pregnant woman going full on topless covered in blood dual wielding guns as if to tell me this is the NEW bad ass we should all strive to be, absolute cringe.
- Negative review

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[20] Gamer opposition to women fighting in games is not precedented. As late as 2018, women featured in *Battlefield V* (EA DICE) set during WWII spawned the online reaction #NotMyBattlefield (Farokhmanesh 2018) to protest the 'failure' of historical and gendered realism.

Figure 9. Anya saves BJ from being jumped by Nazis.

Anya's performance of violence is here read as "bad ass" but rejected on grounds of it being performed by "the pregnant woman". This can be interpreted as a rejection of the games "reality effect" (Hall 2005, 70) – interpreted as if Anya's gendered 'badassness' is "the NEW bad ass we should all strive to be". This articulation implies some sort of exchange of badass subjectivity, possibly on the 'expense' of BJ being saved in the scene in question. The emotional response of "cringe" signifies this representation as socially unacceptable and painful to watch.

I argue this narrative of 'gender unrealism' relates to a macro-topic (Wodak 2001, p. 66) of "social engineering", a political project which Wolfenstein II is accused of taking part in. Rather than representing gender 'as it is' (Hall 2005, p. 71) the game constructs (or engineers) a social reality:

> This boring derivative shooter is using a venerable franchise to make a quick buck by injecting the game play with a story riddled with anti-white propaganda and social engineering.
> - Negative review

The concept "social engineering" as it is deployed here acknowledges the power of signification in bringing alternative social and material worlds about, but the way it is framed here marks this is an illegitimate goal. Thus, "social engineering" is placed against a silent counterpart – relying on the idea of a 'natural' social order being challenged by the game's politics.

The gendered demands that emerge from the reviews are thus based in the desire to experience gendered (virtual) realities in certain ways. The game's attempt to subvert gendered norms is

taken as proof of the 'social engineering' of SJW, feminist and left-wing ideology rather than as having any possible merits of storytelling or legitimate political aims. The ideological representation of social groups derived from statements like these are examined further in the next chapter, and I now turn to the game's politics of racism as it is signified in the reviews.

Racism, white supremacy, and whiteness

An 'unbelievably' racist father

A character that figures frequently in the reviews is BJ's father "Rip Blazkowicz". Rip is a descendant of polish immigrants in denial of his east-European roots who eventually sells out BJ's Jewish mother Zofia and his former friends to the Nazis. The player learns that Rip married Zofia to gain access to her father's money for his sketchy business practice, which turns out to fail miserably leaving the family in a precarious state. Failing to accept his shortcomings, Rip turn to racism and anti-Semitism to explain his situation and lets BJ and Zofia suffer his physical and mental abuse. In a much-referenced scene in the beginning of the game, Rip kills the family dog in an outburst of violent abuse.

Figure 10. Young BJ and his mother Zofia to the left and BJ′s father Rip to the right.

> Killing the family dog because you kissed a little negro girl as punishment doesn't make sense.
> These are all cheap shots. Unrealistic interactions [...]
> - Negative review

Firstly, focusing on the statement that Rip's racism "doesn't make sense", I suggest this can be understood, similar to my analysis above, as a contestation of subjectivities that are clearly

generated at "the sites of class, gender, or race" (Brown 2019, p. 40). If, as Brown claims "there is no such thing as social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence" in neoliberal rationality (Brown 2019, p. 40), this review exemplifies a reaction to a (racist) subjectivity that should not exist – explaining why Rip's racist violence "doesn't make sense". Using racist language in making this point further contributes to the 'anti-anti-racist' positionality in the text.

In the reviews, Rip is often described as 'abnormally evil' – a specifically unrealistically crafted 'bad' character:

> The plot begins in the most preachy manor possible: Your father is the worst human being possible. I mean truly the worst. We're talking Disney levels of puppy kicking evil here […]
> - Negative review

> The father character is abnormally evil (done on purpose as if we already don't look down on racism).
> - Negative review

This similarly exemplifies a contestation of racist subjectivity – implying that it is abnormal and unrealistic. Rip is described as cartoonish and the plot as "preachy", suggesting a religious dogmatism in the storytelling. The latter review suggests that Rip's racism is 'unnecessary' in the game as "we" already understand that racism is bad, which can be understood as managing a positive self-representation (van Dijk 2001, p. 103) while criticizing anti-racism.

Several reviews share this disdain with Rip's character in the plot, resonating with a discourse of BJ's historicity being 'unnecessary' examined earlier. Rip is also sometimes understood as a negative 'stereotype':

> […] the stereotypical boogie man of the click bait press: straight white male, wife beater, anti-semite, racist anti black, complaining about the plight of the straight white male.
> - Negative review

> We discover our hero was abused as a child by his white father who surprise surprise was a terrible racist and anti-semite.
> - Negative review

These reviews suggest that Rip's racist character is connected to a real-world stereotype of 'white racist people', promoted by "the click bait press". I suggest these narratives play into a white "identitarianism" promoted by the Alt-Right – that "American society is fraught with 'anti-white' racism" (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 70), which I now turn to examine more closely.

Grace Walker and the loss of anti-Nazism

In the game, Grace Walker joins BJ and takes on a leading position in the resistance group. Grace is in many reviews understood as a character representing the anti-Nazi fight, making her central in many reviews:

Figure 11. Grace Walker meeting BJ for the first time, suspecting him to be a Nazi.

> […] you eventually run into a racist black lady who spends most of the game being racist towards white people, mostly males. Instead of the protagonist shutting down the racist remarks he actually joins in.. When killing Nazis isn't quite enough, it has to be killing WHITE Nazis.
> - Negative review

In this review, Grace is accused for "being racist towards white people, mostly males". It is a spectacular text that exemplifies a view where "injuries caused by centuries of structural racism and sexism are turned on their head so that it is white men who feel these injuries most deeply" (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 39), riling up a "vitriolic defensiveness" in the aim of establishing a "common belief in white male victimhood" (Bergman in May & Feldman 2019, p. 34). This is probably the clearest amongst many reviews articulating the 'problem' of not 'just killing Nazis' as a generic enemy, but fighting "white Nazis" as an ideological enemy of white supremacy.

In this delicate positionality in relation to the politics of Nazism, a strategy of positive self-representation (van Dijk 2001, p. 103) includes the signaling of a *certain* anti-Nazism, such as

"Don't get me wrong, can't get too upset about killing Nazis, but […]" and "I like killing nazi's as much as the next guy, but […]" (both from negative reviews). A similar strategy is seen here:

> It is very offensive to white people, while giving rootless worship to black people. The white characters are either brain-damaged or nuts […] Hitler is rude, ill-mannered and carzy […] I'm not White.
> - Negative review

Firstly, the claim that a negative representation of Hitler makes the game "very offensive to white people" reads as a trolling neo-Nazi position. More interesting, however, is how the claim not to 'be white' functions as a strategy to legitimize the claim as less political and more objective, despite the 'authenticity' of the claim. Condis (2018 p. 17) addresses this strategy suggesting that "trolls who disclose information about their supposed race, gender, and age [hardly can] be trusted". Reviews like these exemplify the technological context of political discourse – a 'semiotic technology' (Haraway 1988) leaving the reader in doubt of whether one is being trolled, or if it is a genuine sentiment (Condis 2018, p. 13).

The various narratives of Wolfenstein II being 'anti-white' (which I do not have space to cover exhaustively) in many reviews make up a victimization of white masculinity:

> Creators of the game pushed most of that agenda through her [Grace] (how America is weak and submitted to Nazi's, white people are racist, it's men's fault that Manhattan got nuked […] and the only ones that put up a fight against Nazis are mostly black people, so on and so on).
> - Mixed review

Grace is here seen as a main bearer of 'the agenda' – that America, white people, and men are at fault for the horrors of Nazism. This constitutes a victimization based in being unseated and disdained (Brown 2019, p. 177) – cast as 'the bad guy', in a process of 'losing anti-Nazism'. This loss is partly expressed about how white people are claimed to be absent in the resistance:

> If you white - you are a Nazi […] if black - you battle for independence of the USA.
> - Mixed review

> […] white people are cowards and follow the Nazis, black people fight the good fight […]
> - Negative review

There is therefore a construction of anti-Nazism as honorable, righteous, and a symbol of strength in the reviews – something that white masculinity is 'missing out on'. Thus, I argue that anti-Nazism can be understood as a group resource (van Dijk 2001, p. 115) that is being fought over in the reviews, and by being deprived of, constitutes a victimhood for white masculinity.

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Two strategies (Wodak 2001, p. 73) responding to this victimization represented in the material is firstly to appropriate a language of oppression. Here concepts like *stereotype*, *anti-white racism* and *anti-white propaganda* is used to describe an injustice suffered. This strategy, I suggest, mirrors the far-right narrative "anti-racist is a code word for anti-white" playing into the idea of "white genocide" promoted by the Alt-Right (Hawley 2017, p. 49). A second strategy (in combination with the first) is to claim that the game is in fact not anti-Nazi. The following review for example suggests Wolfenstein II has a politics of (neo)fascism:
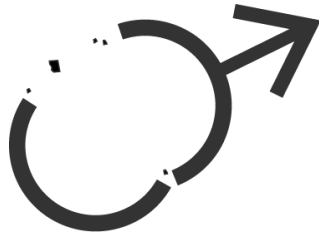
> This game is proud to be a game made for racists, while claiming to be anti-racist (Nazi killing DUH!). It displays racist mentality and ideology all the time and sees it as good and even funny. But only against whites - and BJ agrees. The whole game is a complete and utter propaganda piece for modern neofascists.
> - Negative review

White male entitlement is here a precarious ideological position to argue from, as it is difficult to claim anti-Nazism from the unintentionally ironic position of it simply 'belonging' to white men. The strategies identified, I suggest, relates to a larger logic of white male entitlement here illustrated by Brown:

> If white men cannot own democracy, there will be no democracy. If white men cannot rule the planet, there will be no planet. (Brown 2019, p. 180)

Similarly, if white men cannot own anti-Nazism, there will be no anti-Nazism. This destructive turn in the face of loss is salient throughout the material. In constructing Nazism as an ideological enemy and not primarily a military one, the procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2008) and ideological core of the game resists an aestheticization of politics (Benjamin 1969) common in masculinized gaming[21]. The generic anti-Nazism represented in the earlier entries of the Wolfenstein series is with its weaponized struggles in a simulated reality, rather than on a real ideological and political level, today terribly outdated. As Wolfenstein II moves on, adopting an anti-Nazism exploring (some) intersectional dimensions of contemporary white supremacy, a portion of gamers are demanding an anti-Nazism of 'the old days' – where white masculinity through uncomplicated weaponized struggles was the hero of the day. I suggest this exemplifies a desire of anti-Nazism as mainly an aesthetic. Wolfenstein II has in this rejected masculinized 'neutral gaming' by "politicizing art" (Benjamin 1969, p. 242).

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[21] A recent example is *Battlefield V* (EA DICE 2018) featuring cosmetic customization of playable Nazi characters through in-game micro-transactions (Pearson 2019).

A marginalized apolitical community?

Imagining politics

Having examined a politics of signification in relation to gender and race in Wolfenstein II, I now turn to narratives attempting to explain *why* Wolfenstein II turned to politics, examining what political imaginations and ideological affinities this uncovers. From the basic assumption that games *should* be apolitical, which as we shall see is a widespread attitude in the reviews examined, Wolfenstein II triggers the need to explain *what went wrong* for this political game to come to be. This is, in my view, where beliefs, narratives and discourses of the wider 'gamergate ideology', Manosphere and Alt-Right appear through the particular ways that basic social representations are informed by misogynistic and racist far-right discourse.

The political other

Fundamental to the construction of a general common enemy of masculinized gaming, already well documented in the field of games studies, is the figuration of the Social Justice Warrior or more commonly 'SJW' (Massanari & Chess 2018, Phelan 2019). The SJW is a "hystericized and illogical figure […] in contrast to the reasoned and logical perspective of their […] critics" (Phelan 2019, p. 462). Crucially, an SJW can be "anyone perceived as engaged in practices considered as political correctness […]" (Massanari & Chess 2018, p. 528). During online fieldwork (Wodak 2001, p. 69) for this study, I encountered the following staged interaction illustrating a detailed understanding of SJWs by a dissatisfied gamer on a steam forum[22] for Wolfenstein II.

A conversation between SJW, Bethesda and their fans

SJW: Hello Bethesda, we feel you do not properly appeal to us and our progressive values.

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[22] Steam is a digital distribution service and community platform for PC-gaming.

> Bethesda to their fanbase: Loyal fans, we have decided to no longer appeal to you that have always bought our games and supported us over the years. Instead we have decided to appeal to the far left and feminists.
>
> Bethesda to the SJW: We have changed our game to appeal to your progressive values, we hope you enjoy our work! :D
>
> SJW feminists: We don't like video games.
>
> Bethesda to fanbase: please help fanbase! if you don't buy our games we won't make anymore single player games! it's all your fault!
> - Post in Wolfenstein II Steam Community forum

This lengthy but on point fictional dialogue is valuable as an example of the SJW figure imagined as an obnoxious, sabotaging non-gamer who villainously destroys the possibility of gaming in their quest for 'social justice'. The dialogue represents the 'true gamer' as the "fanbase" and "loyal fans" that has a long economic relationship with the company, implying certain rights to follow from this relationship. The SJW is on the other hand labeled "the far left" and "feminists" who has no 'real' interest in gaming. Similar imaginations of 'the political other' are common in the reviews:

> After paying 60$ for this masterpiece (stress on the "piece") I feel violated. The move to appeal to casual gamers and political activists is apparent.
> - Negative review

Here, the formulation of "casual gamers" and "political activists" are interesting as they mark an 'competing' gamer audience in contrast to the implied apolitical gamer. As Jesper Juul pointed out already a decade ago from interviewing game designers, it is increasingly difficult to fund games aiming at a "narrow hardcore audience" (2010, p. 7). The rise of casual gaming is a very real development in gaming which "influences the development of other video games as well" (Juul 2010, p. 7) such as the AAA FPS hardcore genre that Wolfenstein is part of (Backe 2018). In a social context where the games industry indeed has been, and currently is, changing drastically, I suggest the SJW discourse to be an apt entry-point to understand a specific imagination of 'politics' in relation to an neutral 'us' and a political 'them',

Apolitical gaming

The reviews are saturated with a specific imagination of politics which I understand in relation to a discourse of apolitical gaming. One way that this imagination of politics is articulated in the reviews is in how politics is described spatially in relation to the game:

> […] gamers do not need, nor want, political ideologies (left or right) injected into these games. It is an absolute disgrace to push a leftist ideology and draw parallels between a nazi-controlled United States and the Trump administration. LEAVE IT OUT.
> - Mixed review

This constructs an understanding of Wolfenstein's politics as something that is *external* to gaming and "injected" into the game to "push" a certain ideology on its player. The politics of Wolfenstein II is here marked as political in ways that the average FPS might not be. I interpret the articulation that it is 'politics in general', rather than 'left politics' that is the problem as a strategy of claiming a 'neutral ground' to critique the game from, rather than a particular political place – risking a political position for oneself. Here, a 'common sense' of 'what gamers want' exemplifies a discursive attempt at making an ideological assumption appear as "commonsensical and natural" (Lazar 2005, p. 7).

Looking at the positive reviews, I suggest that the very same discourse of apolitical gaming is deployed also to defend the game:

> The game makes zero mention of any neo American right movements, the enemy is the literal Nazis, the ones from the 1940s, the ones that have ALWAYS BEEN the villians in the Wolfenstein series, yet here you have A SURPRISING AMOUNT OF people giving the game low marks because of it's """politics""" which boil down to nothing more than "Nazis are bad" something to which we USED TO AGREE ON.
> - Positive review

Here, Wolfenstein II's political and anti-racist message is reduced to "Nazis are bad". As discussed in the previous chapter, the Nazis enemy of the game is constructed as a military one, rather than ideological – suggesting that no politics is 'hidden inside' Wolfenstein II's anti-Nazism. Rather, the politics of the game is constructed as only existing in the minds of players 'taking the game to personally', as expressed in another positive review. I suggest that this exemplifies a hegemonic notion (Lazar 2005, p. 9) and a consensus all over the review-spectrum that 'politics' is something 'bad' in gaming. Thus, 'politics' appears in the context, I argue, as a 'negative resource', something that gamers seek to distance themself from, rather than a resource to defend (van Dijk 2001, p. 115). This resonates clearly to Brown's (2019) analysis of neoliberalism as a rationality attempting to dismantle 'the social', making notions of social power and subsequently the notion of politics redundant and rather a sign of the SJW other.

I argue that there is not so much an ideological tension between the positive and negative reviews as a 'struggle of othering' where the former denounce the latter Nazis and white supremacists and the latter call the former SJWs, cultural Marxists, etc. In their underlying

standpoints of Gamergate – that 'agendas' are bad (Cross 2014, para 9) and that games should 'remain neutral', they are expressing an ideological affinity. The common practice from the positive reviews of attributing emotions to the negative reviewer furthermore mirrors the troll-dynamic described by Condis (2018, p. 35) as a social game to "elicit an emotional response from their victims while maintaining a cool, level-headed image for themselves". While I do not have the space to engage in the interesting exceptions, I argue that a widespread apolitical discourse informed by a neoliberal conception of politics is salient in the reviews studied[23].

Apolitical politics?

My examination of the discourse of apolitical gaming in the reviews shows that terms like *agenda, social engineering, propaganda, recruiting tool, cringey, anti-white, misandry,* and even *poison* are used in various frequency to denounce the ideological content of Wolfenstein II while verbs like *push*, *shove*, *force*, *inject*, *pander*, *taint, affect* and *bombard* further delegitimize the politics of the game as something external being forcefully brought into it. My analysis of apolitical gaming suggests that this discourse functions to construct masculinized gaming, not as specific and contingent and thus political, but rather as inherently belonging within the social domain of white masculinity. This of course leads to a paradoxical situation where a political language must be carefully avoided in ideological statements – leading to tensions which I now turn to examine more closely.

I follow Cross (2014, para. 39) arguing that the Gamergate project is framed as 'apolitical' through the claim that the movement is fighting for something 'objective' – "for something you are owed", meaning the issue can be framed as 'outside' the social and political. Thus, the struggle against the SJW other is not regarded as 'counter-political' but rather as 'setting things right' and reverting to a stage before gaming 'was politicized'. This rationality is clearly articulated in the slogan "It's all about the ethics of human decency" (*Figure 12*). 'The other' has not committed a political fault, but a moral one. It exemplifies very clearly how "social justice [is critiqued] in the name of freedom and traditional moral norms" (Brown 2019, p. 44).

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[23] Unfortunately, the restrictions of this study in terms of space did not allow for an analysis of the anti-racist and feminist ideological standpoints that actually did occur, albeit much less frequently, in the reviews.

Figure 12. Gamergate mascot Vivian James on a Gamergate poster. Received from subreddit KotakuInAction frontpage [2020-04-03]. "No Left, No Right" Created by illeity, licenced under Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License

A closer examination of the reviews shows the very same tension about the 'political other' simultaneously being constructed as apolitical:

> Yes the game is very politicized and it has all the "pc" [politically correct] cliches, but that's a cheap trick to get high reviews today, don't fall for it. You make a bad movie/game, you throw in a woman/black/whatever hero and boom, you get 10/10.
> - Negative review

The politics of Wolfenstein II is here reduced to "a cheap trick" to enhance a critical reception of the game. Seemingly trivial, I suggest that this reduction exemplifies a deeply nihilistic stance in relation to the social realm, where the "assumption is that there are no sincere players in the social justice game" (Condis 2018, p. 100). I understand this imagination of politics as

one where politics is nowhere to be found, and it might be understood as a "revenge against the wound of nothingness by destroying the imagined agent of that wound" (Brown 2019, p. 179). A similar point is made in another review:

> [...] Today "politically correct" is a trend, a sort of "product" to sell, and you have to exploit it if you want to survive.
> - Negative review

This review depoliticizes the ideological content of Wolfenstein II as merely "a sort of 'product' to sell", suggesting that what might appear as 'politics' really is a commodity currently in demand. I argue that it mirrors very clearly the political rationality and attitude towards social justice promoted by neoliberalism, expressed by one of its founding fathers as "the concept of social justice 'is necessarily empty and meaningless'" (Friedrich Hayek in Phelan 2019, p. 465).

I identify this particular attitude towards 'politics' as the groundwork upon which specific social representations within the studied gamer subjectivity are built. The discourse of the SJW analyzed here imagines political sentiments as possible only within the frames of illegitimate (political) goals such as appeasing the games press, getting good reviews, being politically correct, selling on controversy, etc. Thus, 'the political' is unimaginable as any real social project, as no real-world inequality is acknowledged to exist within this imagination – the exception being the subjugation of white people and men by 'colluding others' which rises a tension I will turn to below. In this analysis and in relation to the reviews broadly, I agree with Brown's (2019) claim that a neoliberal reasoning in relation to the social realm is paramount in the recent developments of politically nihilistic antagonism. Despite political and social nihilism not being neoliberalism's "intended spawn", it must be regarded as its "Frankensteinian creation" (Brown 2019, p. 10).

Marginalization and victimhood

Video games are changing – not merely the games industry (Juul 2010) but also the social and political context in which they exist. While I do not adhere to a politics of optimism but rather suggest critically examining for example the insidious ways that discourses of diversity within the political rationality of "progressive neoliberalism" (Nancy Fraser in Phelan 2019, p. 455) might exploit social struggle for profit, it would be an oversight not to acknowledge the transformation of mainstream gaming towards pluralism. It is my belief that Gamergaters and masculinized gaming are fighting a losing battle at a time when cultural sensibilities are shifting and the games industry is seeking profits expanding its markets and scope of target consumers

(Juul 2010, p. 7). In this moment, I suggest a detailed examination of precisely how the gendered and racialized relations of power and system of privilege (Lazar 2005, p. 5) works where men – or rather certain racialized masculinities, are losing. I now turn to a partial but detail examination of how a neoliberal imagination of politics and entitlements can be understood in relation to far-right rationalities.

Neoliberal entitlements

My analysis has thus far showed how a discourse of political other(s) – the SJW+[24], is a basic social representation of an 'other' fueled by hatred and/or 'phony politics' to destroy masculinized gaming. While Wolfenstein II, I argue, is uniquely positioned in this context, it is part of a much larger shift in gaming away from a very specific demographic 'default audience' of white males (Juul 2010). In theoretically approaching this 'loss' of masculinized gaming, the concept of "dethroned entitlement" (Brown 2019, p. 179) maps on accurately to conceptualize the social dynamic at play. One way I find this dethronement negotiated in the reviews is by invoking an economic positionality:

> […] a black female leader in the game who says "White America gave up" i feel that there is no
> need for this in a shooting game and it really makes me as a White person feel unwanted even after
> i bought the special version of the game that was 50 pounds plus.
> - Positive review

In this review, a desire for 'feeling wanted' is assumed to be satisfied from a monetary transaction, without any rationale for why 'white people's money' is different from 'other's'. This exemplifies, I suggest, a claim to masculinized gaming that is 'empty' and of no substantiality – it merely relies on "supremacy and entitlement based on past supremacy and entitlement" (Brown 2019, p. 179). As this claim is very weak, a strategy that I identify to defend this empty entitlement within a neoliberal imagination of politics is by invoking the principle of demand:

> >your main audience are white men
> >create a game about how evil white men are
> >be surprised it flopped
>
> what were they thinking?
> - Negative review

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[24] "+" here symbolizing the various groups and movements, specific and abstract, made up and real, that might fall under or be closely associated with the SJW umbrella: antifa, Black Lives Matter, communism, cultural Marxists, feminism, progressive politics, leftist politics, liberal politics and race politics.

Here, the position of majority is claimed to show how 'irrational' the Wolfenstein II's politics are by making "a game about how evil white men are". This strategy is however not without risk as it requires that 'political games' fail in the market as 'apolitical gaming' otherwise might not have the dominant position within gaming it claims to have. This explains a preoccupation with "undisputed facts" (van Dijk 2000, p. 28), that white men "of course no doubt" (as expressed in a negative review), makes up the majority of the audience – and the suggestion that the game "flopped", which arguably is far from an accurate description[25]. It is within this rationality that 'the other' becomes somewhat of an unreliable figure in numbers and strength, sometimes threatening the whole of western civilization[26] and sometimes being a 'fringe perspective'.

Crucially is however the strategy, as seen in the review above, to constructing the self as a victim in reading the game being about "how evil white men are". I suggest this exemplify a 'turn to morality' which overrides the cold logic of market forces. This moment of friction is here illustrated with clarity in a discussion on Reddit:

> […] I don't have an issue with movies made for specific target audiences. I am totally fine with Black Panther being promoted specifically to black audiences and Captain Marvel to women. Not everything has to be marketed towards me. If I don't like the marketing I don't buy tickets.
>
> [comment on the above]
> There's a difference between this and being overtly hostile towards white/male audiences.
>
> – Extract from a tread on the subreddit KotakuInAction

I identify this as a key moment for entitled subjectivity turning to a far-right rationality. In abandoning the market-based arguments, the alternative strategy is to invoke "the ethics of human decency" (*Figure 12,* p. 57). 'The other' is simply indecent in their "[hostility] towards white/male audiences". This exemplifies clearly, I argue, a turn to "traditional moral norms" (Brown 2019, p. 44) in the construction of a victimized self that is justified in silencing 'the other'. However, I suggest that this neoliberal rationality has not completely eradicated the imagination of 'real politics' but merely displaced it temporarily. Rather, I suggest there is a 'return to politics' waiting for gamers emerging on the other side of this neoliberal nihilism. Here, I believe the Alt-Right is positioned strategically with the identitarian project "to

[25] Games sales are generally undisclosed is the secretive game industry, but there are few indications that the award-wining game 'flopped'.
[26] "The developers here have gone OUT OF THEIR WAY to push a particular narrative […]. Its poison, and it should be rightly rejected and called out for the damage it is doing not only to gamers, but to what is left of Western Civilization."
- Negative reviews

discursively reconstruct whiteness" (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 35) – a promise of white masculinity getting what 'the political others' have; community, philosophy, narratives, righteousness, etc. The loss of masculinized gaming in this way reverberates with the broader well known far-right narratives of loss – of one's identity, country, work, women and so on.

But we are nice guys…

Another basis for marginalization that I identify is one based in a positive self-representation (van Dijk 2001, p. 103) – it is simply not just 'they' who are 'bad' but also 'we' that are 'good', and thus underserving of 'being treated like this'. In the review, the 'us' being unfairly negatively represented is here extended to the nation:

> It's really hard to enjoy a game when you feel like the developer is just using their game as a vehicle
> to let you know how they view the US and it's people.
> - Negative review

This exemplifies how a struggle in the local context of gaming is expanding to bigger narratives of geopolitics, an attitude illustrated clearly in *Figure 13* where a positive national self-representation is constructed in relation to climate goals. This, I believe, is a positionality of victimhood that asserts that 'we' are *actually* moral and righteous, but the SJW 'other' does not play fair.
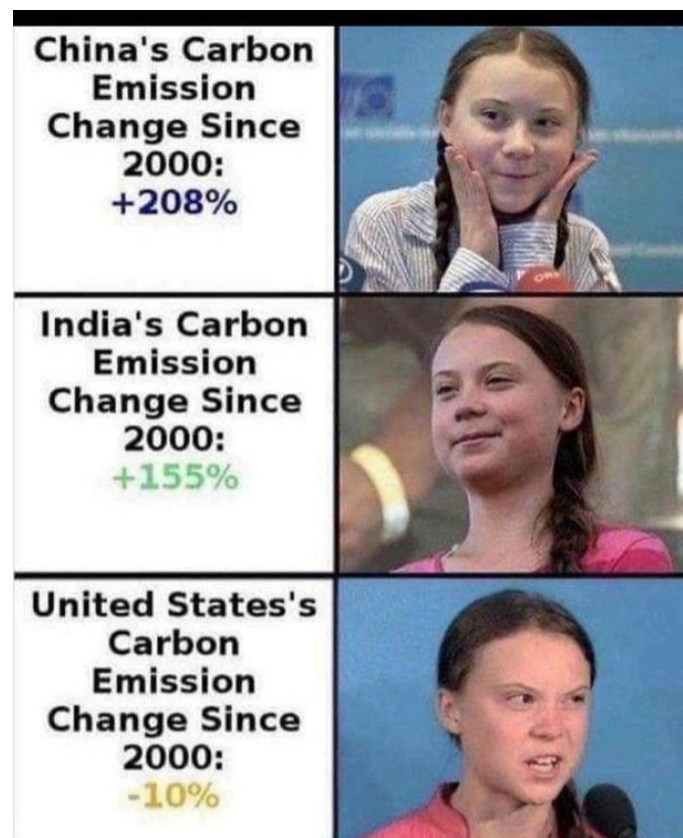

Figure 13. Climate activist Greta Thunberg in a meme from the KotakuInAction subreddit [2020-01-30]

Making the reading that 'I am at fault' in the politics of anti-racism and feminism, and finding this unfair, I suggest is a central basis for victimization. While my analysis show that this strategy is widely occurring in the reviews, I find it difficult to assess (as is expected of the methodology of CDA with its focus on language practice rather than speaker intentions) whether it is a genuine reading of the game and an expression of real sentiment, or if it is merely an cynical attempt at gaining ideological leverage.

In constructing the SJW other as a rabid, unreasonable figure the gamer self is represented as the nice, sensible, good guy in an underdog situation, illustrated quite literary in meme format in *Figure 14*. This self-representation contrasts sharply with the tone in the threads and methods deployed (Massanari 2017, 2018) which often are very extreme and violent, as documented in the Gamergate harassments (Mortensen 2016, Chess & Shaw 2015).

Figure 14. Meme[27] received from the KotakuInAction2 subreddit [2020-01-30]

Complex intersections of marginality?

I *do not* propose that masculinized gaming be taken for its words in claiming marginalization. On the contrary, my analysis has shown what I identify as far-right appropriation of a language of oppression (Hermansson 2020, p. 70) lacking epistemological plausibility and a basis in empirical reality. There is no doubt that white supremacy and patriarchy are structuring forces

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[27] NPC stands for 'non-playable character' which is the computer-controlled characters in games.

in contemporary configuration of political and material power over the world. What I *do* suggest is that these reported experiences of marginality be examined with a theoretical seriousness in the context of a capitalist relations and neoliberal rationality leaving basic human needs of many unsatisfied. Not learning from this particular social and political dynamic would be a loss for feminist and anti-racist efforts.

I exemplify this with two cases in the reviews, the first being how a class-positionality might be part of a notion of victimhood.

> I buy only a few games each year because of financial constraints, and this was one of my three purchases of 2017. As such, you can understand that I was EXTREMELY excited for this game, but it was quite the let down at the end of the day.
> - Negative review

> You will wish you had spent your hard earned money on another game, believe me.
> - Negative review

I suggest these statements encourages us to think about the discursive practices of hate and bigotry the context of neoliberal capitalist society – here exemplified with examples bringing the economic aspects of gaming into account. The "heavy deployment of 'us vs them' mentality and rhetoric" (Blodgett & Salter 2018, pp. 136-137) of masculinized gaming clearly feature sexist and racist discourses, but I believe that an understudied class perspective can illuminate an insecurity and anxiousness in masculinized gaming that often remains hidden. This might help illustrating an intersectional complexity (de los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari 2002) in how entitlement and antagonism can draw from positions of marginality in contemporary social dynamics of white masculine loss.

My second point is the arguably precarious positionality of extreme and widespread antagonism:

> I hate all propaganda they put in games and moves and bunch of pure politician Bullsh*t and incorrect historical information and events. But this is the world we're living in today its based on a Lies. […] To hell with this evil world...
> - Negative review

This text exemplifies a nihilist attitude present in the reviews and tells of a positionality of extreme antagonism, mistrust, and paranoia. In examining online antagonist communities as offering recognition and community by 'taking the red pill' (Tuters 2019, p. 44) and 'joining the club', I think it is also important to examine how an overarching ideological project of mistrust can isolate individuals in hopelessness, possibly furthering radicalization (Marwick &

Caplan 2018, p. 554). In an environment of scarcity, not primarily of material but social and emotional needs, games and masculinized gaming culture has probably played an important role in the lives of many, making this a group resource (van Dijk 2000, 115) to fight desperately for.

The case I am making is thus that in attempting to subvert these ideological projects of hate and antagonism, a genuine theoretical interest in these positionalities is important. It requires acknowledging that patriarchal relations produce positions of complexity, of which the masculinized gaming I am studying here not necessarily (only) is a position of power as much as a position of resentment and insecurity at risk of being mobilized by far-right forces – which might be a more 'real' position of victimhood.

Conclusion

This study has been a qualitative snapshot of ideological reviews of Wolfenstein II, examining how imaginations of gender, race, social justice, entitlements, and victimization show certain ideological traits in the deployment of various discursive strategies. My analysis is partial, and I hope my representation of the material allows for alternative readings and scholarly dissidence. I am however content that the reviews exemplify a political and social development that goes beyond merely gaming.

Summing up the results of my analysis

The Metacritic reviews of Wolfenstein II has been a rich material for an analysis of ideological practices. With a focus on the politics of gender and race in the game, my analysis show how various beliefs, narratives and ideologies are deployed in what I regard to be an ideological project with affinity to the politics of Gamergate, the Manosphere and the Alt-Right.

In examining opposition to the game as a politics of signification (Hall 2005), my analysis started with contestations over performances of masculinity and femininity by the game's couple protagonist BJ and Anya fighting in the anti-Nazi resistance.

BJ's character, constructed performatively (Butler 1999) at the intersecting sites of gender, race, class, and (dis)ability is largely rejected as a failure, as opposed to a desired 'badass' masculinity. He is regarded as the victim of a 'politicization', particularly through the 'inclusions' of his childhood and the way BJ's mental and physical state is portrayed. From these accounts, I read the desired protagonist subject of masculinized gaming in the reviews as a masculinity that meets no real adversaries – social, political, psychological, or biological – only a constructed militarily one determined to lose. I here examined reviews telling a story of masculinity from omission – the problem not mainly being what is *lacking*, but rather what *is there* – history, emotion, personal development, and social relations. From the framing of BJ's 'failed masculinity', I suggest that a feminist reading inspired by Halberstam (2011) instead can understand BJ's 'gendered failures' as a rejection of the specific frames of success relying on the oppression of others. My argument here is that BJ's 'resistance to', rather than 'oppression of', not only a military but also an ideological and political enemy (Nazism), constitutes a 'politicization of art' (Benjamin 1969, p. 242), which in the reviews studied is perceived as a failure of masculinity, and consequently the game in large.

Anya's femininity is on the other hand rejected on ground that it is 'unrealistic'. Here, Anya's pregnancy is central in questioning her Nazi-fighting skills, implying that she is acting irrationally risky. I suggest that the performance of 'real' and 'unreal' gender can be understood through Halls (2005, p. 70) notion of media having a "reality effect". One discursive strategy (Wodak 2001, p. 73) to counter the games (feminist) claims about gender is to signify (Hall 2005) these as 'social engineering', implying a neutral choice of representing women 'as they really are'.

BJ's racist and anti-Semitic father "Rip" is similarly to Anya's gender-performance largely regarded as 'unrealistic' and is suggested to be driven by the ideological motivation of the creators. The father is here suggested to be a 'stereotype' of white racist men, hinting at a systemic misrepresentation of white men in media – a strategy I suggest closely resembles the Alt-Right and identitarian strategy of legitimizing the notion of "anti-white racism" (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 70). Anti-Nazism is largely treated as a resource (van Dijk 2001, p. 115) to be claimed, and something that white masculinity is 'missing out on' in Wolfenstein II. This underlies a narrative of (white) victimization, suggesting that the game is not genuinely anti-Nazi, paradoxically for 'hating white men'. My analysis of the contestation of anti-Nazism shows a complex relationship to politics where I suggest anti-Nazism is desired as an aesthetic (Benjamin 1969) rather than an engagement with the politics and the ethics it prescribes.

Answering my **first research question**, I conclude that the struggles accounted for above make up an ideological and political struggle enacted through discursive contestation over the meaning of the game and its characters. In the ideological practices of signifying Wolfenstein II's story and characters in various ways, I regard the Metacritic reviews as a lively arena for ideological struggles against feminism, anti-racism, and other emancipatory projects.

My second analytical chapter set out to examine the construction of an ideological 'other' and an apolitical 'us' in the context of a demographically changing games industry (Juul 2010). In dialogue with previous research (Massanari & Chess 2018, Phelan 2019), I propose the SJW figure as an apt entry-point to understand a specific neoliberal imagination of 'politics' and the social realm (Brown 2019). From close readings of reviews, I suggest that 'politics' is regarded commonsensically (Lazar 2005, p. 7) as something external to gaming, relying on the idea of an ill willed 'other' forcing politics into gaming. Crucially, this means, I argue, that masculinized gaming makes a (unacknowledged) political claim to gaming – constructing this as apolitical. Briefly, I point out that this discourse of 'apolitical gaming' also is present in

positive reviews, but there rather deployed to defend the game. Thus, my analysis shows that a strong sense of white male entitlement is presupposed in apolitical gaming discourse. Examining how a formulation of the SJW 'political other' is reframed rather as an 'amoral other', I suggest this exemplifies a critique of social justice "in the name of freedom and traditional moral norms" (Brown 2019, p. 44). Examining further how Wolfenstein II's politics is framed as a commodity, I suggest this particular neoliberal attitude towards 'politics' is the groundwork upon which the social representations of a gamer 'us' and SJW 'them' are constructed, thus answering **research question 2.**

I then moved on to examine in detail a self-victimization of white masculinity in the reviews. With the help of Brown's (2019) concept of dethroned entitlement I examined how a claimed subject position of a 'loyal consumer majority' work as a rationality for opposing the politics of Wolfenstein II as illegitimate. Reviews exemplify how this economic relation is taken as a guarantee for white masculine subjectivity to 'feel wanted' while playing the game. However, my analysis found this market based entitlement to easily give way for an accusation of an amoral other 'being hostile towards white men' which resonates with Brown's (2019, p. 44) analysis of how a neoliberal rationality allows for an opposition of "social justice in the name of freedom and traditional moral norms". Failing to argue for male entitlements through a neoliberal logic, opens up I argue, for racist and sexist claims to white masculine entitlement – especially a "discursively reconstruct[ed] whiteness" (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 35) as formulated in Alt-Right discourse.

Building on the insights of my analysis, I examine claims to marginality and victimization with a theoretical openness to complex intersections of marginality in masculinized gaming. I however emphasize that this should not be confused with taking claims to marginality and an appropriation of a language of oppression as valid – a tactic I interpret as a far-right strategy (Hermansson et al. 2020, p. 70). While it would need to be examined more focused, I suggest from my analysis that a marginality in relation to class might be overlooked in the field. I also suggest that masculinized gaming should be examined further as a position of resentment and insecurity at risk of being mobilized by far-right forces rather than merely a position of power, and that feminist and anti-racist emancipatory projects here has a opportunity to challenge the far-right as the 'only' solution in dethroned entitlement (Brown 2019). With this analysis, I find **research question 3** answered.

My main contribution the field of games studies is an empirically grounded feminist analysis of what I call masculinized gaming – examining in particular how desired subjectivities of gender and race in the case of Wolfenstein II are informed by anti-feminist and racist ideological stances. Most importantly, I suggest, is the analysis of how the political imagination of masculinized gaming is informed by a nihilistic neoliberal rationality – a so far understudied perspective in my view. This analysis would however need to be developed in a more focused way and in a wider empirical context.

The main contribution to the field of far-right extremism is how an everyday gamer online space features racist and sexist language resonating with contemporary far-right strategies. Most importantly is how the review-format is used as a discursive arena attempting to 'red pill' fellow gamers, potentially radicalizing readers or at the least normalizing sexist and racist discourse. The weak presence of a counter-discourse in the positive reviews is also a relevant finding in relation to this field.

Looking forward from a partial analysis

There remains much in the material to be examined, and the analysis I present in this study leaves many important issues unexamined, the most obvious being the ideological formations and negotiations from positive reviews just touched upon briefly in my analysis. Here, notably, violent Nazi-killing fantasies (ambivalently between real and fictional) remains unexamined in the context of masculinized gaming and Wolfenstein II's depiction of physical and ideological anti-fascism. There are also many theoretical perspectives that I did not manage to incorporate into this study – here I think specifically of feminist and anti-racist theoretical perspectives on racism and whiteness, as well as a more focused deployment of intersectional theory, that I did not manage to engage with in this short study. The politics of emotion in ideological struggle, enacted especially through the widespread use of 'cringe', is also a perspective that I would have wished to examine further.

What I believe to have studied in this project is a group of largely privileged subjects who are experiencing the empty promises of capital. Masculinized gaming, holding itself to be simply 'neutral gaming' run into contradictions as it is forced into a political struggle defending what it perceives as entitlements. In the last decade, however, I believe the previously 'neutral gaming' has collapsed into a state of identity – as hardcore gamer, gamergater or white male gamer – yet another consumer on the market of gaming alongside casual gamers, feminist

gamers, racialized gamers, queer gamers, indie-games, post-colonial gaming etc. Masculinized gaming has in virtue of losing the privilege of the unmarked become political against its wishes, and it seems to largely be making a turn to conspiracy rather than renegotiating its place in culture as specific rather than universal. An emancipatory goal must be to steer these anxieties from being mobilized by far-right forces, a project which I believe thus far has been a failure. I therefore believe feminist and anti-racist efforts in relation to the rise of a popular online far-right must have a clear picture of *what* sort of feminism and anti-racism is being labeled *the enemy* in online spaces, opening the possibilities for new anti-fascist efforts and unexpected solidarities. One such virtually unstudied project is the phenomena of 'LeftTube' where feminist and anti-racist discourse is meeting the Alt-Right surge on their own arena in the techno-capitalist center of YouTube. Going forward, we need to account *better* for the rationality of neoliberalism in antagonistic online communities, not as an all-encompassing deterministic force, but as promoting a *particular* understanding of social struggle, inviting the politics of patriarchy and white supremacy.

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Appendices

Wolfenstein II PC (31.7 % met criteria)	
52 %[28] of the **negative** reviews met the criteria	36 of total 69
17 % of the **mixed** reviews met the criteria	7 of total 42
24 % of the **positive** reviews met the criteria	24 of total 100
Wolfenstein II Playstation (33.2 % met criteria)	
40 % of the **negative** reviews met the criteria.	23 of total 57
37 % of the **mixed** reviews met the criteria.	10 of total 27
30 % of the **positive** reviews met the criteria.	54 of total 178
Wolfenstein II XBOX (29% met criteria)	
57 % of the **negative** reviews met the criteria.	8 of total 14
23 % of the **mixed** reviews met the criteria.	3 of total 13
20 % of the **positive** reviews met the criteria.	7 of total 35
Wolfenstein II Switch (13.8 % met criteria)	
33 % of the **negative** reviews met the criteria.	2 of total 6
0 % of the **mixed** reviews met the criteria.	0 of total 2
10 % of the **positive** reviews met the criteria.	2 of total 21

Figure 15. Detailed list of reviews meeting criteria

[28] Rounded off to nearest whole number