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The politics of the NPC meme: Reactionary subcultural practice and vernacular theory

Big Data & Society
January–June: 1–16
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Abstract

The acronym ‘NPC’ originates from videogame culture, where it refers to computer-controlled drones whose behaviour is dictated by their programming. By 2018 the term had gained traction within right-wing subcultural spaces as shorthand for individuals apparently incapable of thinking for themselves. By the autumn of 2018, these spaces were awash with NPC memes accusing liberals and leftists of uncritically accepting progressive doxa and parroting left-wing catchphrases. In mid-October, with midterm elections looming in the US, Twitter banned over 1000 NPC roleplay accounts created by supporters of Donald Trump, citing concerns over disinformation. This event was much discussed both within right-wing subcultural spaces and by mainstream media outlets, serving as an occasion to reassess the political effects of digital media in general and reactionary memes in particular. Here we use a combination of computational analysis and theoretically informed close reading to trace the NPC meme’s trajectory and explore its role in entrenching affectively charged political and (sub)cultural faultlines. We show how mainstream attention at once amplified the meme and attenuated its affective resonance in the subcultural spaces where it originated. We also contend that while the NPC meme has served as a vehicle for antidemocratic bigotry, it may yet harbour critical potential, providing a vocabulary for theorising the cultural and political impacts of communicative capitalism.

Keywords

Memes, social media, digital politics, subculture, 4chan, Reddit, far right

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Introduction

In July 2016 a user of 4chan’s videogames board /v/ made a post titled ‘Are you an NPC?’ (Thread 344124640, 7 July 2016). In it they outlined ‘a theory’ that the majority of people on earth are little more than ‘walking flesh piles’ who ‘follow group thinks [sic] and social trends in order to appear convincingly human.’ Comparing these pseudo-subjects to videogame non-player characters (NPCs), the post argued that they betrayed their ‘soulless[ness]’ through their constant recourse to ‘the same buzzwords and hackneyed arguments... like in a vidya when you accidentally talk to somebody twice and they give you the exact lines word for word once more.’ While the post received pushback, the term ‘NPC’ caught on as shorthand for

individuals apparently ‘unable to have ideas and thoughts of their own’ (Dafaure, 2020).

This conceit received a second wind in the autumn of 2018 when a user of /pol/, 4chan’s notoriously reactionary politics board, drew attention to a *Psychology Today* article titled ‘Not Everyone Conducts Inner Speech’ (Hurlburt,

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Figure 1. Wojak confronts his NPC counterpart (/pol/ Thread 184868780, 7 September 2018).

2011), citing it as proof that NPCs walk the earth (Thread 184701729, 6 September 2018). The acronym promptly acquired its own avatar – an angular greyscale version of imageboard culture’s woebegone mascot Wojak (Figure 1) – and a wave of meme production ensued. Some NPC memes mocked ‘normies’ for their apparently unthinking compliance with social conventions. Others, as we might expect from a site infamous for racist and antisemitic bigotry, used the figure of the NPC to portray Black and Asian people as ‘non-sentient’ drones (Thread 184701729, 6 September 2018), or to spin stories of ‘flesh golems’ in thrall to shadowy Jewish puppetmasters (Thread 185216072, 10 September 2018). Many NPC memes ridiculed liberals and leftists, painting them as guilty of uncritically accepting progressive doxa and parroting left-wing catchphrases. It was in this guise that the meme was embraced by users of right-leaning subreddits like *r/The_Donald* – a haven for diehard supporters of ‘God Emperor Trump.’ Love for the meme within these spaces only intensified when, on October 5th, journalist Cecilia D’Anastasio published an article arguing that NPC memes were ‘dehumanizing’ on the progressive gaming website *Kotaku*, long a bete noire of reactionary gamers. While D’Anastasio’s article made little impact outside gaming culture, for many users of Reddit and 4chan, sites with strong ties to this subculture (Massanari, 2017: 331; Salter, 2018: 252), it was proof of the NPC meme’s ability to antagonise Democrats and leftists. The idea of characterising Trump’s opponents as robots had a particular piquancy for fans of the president, who had often been dismissed as ‘Russian bots’ in the wake of revelations about the Russian Internet Research Agency’s use of botnets to influence online discussions around the 2016 election.

In mid-October 2018 a rash of ‘NPC accounts’ began appearing on Twitter. The accounts’ profile pics were all versions of NPC Wojak, variously sporting elaborate piercings, oversized eyeglasses, vividly coloured asymmetric undercuts, and other metonymic signifiers of liberal or left-wing sympathies; their bios featured hashtags like #resist and #believewomen, espoused antifascist and socialist values, and sported a range of esoteric pronouns (Bell, 2018). These accounts turned out to have been created by users of *r/The_Donald*. With midterm elections looming in the US, they had taken to Twitter to roleplay as leftist NPCs, aiming to paint Trump’s opponents as brainwashed drones. When some NPC accounts began tweeting inaccurate information about the date of the election, Twitter stepped in, suspending over a thousand accounts amid fears of disinformation (idem.). The move angered many on the right, who saw it as evidence of Silicon Valley’s complicity with the liberal establishment. It also attracted interest from the mainstream media, with journalists like the *New York Times*’ Kevin Roose and *The Verge*’s Julia Alexander publishing pieces that explained the meme even as they acknowledged the risk of supplying the ‘oxygen of amplification’ (Phillips, 2018) to reactionary subcultures.

Since then the meme’s profile has declined markedly. While the term NPC is still in use among reactionary online subcultures, it never regained the popularity that it enjoyed in late 2018. Why, then, do we believe it remains worthy of discussion? By tracing the trajectory of the NPC meme this article aims to better understand the political and cultural work done by memes. It also aims to complicate certain assumptions about memes as ‘viral’ or ‘spreadable’ media (Jenkins et al., 2013) and the terms on which reactionary political memes, in particular, circulate

and develop. In some ways, the story of the NPC meme suggests that attention from mainstream media can keep memes alive and incentivise their uptake – perhaps particularly when that coverage is disapproving. And yet, it is also possible to argue that the flurry of attention that the NPC meme received in the wake of the Twitter purge stymied its spread, implying that mainstream attention is not necessarily oxygenating. Memes have frequently been framed as a means of growing right-wing subcultures, a framing that assumes those who share memes do so in the hope of ‘recruit[ing] new members’ (Scheuble and Oezmen, 2022: 5). There are reasons to contest this framing, however. The NPC meme arguably functioned not as a means of extending or redrawing political and (sub)cultural boundaries, but of consolidating existing communities and worldviews, intensifying affective investments and entrenching faultlines – including those separating different right-wing factions. In this paper, we focus on the early phase of the NPC meme’s development on 4chan and its brush with mainstream awareness after r/The_Donald users adopted it as a ‘collective avatar’ (Devries, 2021), or a script for acting and participating in an online community as a particular character, in order to attack the left. We aim to track how the figure of the leftist NPC emerged from and functioned within right-wing subcultures, stressing the contingency of the meme’s development and the NPC’s polyvalence as a figure.

Beyond this, we hold that the NPC meme is not just an example of how content circulates online, but an attempt to thematise and even theorise these dynamics. NPC memes provided a means of talking about where, how, why and what people post. Although in many cases the meme taps into deeply racist, sexist and ableist worldviews, in at least some iterations we can glimpse a critique of ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean, 2009), or the absorption of democratic participation into networked media technologies in such a way as to preempt and capture resistance. Nevertheless, this critique is severely constrained by right-wing subcultures’ refusal to consider the broader implications of these ideas. Here we both extend the NPC meme’s critique into its sociopolitical context and show what the inability of reactionary subcultures to develop their critique into a social theory reveals about the relationship between meme-making, affect and boundary work.

This paper proceeds in four main parts. First, we review literature on memes and explore methodological and conceptual difficulties involved in the study of ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean, 2009), particularly around linking analyses of large datasets to close readings of subcultural practice and affective sense-making. Next, we present a mixed-methods case study of the NPC meme. We chart its circulation across 4chan, Reddit, 8chan, and mainstream media, suggesting that anxieties around supplying the ‘oxygen of amplification’ (Phillips, 2018) to obscurantist reactionary memes can sometimes be misplaced, as mainstream attention can also alter a meme’s

subcultural status. We use our ‘distant reading’ of the meme’s trajectory to target our close reading of the NPC meme, exploring how it resonates with subcultural affect, whilst also teasing out the meme’s potential as a theory of how users are sleepwalking (Sampson, 2020) into a ‘social media abyss’ (Lovink, 2016). We close with a discussion of how the NPC meme offers an immanent critique of communicative capitalism, and suggest that future research should explore the deep-seated connections between the logics and practices of gaming and novel ways of thinking and doing politics.

Mememes and subcultural practice

Internet memes are inherently iterative and dynamic. No single instance of a given meme will exhaust or even adequately exemplify its potential. Consequently, attempts to pin down or decode memes, assigning them a stable significance, invariably fail. Defining what memes are is similarly fraught with difficulty. While the term ‘internet meme’ is sometimes used specifically to refer to image macros, Shifman (2014) proposes a broader understanding, capable of encompassing ‘the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet’ (2). This definition has the virtue of directing attention away from a stable definition and toward dynamic cultures of practice – like those of /pol/ or r/The_Donald.

These cultures of practice are often highly self-referential. As Katz and Shifman (2017) argue, memes produce ‘affective meaning’ rather than ‘referential meaning’, facilitating community formation whilst remaining inscrutable to outsiders not already inducted into the relevant affective social connections. Indeed, memes are perhaps best understood less as carriers of messages than tools ‘for identity work[,] in-group boundary establishment and policing’ (Miltner, 2014). If memes attract an audience that extends beyond the subcultural or affective community where they were initially developed, they risk losing their ‘meme value’ through overexposure (Literat and van den Berg, 2019) – something that appears to have happened to the NPC meme. Indeed, while memes have been understood as quintessential viral and spreadable media, meme makers use various means to *limit* their capacity to resonate beyond audiences with the requisite ‘memetic literacy’ (Tuters and Hagen, 2020: 2218). Nevertheless, memes have a habit of crossing over ‘from subculture to the mainstream’ (Miltner, 2014). The NPC meme cemented 4chan’s status as a particularly fertile generator of memes capable of escaping the ‘deep vernacular web’ to thrive on ‘the mainstream surface web’ (de Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020: 215). 4chan’s design, which dictates that posts are both anonymous by default and ephemeral, has been seen as creating favourable conditions for the emergence of durable and memorable memes, driving constant innovation and iteration (Tuters and Hagen, 2020: 2219).

Broadly, we can understand the terms ‘NPC memes’ and ‘the NPC meme’ as referring to posts that use the image of NPC Wojak and/or the acronym NPC to imply that certain individuals or groups lack reflexivity or interiority. Within this category a range of subgenres exist, including posts laying out NPC ‘programming’ in the format of computer code, and posts that recreate the interfaces of social media sites and dating apps to highlight the inanity of the exchanges that occur on these platforms. As this suggests, the term ‘NPC memes’ is perhaps best understood as designating a constellation of tropes. Drawing on Devries’ (2021) analysis, we might also see the NPC as a ‘collective avatar’ adopted for online performances.

Then there is the term ‘NPC theory’. This phrase sometimes alludes to the decidedly esoteric theory expounded in the 2016 /v/ post. That post posits that if we assume reincarnation exists, and that there has only ever been a ‘fixed quantity’ of souls migrating from one body to the next even as the earth’s population has mushroomed, then the ensouled minority must now be surrounded by masses of soulless drones (Thread 344124640, 7 July 2016). In other cases the term ‘NPC theory’ refers to philosophical and scientific concepts and theories seen as lending credence to the idea that some individuals lack interiority, reflexivity or rational consciousness. It was a psychological study suggesting that ‘not everyone conducts inner speech’ that renewed 4chan’s interest in ‘NPC theory’, and the idea has also been linked to the hypothetical figure of the ‘philosophical zombie’ (a link drawn by reactionary YouTuber Tim Pool in a 2018 video). As theories go, these are not especially rigorous or convincing. NPC memes hardly promise a revolution in the fields of evolutionary biology or philosophy of mind, and on /pol/ they largely served to provide a new vocabulary with which to express familiar forms of racism, sexism and anti-equalitarianism. And yet, we think there is value in seeing NPC memes as attempts to theorise digital politics and media. As with concepts like Poe’s Law (which decrees that without knowledge of the intent behind a post it is impossible to distinguish between parodic and earnest statements online), the NPC meme provides a vocabulary for discussing and theorising the experience of navigating spaces where identities and motives are unclear, where agency is distributed among human, machinic and algorithmic actors, and where contents can be altered and recontextualised in ways that make their initial meaning hard to determine. In discussions of the NPC meme we see a ‘vernacular criticism’ of memes (Literat and van den Berg, 2019: 233) and a broader discussion of the shape and status of social media. While the meme undoubtedly functioned as a vehicle for racist and reactionary ideas, it also contains the seeds of a critique of social media platforms.

As we show in what follows, ‘mainstream’ or ‘normie’ analyses and explanations of subcultural memes can

undermine rather than broaden their appeal. However, it remains important to tread carefully when ‘rescuing’ a meme from a reactionary or extremist subculture. de Zeeuw and Tuters (2020: 228) are right that ‘a kind of immanent media critique’ can be uncovered in even the most reactionary subcultural spaces if we can momentarily suspend our otherwise fully justified ‘moral outcry’ in the service of analysing subcultural communities of practice. However, it is also important to note that reactionary politics always involves producing an immanent critique (Robin, 2018). The difficulties of studying such groups run deep: even if researchers can temporarily bracket the toxicity of these subcultural spaces to engage with their ‘dissimulative’ (de Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020) practices and their immanent critiques of communicative capitalism, the critiques themselves are also highly dissimulative. Yet this fundamental undecidability makes the need for a sustained, situated engagement all the more urgent.

Describing and explaining: Data and affect

The dynamic, iterative, and often obscurantist nature of memes raises several methodological and conceptual questions around how memes can be charted and tracked without losing sight of the ways they are also lodged in subcultural communities. We suggest that answering these questions requires combining computational methods with ‘human’ methods, including close reading. Anderson (2021) criticises computational methods as ‘consequence-driven and interpretation-free’. This argument arguably overlooks a growing interest in how computational methods make different kinds of interpretation possible (Mützel, 2015; Marciniak, 2016), and how ‘automated tools’ and ‘qualitative analysis’ might ‘work together’ (Moats and Borra, 2018). However, Anderson does highlight the notable danger of importing into studies of digital data the reigning ‘algorithmic episteme’ (Fisher and Mehozay, 2019), which registers individuals only as users producing data within the constraints of platform affordances. Indeed, as Marres (2018) suggests, data-driven studies of social media risk reproducing the logics of social media architectures and assuming that all social and political processes can be measured by tracing user actions (liking and retweeting, following and unfollowing, swiping left or right, etc). Analysis of such measurable actions allows platforms to tweak algorithms and affordances to optimise user engagement; it also allows researchers to analyse and diagnose such social trends as disinformation and online abuse. However, this consequence-driven, diagnostic view of social life smuggles in a return of the ‘strong effects’ paradigm (Anderson, 2021). As a result, sociocultural problems are reduced to what is traceable and measurable. In the process, the complexity of lived experience – even

experience highly constrained by the ‘algorithmic episteme’ – is lost.

The question this raises is how computational methods and data-driven research can be linked with ethnographic engagement and interpretation. The NPC meme is a unique case study for approaching and refining this methodological and conceptual impasse. In one sense, the meme can be viewed as a kind of ‘pollutant’ in the public atmosphere. However, a close reading reveals that discussion around the NPC meme was also animated by a palpable fear that digital media reduce human subjectivity to a highly constrained set of user options that, once selected, become traceable datapoints fueling the algorithmic optimisation machines of digital platforms. We propose to take seriously both the social pitfalls and the conceptual promise of the NPC meme.

Understanding memetic circulation requires analysing traceable datapoints alongside affective impulses. Sampson (2020) encourages a rejection of the strict separation between logic and emotion that subtends the ostensibly clear distinction between fact and falsehood, news and fake news, truth and post-truth. He directs inquiry instead to the ‘intensity of aesthetic experience’, where ‘facts are more than themselves’ (2020: 35) and where ‘information can become more or less truthful, depending on how many times it is liked’ (2020: 31). Facts must wade through affect, which circulates in a collective, pre-individual, and pre-cognitive ‘feely milieu’ (2020: 31). Facts don’t care about your feelings, as the saying goes, but facts do have to be felt before any purportedly rational subject can assess their facticity. Drawing on Whitehead, Sampson (2020) argues that facts are always also ‘aesthetic facts’, which ‘lure’ subjects toward the ‘delightful experience of fact’ (12). In this sense, social media position users as ‘sommambulants’, which is not to suggest that social media users are ‘asleep’ to the hard facts of reality, but instead that somnambulism is a collective ‘moment of indistinction where the self comes into contagious relations with others’, and, it is important to add, with sociotechnical affordances (2020: 71). Whether one follows Sampson’s broader theory of somnambulism, the notion of ‘aesthetic facts’ effectively captures the feel of the social media stream and the ephemeral 4chan board, where ‘evanescent’ (Venturini, 2022) flows of information compete for engagement. Charting the circulation of ‘aesthetic facts’, then, involves remaining alive to these somnambulant contagions and alert to where the contagions are blocked, disrupted, or diminished.

Methods: Close and distant reading

This paper attempts to avoid the pitfalls of ‘interpretation-free’ (Anderson, 2021) computational analyses by using computational tools in order to identify data that demand

further interpretive analysis. We conducted a cross-platform analysis of the meme’s origins and diffusion, charting key patterns in a corpus of NPC posts and then investigating those patterns with a close reading that foregrounds the affective and critical work the meme performs. Cross-platform analysis has been deployed to investigate how platform affordances shape discussion and debate around public issues or controversies (Pearce et al., 2018; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021) and to explore the circulation of “‘born-digital” sociocultural controversies’ such as #GamerGate (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016: 79). Here we similarly rely on cross-platform analysis to chart the ‘normification’ (de Zeeuw et al., 2020) of born-digital subcultural content.

Although the famous ‘Are you an NPC?’ post was made to 4chan’s /v/ or Video Games board in 2016, our initial scoping of that board showed NPC discussions were dominated by references to videogames as opposed to the meme. We therefore excluded /v/ from our analysis and focused instead on /pol/. To explore the meme’s subcultural circulation prior to and following mainstream attention in October 2018, we used the 4CAT tool (Peeters and Hagen, 2021) to gather NPC references between June 2018 and June 2019 from the /pol/ boards on 4chan and 8chan as well as from r/The_Donald and r/KotakuInAction, given r/The_Donald’s well-publicised use of the meme and *Kotaku*’s critical coverage of it. To cast our net wider on Reddit, we identified subreddits related to r/The_Donald and r/KotakuInAction using the ‘subreddit algebra’ tool (Martin, 2017), which calculates the relationships between subreddits by measuring the co-occurrence of commenters between subreddits. After removing subreddits that were largely inactive, such as r/AgainstGamerGate, our final list of subreddits in order of engagement with the NPC meme included r/The_Donald, r/KotakuInAction, r/ShitPoliticsSays, r/TumblrInAction, r/SocialJusticeInAction, and r/TheLeftCantMeme. In total, we gathered all mentions of NPC from 4chan’s /pol/ board, 8chan’s /pol/ board, and the above selection of subreddits from June 2018 to June 2019. This yielded a sample of 113,790 posts and comments. After removing duplicate posts, we were left with a sample of 112,530 posts and comments.

In order to identify the source of the NPC meme and assess how mainstream attention affected its spread, we first plotted posts referencing the meme over time by platform. Our initial analysis showed that first /pol/ and subsequently r/The_Donald were major drivers of NPC content throughout the period surveyed. As a consequence, we focused our close reading on how the meme was deployed and discussed within these two spaces. In order to establish a framework for this close reading, we used the Natural Language Toolkit embedded in 4CAT to conduct a bag-of-words analysis. After excluding stop words, the word NPC, and common curse words, we tracked the top

ten most frequent words by month on /pol/ and r/The_Donald. As we describe in more detail below, this analysis suggested a more theoretical and philosophical orientation on /pol/ and a more directly partisan orientation on r/The_Donald. To explore whether these differences shaped subcultural boundary work, we searched for references to ‘/pol/’ and ‘4chan’ in our corpus of r/The_Donald posts, and for references to ‘The_Donald’, ‘T_D’, ‘Reddit’ etc. in our /pol/ posts, building up a picture of how users of these spaces saw one another. We then conducted a deeper qualitative analysis of NPC-related activity on r/The_Donald between late September and the end of October 2018, using posts from this period to build a better picture of the ‘collective avatar’ (Devries, 2021) of the Democrat-voting NPC and of how users developed and deployed this figure during the period leading up to and immediately following Twitter’s mass ban and the media coverage of this event.

Charting the NPC meme: A cross-platform analysis

As Figure 2 shows, the NPC meme first attracted interest on 4chan’s /pol/ board and was later taken up on Reddit, particularly by r/The_Donald. There are spikes in mentions of NPC on 4chan and 8chan prior to mainstream attention. On 4chan’s /pol/ board, references to the meme peaked at 3177 mentions the day before Roose’s 18 October, 2018 *New York Times* story, with the day the article was published a close second at 3092 mentions. Mentions of NPC on r/The_Donald peaked at 1083 on 11 October, 2018, about a week after D’Anastasio’s *Kotaku* article but, significantly, before the Twitter bans and the *New York Times* coverage. Mentions dropped significantly after the *New York Times* story on both r/The_Donald and /pol/. The pattern in this case study is similar to de Zeeuw et al.’s (2020) finding that subcultural spaces are initially energized by the ‘oxygen of amplification’ (Phillips, 2018) but also that the effects of this are short-lived.

Indeed, the significant drop that follows the spike suggests that popularity might also be a sign of a meme’s imminent obsolescence, as too much mainstream attention can deflate the subcultural value of a meme (Literat and van den Berg, 2019). Subcultural communities tend to position themselves in opposition to the mainstream of ‘legacy’ media organisations, such as broadcasters and newspapers, along with web publications targeting ‘normies’ or participating in consensus liberalism. In this sense, mainstream attention is almost by definition a sign that a meme has been lost to the ‘normies.’ However, the NPC meme’s relationship to the mainstream is ambivalent, because while it serves to divide canny insiders and unthinking outsiders, a performance of cluelessness from outsiders can prove the meme’s accuracy. This is why pundits such as Tim

Pool and Paul Joseph Watson both released videos in October 2018 explaining how the mainstream media doesn’t ‘get’ the meme. This knowing stance is typical of ‘micro-celebrities’ (Marwick, 2013), who cultivate their audiences through performances of authenticity and reliability (Lewis, 2020). However, from the perspective of a 4chan ‘anon’, a micro-celebrity or a *New York Times* journalist deploying the meme are equally signs of its waning affective force. As one ‘anon’ wrote in a /pol/ thread, ‘anyone who isn’t a basement dwelling incel brainwashed by neo-nazi propaganda is labelled an “NPC”’. Which is ironic given that these people are literally taught how to behave by their cult leaders Richard Spencer, Paul Joseph Watson et al. and respond on cue EVERY TIME with the same worn out conspiracy theories and buzzwords’ (Thread 188747987, 9 October 2018). This post reveals the complex boundary work the NPC meme performs. Mainstream misunderstandings of the meme can prove its accuracy, but even subcultural insiders risk appearing as NPCs if they overuse the meme.

Figures 3 and 4 offer month-by-month breakdowns of the top ten words occurring in posts featuring the term ‘NPC’ on 4chan’s /pol/ and r/The_Donald respectively between June 2018 and June 2019. Both communities used NPC memes to distance themselves from liberals and leftists. As these diagrams hint, however, they went about this task in markedly different ways. On /pol/, NPC posts from June 2018 are theoretical and philosophical in nature, with the terms ‘enlightened’, ‘descartes’ and ‘religion’ all occurring. Frequent occurrences of ‘real’, ‘thinking’, ‘human’ and ‘life’ in September 2018 suggest a continued interest in using NPC memes to explore subjectivity and the nature of reality. There is a marked shift in October 2018 to a focus on political enemies (‘shills’ and other more hateful phrases) and allies (notably Trump). On r/The_Donald, the meme never has such a clear ‘theoretical’ moment; there are few posts prior to October 2018, and results for that month suggest a focus on political strategy rather than philosophy. Featuring the terms ‘account’, ‘twitter’, ‘trump’, ‘left’, ‘leftist’, ‘bot’ and ‘lol’, the list reflects the way that users of r/The_Donald became caught up in creating NPC Twitter accounts intended to make their electoral opponents look ridiculous. Subsequent months maintain a party-political focus on liberals, the left, and political ‘programming’; on /pol/, by contrast, there is more of a focus on race and ethnicity, with the words ‘white’ and ‘jew’ occurring frequently. The following sections explore this broad pattern of differences brought to light by our computational analysis. Shifting to a mode of close reading better equipped to bring out the aesthetic and affective qualities of NPC memes, they explore the NPC meme’s role in political boundary work and probe the relationship between NPC theory and the circulation of NPC memes as a form of political practice.

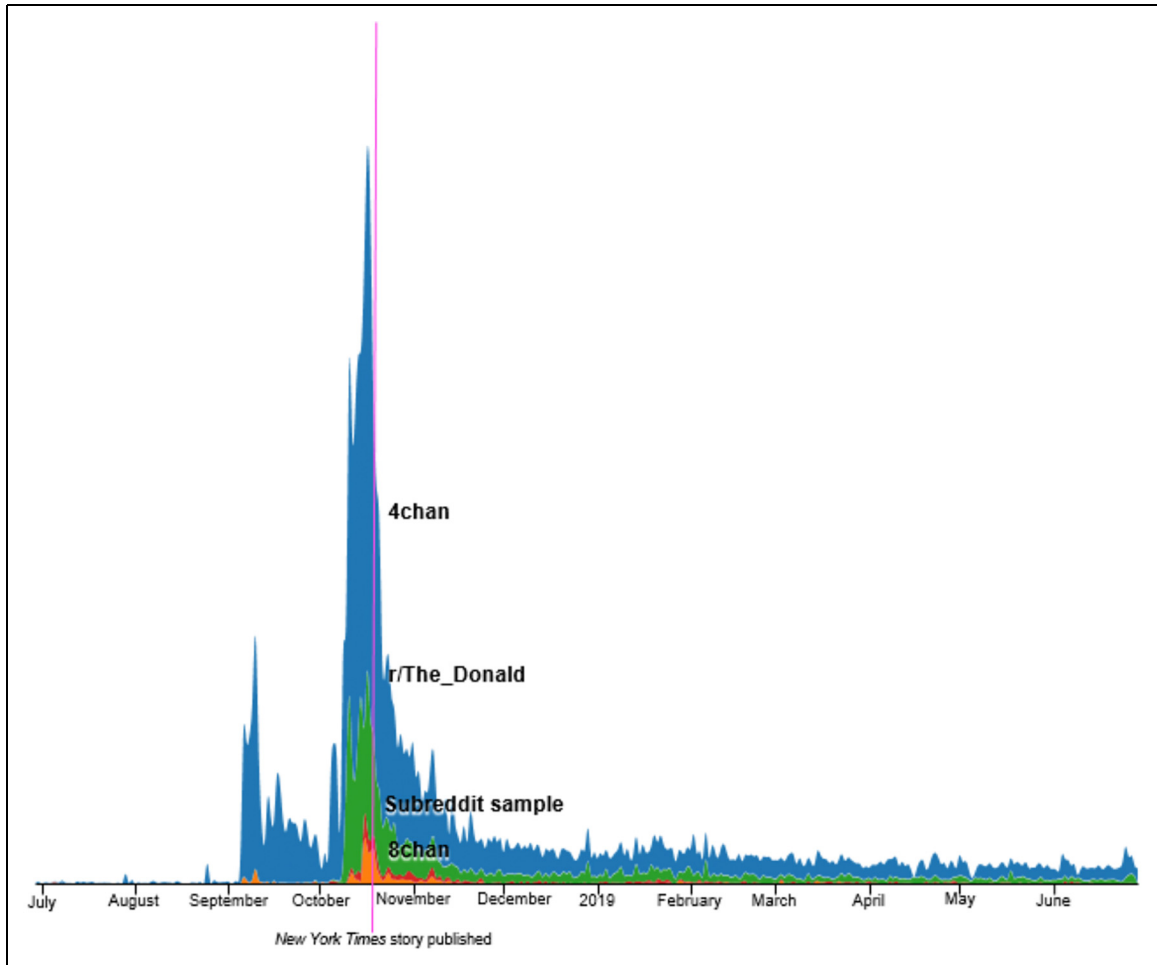


Figure 2. NPC mentions.

Close reading

Political boundary work

Our close reading revealed that NPC memes were used not only to distinguish right from left, but to differentiate between right-wing subcultures. /pol/ users frequently demanded that other anons ‘go back’ to r/The_Donald, which was represented as a hive of ‘NPCs’ in its own right (e.g., Thread 186296878, 20 September 2018), and while NPC memes were more often targeted at leftists, normies, women and ethnic minorities, they were also used to mock Trump loyalists. The ideological differences fueling this animosity become clearer in responses to a /pol/ post asking ‘I know that 4chan hates reddit cuz they are full of these fuckin npc, but how do you guys feel about the very few gems such as thedonald?’ (Thread 191313530, 29 October 2018). While some anons have good things to say about r/The_Donald, others portray the kind of ‘civic nationalism’ it represents as fundamentally misguided (Thread 191313530, 29 October 2018), reflecting a broader tendency among ‘alt-right’ thinkers to view

‘civic nationalism [a]s illegitimate because it focuses on political values that unite rather than racial unity’ (Bar-On, 2019: 234). As one /pol/ user opines, while Trump may share their project of ‘challenging cultural marxism/post-modernism’, ultimately he is ‘just an e-celeb’ and ‘a boomer’ (Thread 191426593, 30 October 2018). On /pol/, party political contests are framed as superficial manifestations of deeper conflicts understood in racial terms, with ‘NPC theory’ furnishing a language for reframing the board’s preoccupation with intelligence and evolutionary fitness, and its understanding of politics as a matter of covertly manipulating credulous populations. As we have noted, this is reflected in our rankflow diagrams, with Figure 3 attesting to the prevalence of terms like ‘white’ and ‘jew’ in NPC posts on /pol/ – terms absent from Figure 4.

Users of r/The_Donald, by contrast, are often positive about 4chan and /pol/, acknowledging the NPC meme’s origins in these spaces and thanking 4chan for giving them a new weapon in their battle with the left. While both spaces use the NPC meme as an ‘immunopolitical’

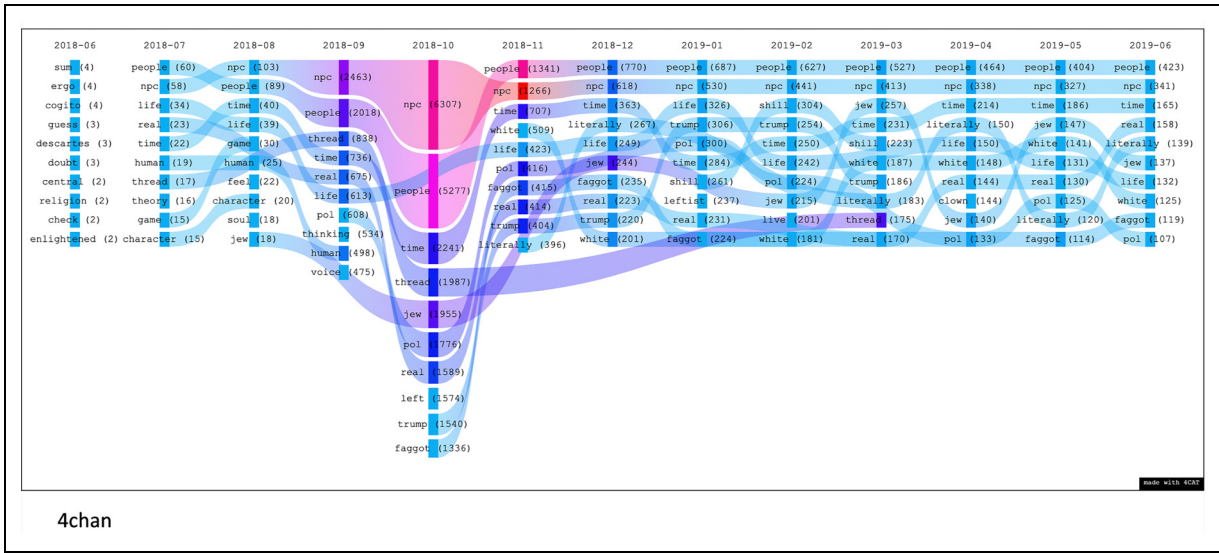


Figure 3. Rankflow Diagram of top ten words on posts and comments referencing NPC on 4chan by month. Colour (blue to red) and bar width indicate number of occurrences.

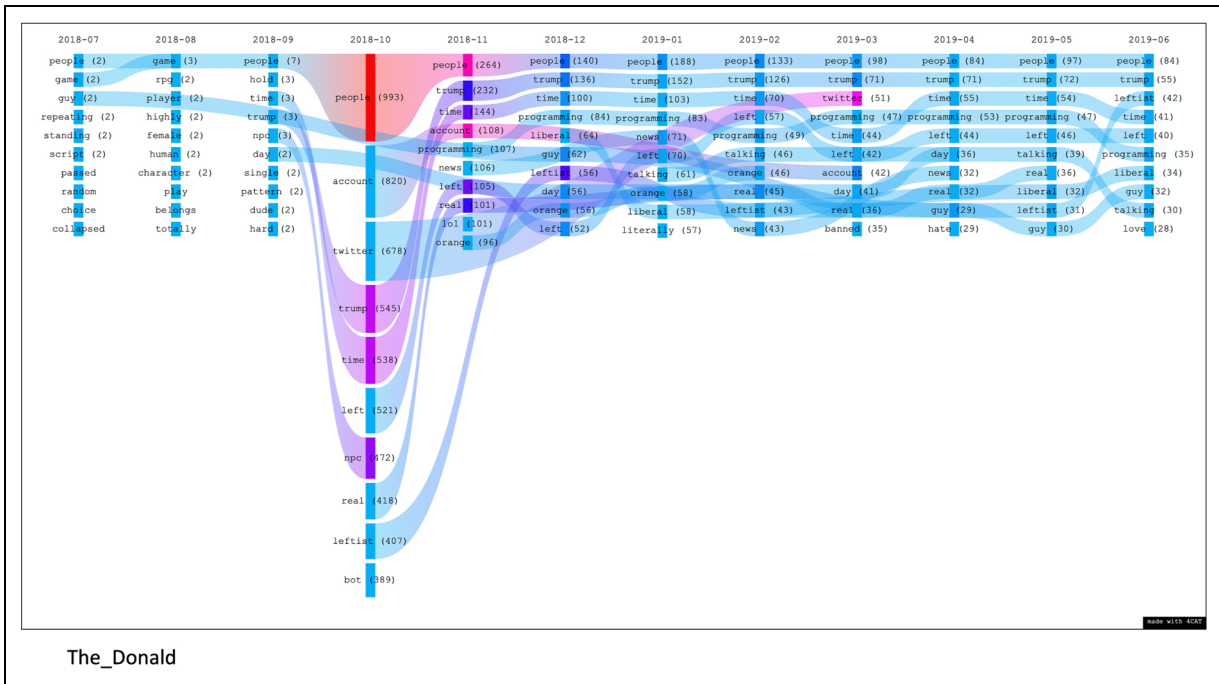


Figure 4. Rankflow diagram of top ten words on posts and comments mentioning NPC on r/The_Donald by month. Colour (blue to red) and bar width indicate number of occurrences.

tool for shoring up a particular vision of subcultural right-wing ‘self-identity’ (Sampson, 2020: 121), closer inspection bolsters the idea that it was on r/The_Donald that the NPC meme developed into a means of doing partisan politics via social media – something hinted at in Figure 4, which demonstrates the prevalence of words like ‘twitter’ and ‘account’ on r/The_Donald in October.

That said, closer analysis of individual posts also casts doubt on the idea that the proliferation of NPC roleplay accounts on Twitter resulted from a coordinated operation. Where Roose’s (2018) *New York Times* piece describes ‘a trolling campaign organized by right-wing internet users’, reading through posts on r/The_Donald across the 11th, 12th and 13th of October reveals less coherence and more

spontaneity than this implies. Reactionary subcultures have certainly launched planned ‘ops’ and made concerted attempts to ‘game’ media outlets and platform architectures to promote themselves and spread disinformation (Phillips, 2018; Sampson, 2020: 26–7). Reviewing activity on r/The_Donald, however, suggests an outbreak of memetic affective contagion rather than a concerted plot to pervert democracy. Across this period we see users visiting Twitter, reporting back on how NPC accounts are being received (‘they are getting PISSED OFF and upset at these npc things rofl’ (r/The_Donald, 11 October 2018)) and apparently inspiring others to create their own accounts (‘Omg I need to make an account Haha’ (r/The_Donald, 13 October 2018)), in a widening affective spiral of left-wing ire and right-wing glee (as Figure 4 shows, ‘lol’ is one of the top ten words in posts from October). These feelings gradually give way to confusion and paranoia, as users attempt to ascertain whether Twitter has begun purging NPC accounts and how moderators are identifying them. It is this affectively charged moment that draws the attention of mainstream news outlets, whose reporting sparked responses ranging from affirmation to exasperation from users of /pol/ and r/The_Donald. As Sampson holds, while the popular mood can be ‘steered in certain directions’ through canny use of digital platforms, in many cases contagions are ‘directed by... mostly accidental forces’ (Sampson, 2020: 56). Emerging from messy assemblages of actors human and otherwise, they unfold in a manner difficult to predict or control. This certainly seems to be the case when it comes to the emergence, evolution, and proliferation of the collective avatar of the leftist NPC as deployed by users of r/The_Donald.

The leftist NPC as collective avatar

Devries defines the collective avatar as ‘a character – a way of acting or being – collectively constructed by an online community’, describing how ‘users embody this character in order to participate effectively in a certain online space’ (2021: 239). What, then, were the characteristics of the leftist NPC as collectively constructed and embodied by r/The_Donald? While r/The_Donald’s NPC memes did reference political values, policies and beliefs, they often distinguished left from right in terms of attitudes and affects, proposing that leftist NPCs are laughable and contemptible because they are sanctimonious, superficial, literal-minded and *incapable of taking a joke*. Many posts reflected a conviction that ‘Narcissism’ had become a ‘core value of the modern left’ (r/The_Donald, 15 October 2018). Posts often pointed to the way that leftists ‘dye their hair, pierce their bodies, get tattoos, and adhere to ridiculous [sic] labels in the name of being unique’ (r/The_Donald, 10 October 2018), with one arguing that the NPC meme was so effective because ‘it takes away all of these narcissists special unique snowflake personalities

and shakes them to the very core of their souls because it shows they are all the same, they are not special, they say the same things and are not unique at all’ (11 October 2018).

The collective avatar of the NPC was used to express what Berlant describes as the contemporary right’s ‘scat against specialness’ (Markbreiter, 2019). NPC memes mocked what r/The_Donald’s users presented as a tendency towards cosmetic ‘pseudo diversity’ (idem.), affirming the antipathy denizens of anonymous and pseudonymous ‘mask culture’ spaces like Reddit and 4chan often feel towards ‘face culture’ platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, where users generally post under their real names and share aspects of their everyday lives (de Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020). NPC Wojak offered an ideal vehicle for this critique, as the profile pictures presented in Roose’s (2018) article illustrate (Figure 5). All memes trade on the modularity of digital media, leveraging the capacity to edit and substitute specific elements of an image or text while leaving others unchanged. As a blank slate ready to be customized with accessories and accouterments that only accentuated his underlying blankness, NPC Wojak weaponised this fact. r/The_Donald exploited this collective avatar’s affordances to mock liberal diversity rhetoric, dismissed by one user (in language also drawn from gaming culture) as ‘just a palette swap’ on top of the same underlying ‘code’ (r/The_Donald, 10 October 2018).

For r/The_Donald’s users, the fact that Trump’s opponents could not see that their attempts to differentiate themselves only made them appear more generic was symptomatic of their profound lack of ‘self awareness’ (r/The_Donald, 10 October 2018), confirming that ‘The Left doesn’t understand irony’ (r/The_Donald, 17 October 2018). This, in turn, was offered as the reason why ‘the left can’t meme’ (r/The_Donald, 17 October 2018) – a favourite axiom of the online right, and one that Tim Pool, among others, presented leftist NPC memes as proof of.

The idea that leftists are irrational, humourlessly dogmatic and robotically predictable also found expression in NPC memes purporting to lay bare the simplistic algorithms driving left-wing opinions and behaviours – a format that allowed users to flaunt their code literacy. One typical example (r/The_Donald, 11 October 2018) sets out a routine dictating that in the absence of a ‘logical response’ NPCs should resort to calling their interlocutors Nazis or bots, or to reciting the latest Democrat talking points:

```
{
  if error.152 (No logical response found found.)=true
  print ‘Nazi’, 30% ‘You’re too stupid to understand.’, 15%
  ‘Bot’, 43% ‘[update.current ‘Democrat copy paste’=
  False update.current]’, 77% NPC update‘mood’ +Angry.
}
```

As with the ‘learn to code’ meme (the product of a 4chan campaign that saw ‘journalists who had been fired in a



Figure 5. Twitter profiles created as part of r/The_Donald's campaign (via Roose, 2018).

series of mass layoffs... inundated by messages on Twitter that they should “learn to code” (Levi, 2022: 161)), these versions of the NPC meme identify the right with logical thinking and technical literacy, and the left with empty rhetoric. They also suggest that while leftist NPCs may be robotic, they are not coolly rational – and are in fact given to histrionic outbursts when their primitive logic breaks down.

Another such post (r/The_Donald, 9 October 2018) lays out the if/then logic supposedly driving political comedian Stephen Colbert. Classifying Colbert as an ‘elite mob’ (‘mob’ or ‘mobile object’ being a term used by videogame developers to refer to NPCs, especially ones capable of engaging the player in combat), the post is formatted as a set of instructions for triggering different speech samples depending on how many ‘hp’ (hit points) Colbert has remaining:

```
‘goto NPC\elitmob\_Colbert\sound\
```

```
If hp(NPC\_elitmob\_Colbert) = 100
```

```
then play ‘Impeach-drumf.wav’
```

```
and flagcombat(1)
```

```
If hp(NPC\_elitmob\_Colbert) = 75
```

```
then play ‘2-scoops.wav’
```

```
and phase.slownewsday 1
```

```
If hp(NPC\_elitmob\_Colbert) = 50
```

```
then play ‘Orange-spectre.wav’
```

```
If hp(NPC\_elitmob\_Colbert) = 25
```

```
then play ‘Putin-is-our-president.wav’
```

```
and phase.muh-russia 1
```

```
If hp(NPC\_elitmob\_Colbert) = 0
```

```
then play ‘Literally-shaking.wav’
```

```
and flagcombat(0)’
```

These claims – that leftists are dogmatic, predictable and lacking in self-awareness, and that this makes them legitimate targets for mockery, mimicry and manipulation – echo Bergson’s theory of comedy. For Bergson, laughter is a response to the human tendency to succumb to ‘automatism, *inelasticity*, habit’ (1914: 25, emphasis in original). Being laughed at should be salutary, restoring the ‘wide-awake adaptability and living pliability of a human being’ by jolting us into a renewed awareness of ourselves and how we appear to others (ibid. 10). Some posts on r/The_Donald expressed hope that NPC memes would function this way, inducing leftists and libs ‘with remaining scraps of self awareness to really look at the truth’ (r/The_Donald, 10 October 2018) so that ‘like Pinocchio they can... become real’, embracing ‘the redemptive potential to get red pill’d’ (r/The_Donald, 10 October 2018). In general, however, NPC memes were framed as means not of winning over leftists, but of demonstrating their irredeemability. While it was important that NPC memes should be recognised as funny by fellow right-wingers, it

was even more important that they should be found offensive, alienating or puzzling by progressives, whose *failure* to find NPC memes funny could be interpreted as proof of their NPC status.

Discussion: NPC memes and communicative capitalism

Confronted with the collective avatar of the left-wing NPC, liberal and progressive pundits faced a dilemma: ignore or engage? Some journalists held that it was better to deny the NPC meme ‘oxygen’ (Alexander, 2018); others reasoned that ‘ignoring trolls doesn’t always make them go away’ (Roose, 2018). Our own research is inconclusive. It suggests that while mainstream attention can provide validation and a motivation to continue circulating a given meme, it can also leech memes of their subcultural capital, hastening their decline. It *also* suggests, however, that what was missing from these debates was any acknowledgement of how ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean, 2009) facilitates and recuperates the circulation of content and the generation of affective intensities. This section explores how these dynamics shaped the production, circulation and reception of journalistic coverage of the meme before going on to argue that NPC memes should be understood not merely as *products* of communicative capitalism, but as a potential (albeit problematic) step toward theorising and critiquing this regime.

In their articles for *Kotaku* and *The New York Times*, D’Anastasio and Roose both seek to pre-empt accusations that they themselves are behaving like NPCs unwittingly propagating the meme. While the headline’s claims of ‘dehumaniz[ation]’ were taken as proof of leftist hysteria (r/The_Donald 8 October 2018, 9 October 2018), D’Anastasio’s (2018) piece actually affects a tone of world-weary condescension. Roose adopts a similar register. Structured ‘as a question-and-answer session between the innocent and the knowing’, with Roose fielding questions from a reader stand-in, his article’s format evokes the explainers that offered to decrypt alt-right memes during the 2016 Presidential election cycle (Topinka, 2019). Roose, however, is careful to avoid alarmism or hyperbole. Reasoning that most NPC Twitter accounts were ‘probably not’ attempting ‘to interfere in the election’, he concludes that ultimately this is a story about ‘attention-starved gamers looking to impress one another by “triggering the libs” with edgy memes.’ He also highlights the NPC meme’s Ourouboros logic, noting ‘when progressives object to a meme that portrays them as unthinking automata, it becomes another piece of evidence: See? The left can’t take a joke.’

These precautions, however, proved futile. Both articles were received on /pol/ and r/The_Donald as examples of progressives inadvertently bringing the NPC meme to new audiences while demonstrating the validity of its

critique. This poses two questions: why, despite their best rhetorical efforts, were these authors still held up by right-wing subcultures as blinkered NPCs? And why, if D’Anastasio and Roose suspected that their articles would be received this way, did they publish them in the first place? Dean’s (2009) work sheds light on both questions. She describes how networked media technologies constantly demand user ‘contributions’ to the digital content stream, supplying an affective charge that further binds users to those technologies. These forces drive the production of a never-ending stream of takes, threads, thinkpieces and explainers. Whether anyone actually reads this content is another matter – and is arguably beside the point as long as the content is indexed, shared and reacted to. In Dean’s words, ‘the message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant’ (46).

Communicative capitalism abhors a ‘data void’ (boyd and Golebiewski, 2019), or a search query that yields limited, nonexistent or misleading data. If such voids ‘are ripe for exploitation by media manipulators with ideological, economic, or political agendas’ (ibid. 2), they also represent a tempting target for legitimate media outlets competing for clicks. Consequently, even in cases where it might be more prudent to keep silent there is a strong incentive for journalists to post *something*, lest they lose out on attention and ad revenue. Roose’s (2018) ostensible rationale for publishing his article was his belief in the importance of ‘understanding... how easily joke memes can escape the internet’s seedy underbelly and morph into actual tools of influence.’ But we also need to acknowledge the role of communicative capitalism in driving the production of articles like his and D’Anastasio’s – and in shaping the terms on which they are received. Users of /pol/ and r/The_Donald often appeared to be responding to the headline of D’Anastasio’s article (presumably chosen by a sub-editor) rather than the text itself. This, however, is typical of the way content circulates through digital networks. Online, essays and editorials are received not as sets of propositions to be carefully considered, but as occasions to react, share, and position oneself – to affect and be affected.

Here Berlant and Ngai’s work on comedy is helpful, allowing us to unpack the affective work done by the NPC meme, and to understand it as both a product of and a response to communicative capitalism. Of course, some might argue that describing NPC memes as comedic is inappropriate given the hateful and reactionary viewpoints they were used to express. The defense ‘it’s just a joke’ became a key move in the alt-right playbook, allowing hate-speech and abuse to be dismissed as mere play (Sinders, 2021: 28–30). Berlant and Ngai (2017) themselves acknowledge that it is tempting to conclude that ‘bad or unfunny, reactionary or conservative humor is not really humor at all’ (241). For them, however, we should resist this temptation, because it is precisely its capacity to elicit joy from

some and outrage or bafflement from others that makes comedy such an effective way to ‘test or figure out what it means to say “us”’ (235). As this language implies, Berlant and Ngai disagree with Bergson’s account of how comedy re-emphasises boundaries that were always-already fixed. Instead, they see comedy as a space to explore ‘the *question* of what’s living, what’s mechanical, and who needs to know... an uncanny scene of aesthetic, moral, and political judgment’ (Berlant and Ngai, 2017: 234, emphasis in original).

As we have argued in work on reactionary gamer humour (Gallagher, 2022), these theories are useful in contextualising the often uncanny experience of interacting with actual videogame NPCs. But they also shed light on the cultural work done by NPC memes as accounts of navigating the online spaces communicative capitalism has bequeathed us. These are spaces populated, patrolled, curated and moderated by bots, algorithms and artificial intelligences. Their users are encouraged to act on impulse rather than thinking things through, becoming ‘deeply entangled’ in assemblages of ‘brains, bodies and computers’ (Sampson, 2020: 27). Even as NPC memes assert that it is easy to recognise NPCs, they speak to a sense that it is becoming increasingly *difficult* to distinguish bots from people, facts from fakes, jokes from earnest assertions. The /pol/ poster who posits that NPC memes have struck a nerve because they play on the left’s ‘fear... that they’ll fall victim to groupthink’, undermining their claims to be ‘bastions of rational thought’, is surely onto something (Thread 189449955, 15 October 2018). But we could equally argue that if it were so easy to distinguish leftist drones from right-wing free-thinkers then there would be no need for NPC memes.

In the moment of reacting to an NPC meme – whether by laughing at its skewering of liberal pieties or grimacing at its dehumanisation of progressives – users experience a jolt of what Sampson calls ‘self-enjoyment’ (2020: 72) – a sense of who they are, where they belong and what separates ‘us’ from ‘them’. But these feelings are compelling precisely because they offer relief from a deeper sense of disorientation and malaise. By asserting that some people are rational individuals and others interchangeable automata, NPC memes at once foreground and displace a more disturbing truth: that we are all, in Sampson’s (2020) terms, ‘sleepwalkers’ neither ‘*wide awake* or *fast asleep*’ (37, 42, emphasis in original).

Insofar as they claim that some people or peoples are fundamentally deficient, and that this deficiency is expressed in behaviour that is at once irrational and all too predictable, NPC memes misrepresent reality. In certain NPC memes, however, we see a different claim struggling towards articulation: that under communicative capitalism users have become increasingly dependent on digital platforms designed to elicit behaviour that is at once irrational and predictable. Here we return to the idea

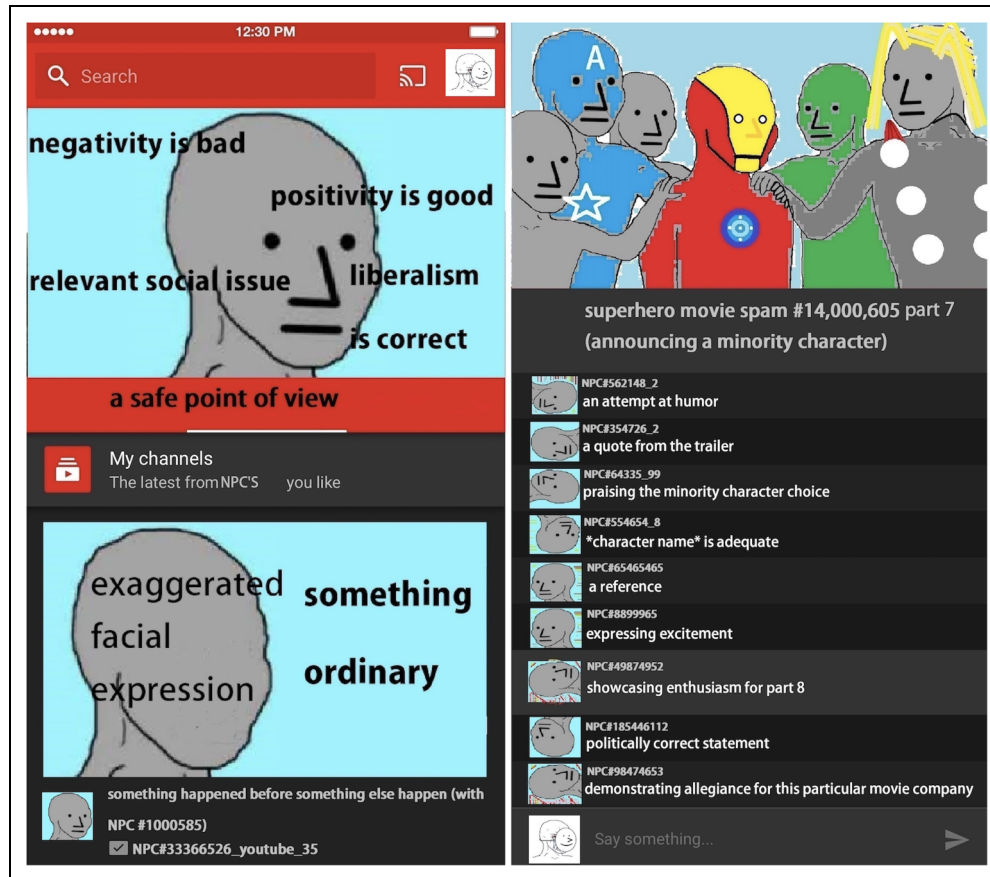


Figure 6. NPC meme mimicking YouTube's user interface.

that the figure of the NPC might have *theoretical* value. To be sure, the forms of 'NPC theory' circulated on 4chan reflect that space's profoundly regressive ethos. But some NPC memes also suggest how the figure of the NPC lends itself to theorising contemporary digital platforms – platforms that encourage somnambulistic, affectible users to keep generating content while making it hard to tell who is posting, why, and how seriously we should take them.

Two examples will illustrate how 4chan users employed the figure of the NPC to explore these dynamics. The first (Figure 6) is from 4chan's /tv/ board (Thread 104683167, 10 Oct 2018), and portrays NPCs commenting on a YouTube video titled 'super hero movie spam #14,000,605 part 7 (announcing a minority character).' NPC#562148_2 has posted 'an attempt at humor'; NPC#185446112 a 'politically correct statement.' The second example (Figure 7) was posted to 4chan's paranormal /x/ board as part of a thread discussing whether all women are in fact part of a 'secret witch covenant' (Thread 21590962, 14 October 2018) – a premise that speaks both to chan culture's pervasive misogyny and its fondness for outlandish conspiracy narratives. The image presents the Tinder profile of 'Female, 22', an alumna of

'Some university or other' whose favourite song is 'Some normie shit or other' (Thread 21590962, 15 October 2018). Like the posts laying out the code driving NPC behaviour, these images present generalities in place of particularities. Portraying the forms of interaction, self-expression and self-promotion in which 'normies' engage as inane, generic, and entirely predictable, they point to the compensatory dimensions of the NPC meme. According to Hebdige (2003 [1979], 2) (whose insights Chun (2021: 225) applies to today's reactionary right), all subcultures turn 'stigmata' into 'icons... signs of forbidden identity, sources of value' (2); in these iterations of the meme an inability to follow dominant social scripts becomes proof that anons are superior to mere NPCs, whose conformity can be taken (depending which version of NPC theory we subscribe to) as evidence that they are brainwashed, literally soulless, or 'low IQ' (a term with eugenicist and racialising valences that /pol/ users are only too happy to tease out). The fact that the NPC meme is a product of subcultural spaces where such attitudes are rife should not be ignored, and these two instances of the NPC meme undoubtedly reflect chan culture's sexism, disdain for diversity and contempt for 'political correctness'.

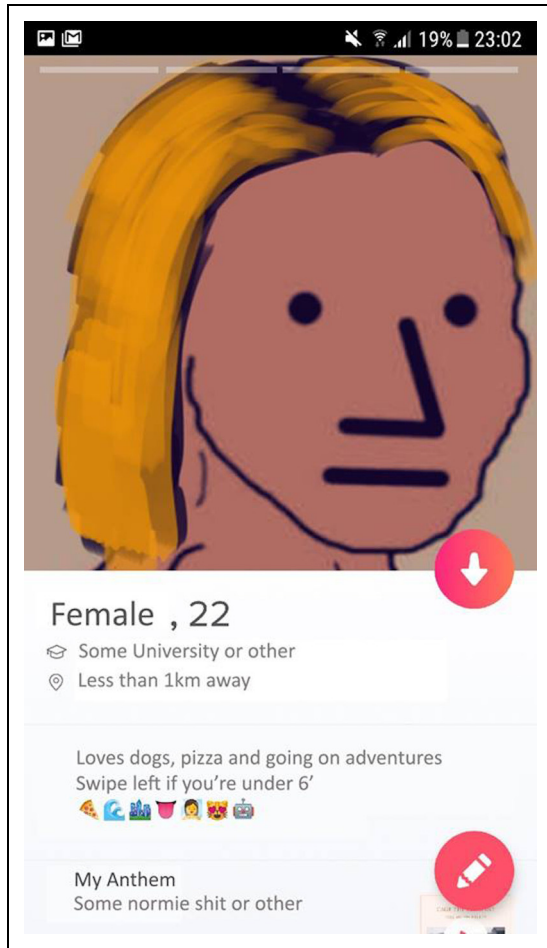


Figure 7. NPC meme as Tinder profile.

We could also see these posts, however, from another perspective: as critiques of how ‘face culture’ platforms enjoin users to brand themselves and compete for attention (Marwick, 2013), and of how those platforms structure social relationships, parse identities and incentivize certain forms of interaction. Viewed from this angle, these posts use NPC Wojak to show how communicative capitalism prompts users to post even when they have nothing to say, to ceaselessly catalogue their own tastes and traits, and to view each event as an opportunity to position and promote their brands. Rather than viewing these memes as jabs at typical normies, we might instead see them as criticising digital platforms engineered to facilitate the analysis, prediction and monetisation of user behaviour. Such a reading enables us to see how NPC memes, which have mostly been deployed to shore up a sense that *we* are rational individuals while *they* are duped drones, might instead be used to show how digital platforms render all users vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation and affective contagion.

That reactionary online subcultures are unwilling or unable to make this leap, developing the meme’s

immanent critique into something more robust, is telling. As we have noted, these subcultures are, in general, skeptical about the possibility of convincing or converting NPCs – a judgement that absolves them of the responsibility for building any broader political movement. Teasing out the critique latent in NPC memes would, perhaps, bring them uncomfortably close to an encounter with progressive, left-wing or even Marxist perspectives on shared experiences of alienation, entailing a reckoning with the limits of individual autonomy under communicative capitalism. Far easier to resort to jabs at individuals whose susceptibility to the affective lures of digital platforms can be taken as proof that *they* are irredeemable.

Conclusions

As we have shown, there can be an inverse relationship between the spread of a meme and its ability to bind subcultural affects. Studying memes therefore requires a methodology capable of tracking their circulation across platforms while still attending closely to the affective charge of memes in context. The trajectory of the NPC meme complicates accounts of memes as spreadable media, while providing a rich case study in how they facilitate (sub)cultural boundary work by functioning as vectors of affective contagion. While the same could perhaps be said of any meme, what sets the NPC meme apart is the way it provides means of discussing and even theorising these dynamics. The NPC meme also offers a ‘collective avatar’ for participating in subcultures and for practicing politics in ways that draw on the logics and structures of gaming. Numerous scholars have identified the 2014 #GamerGate movement as marking both a politicisation of gaming culture and a gamification of politics (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018; Sinders, 2021). United by their antipathy to ‘social justice warriors’, disgruntled gamers developed methods of ‘gaming’ digital platforms that would later be deployed by the alt-right and other reactionary subcultures. Yet the NPC meme is not merely an instance of terms and concepts from gamer culture bleeding into political discourse; it also points to deeper parallels between values, tactics and systems of sense-making prevalent in gaming culture and those of networked right-wing subcultures. These parallels go beyond games’ representational content. As such, while it is important to address the terms on which digital games encourage or enable players to act out reactionary fantasies (as scholars like Schoppmeier (2019) and Brett (2021) have), this alone is not sufficient. Even games with scenarios that might seem innocuous or benign ask players to cultivate the ability to see through the interface and discern the rules, codes and hierarchies subtending what they see on screen (Kirkpatrick, 2011: 228). As NPC memes illustrate, gamer culture’s valorisation of this skill echoes the pride

that ‘red-pilled’ right-wing subcultures take in their supposed ability to see through the illusions propagated by the liberal establishment and to discern what’s *really* going on. Within such a worldview politics is no longer a matter of building coalitions through reasoned debate or emotional appeal, but of ‘activat[ing] npcs’ (/pol/ Thread 191366320, 30 October 2018) who will necessarily remain ignorant of what’s really at stake. We suggest that further research on memes and meme culture can contribute to a nascent body of literature that argues that the logics and practices of gaming culture are deeply interwoven with all digital culture, and that gaming supplies affects, concepts and values for thinking and doing politics, requiring us to think through the implications of viewing politics as a (video)game.


Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This article was written as part of the research project ‘Political Ideology, Rhetoric and Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century: The Case of the “Alt-Right”’, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/R001197/1).

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