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Playing with the News on Reddit: The Politics Game on r/The_Donald

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Abstract

Research into online forms of far-right, alt-right, populist and supremacist politics has raised questions about the extent to which social media enables or constitutes extremist affects and ideologies. Building on this research, and through a case study of how a pro-Trump community on Reddit made sense of news events and sought to contest their representation, this paper explores the relationship between games and politics, arguing that digital platforms encourage people to apprehend, interpret and contest political ideas and information as if engaged in a kind of video game. We show how the group sought to manipulate platform affordances, waging a kind of Info War rooted in an understanding of politics as a pure space of conflict. We show how social media orients people to politics, phenomenologically, through the logics, structures and narratives of online games and argue that this affects not only online behaviours but more general apprehensions of politics.

Key words

Gaming, Reddit, politics, ideology, Trump, social media

Introduction

Research into the prominence and political success of online forms of far-right, alt-right, populist and supremacist politics has brought to the fore questions about the extent to which social media either enables or constitutes extremist (especially racist and misogynist) affects and ideologies. At one level, the prevalence of such online extremism can be explained with reference to how digital platforms, because they lower barriers to entry into the political public sphere, enable dispersed and abject political positions to become easily accessible (Munger and Phillips, 2020), intensifying shared perceptions and creating networks of support and influence (Lewis, 2018). At another level, there may be “elective affinities” (Gerbaudo, 2018) between social media and populism, or “communicative affinities” (Phelan, 2019) between a platform and its users. Digital infrastructures reinvigorate the “paranoid style” of politics (Birchall, 2021), mobilizing its affective networks (Johnson, 2018). This article builds on these findings, arguing that digital platforms can also shape fundamental political ontologies. The proposition of this paper is that social media platforms encourage users to apprehend, interpret and contest political ideas and information as if engaged in a kind of game.

Games and gaming have long had a relationship to politics, not only in the strategic thinking of warfare but through the popular consumption of videogames, which provide popular forms of mediated representations and simulations of warfare (Der Darian, 2009), contributing to a culture of “perpetual war” (Power, 2007) and “everyday militarism” (Robinson and Schulzke, 2016). Yet gaming does not just glorify the grand stage of strategic politics and warfare; it also shapes and structures the more humble, banal, “everyday practices of world politics” (Salter, 2011: 154). As

Robinson and Schulzke (2016) argue, videogames inscribe the spectacle of war into everyday visual cultures. Crucially, though, in videogames these visual representations are complemented by highly engaging forms of interaction, which have the potential to shape political practice (Robinson and Whittaker, 2021). Indeed, as Hirst (2021) has shown, videogames can form the basis for connective practices that have wide-ranging political implications. If gaming and video games play an increasingly important role in popular culture (Salter, 2011), and if popular culture shapes and structures everyday understandings of politics (Innes, 2017), then studying the intersections of politics and such games is a crucial task.

However, that task cannot be confined to the study of video games alone. Gaming has come to shape more general ways in which people access, apprehend and act on politics. An obvious example is the conspiracy theory tied up with the name QAnon (Haiven et al, 2021; Cramer and Wu Ming 1, 2020; Chaudhary, 2021). As Cramer and Wu Ming 1 (2020) put it, QAnon is a “conspiracy fantasy” rendered as a “collective text interpretation game.” QAnon’s believers - perhaps we should say “players” - consume much of the same news as nonbelievers; but they interpret it differently, arranging facts into a melodramatic narrative of a heroic battle fought against an evil enemy, where all that matters is securing victory. From this perspective, the United States Capitol riots of January 6, 2021 – in which Qanon followers played a key role - were entirely logical: To accept defeat in a videogame is to end the game. From a gaming perspective, the peaceful transition of power is no such thing; it is a feint and a fix, an attempt by the enemy to impose its version of reality - a maneuver that demands a response. Social media platforms reinforce this logic, encouraging a politics that is both entertaining and cruel, community-building (or team-building) and divisive (Marlin-Bennett and Jackson, 2022). As Nguyen (2021: 414) argues, platforms reduce social and political processes to a game: users inhabit the “agential

structure” of the platform, adopting the “alternate set of goals” its affordances encourage such as seeking likes, retweets, upvotes, and followers. In politics understood as a game, all opinions and ideas belong to one side or another, obviating the need for an exchange of opinions and making the “marketplace of ideas” obsolete. Instead, politics becomes an everyday, participatory, and perpetual war-game focused on identifying and destroying enemy ideas and opinions.

Here, we develop this argument through a mixed-methods study of the extremist, reactionary community *r/The_Donald*. Drawing on a “digital hermeneutics” (Romele, et al, 2020) approach, we combine data analysis methods with interpretive methods, showing how this form of mixed-methods analysis can be leveraged to study everyday politics on social media, in this case *r/The_Donald*. Formed in 2015, growing to almost 800,000 users before being banned in 2020, this group gave rise to a distinct orientation to politics - a shared political theory and a way of being political in the context of an ongoing “Info War.” When used to describe state propaganda, the concept of “information war” can misleadingly construct audiences as passive and vulnerable in the face of targeted media attacks, as Szostek (2020) has argued. Here, we examine the concept of “information war” - or “Info War” as it is stylised on the subreddit and in other online spaces – not as a top-down state-led strategy but as part of a co-produced mediatized framing of events, wherein no one actor has “control” over the narrative (Tolz et al, 2021). We therefore direct attention to the political game as played on the subreddit, identifying three key features of this way of playing politics: firstly the conversion of politics from an arena of contending real interests into an endless “Info War,” for which the struggle over media representations of political events is everything; secondly, collective “playing” of platform affordances with the goal of winning that Info War, and with progress toward, or distance from, “winning” measured not merely by votes in regular elections but a perpetual pursuit of platform metrics and scores; thirdly, and deriving from

these first two, a conception of politics as a pure, global, and eschatological space within which intrinsically good or evil force do battle. We aim to show how the logics, practices, and narratives of gaming captured and came to constitute politics itself on the subreddit. Insofar as social media orients people to politics as to a video game, this will affect not only the form and content of politics but its apprehension and constitution; once politics is grasped as a game, only particular kinds of political commitment are possible.

The article begins by explaining further how digital platforms affect our apprehension of politics. In the next two sections, we adopt what game studies scholars would call a “narratological” analysis. Drawing on comments on r/The_Donald, we outline the “political theory” of the subreddit, its representation of political action as the defence of a homeland defined by idealised and exclusivist constructions of race and gender. We show how the heroic pursuit of victory against a homogenous, conspiratorial enemy, hell-bent on deconstructing that homeland, demands participation in an all-encompassing “Info War.” In the fourth part we shift to what game studies scholars would call a “ludology” approach, focusing on the formal properties and structures of the forum. We analyse Reddit metadata, gathered with a Python script, identifying how Reddit’s platform affordances shape the political game as played on r/The_Donald. We show how r/The_Donald users leveraged these affordances in pursuit of better metrics and better positioning in the Info War. For ludologists, narratologists mistakenly view games merely as “interactive” stories, missing the structures and properties that distinguish games from other media forms (Murray, 2005). However, we are interested in how the formal properties of the games shape the form and content of political practices and ideologies (how the ludic drives the narrative, which in turn intensifies the commitment to play). In a final discussion section, we

reflect on the implications of our argument for further research into the ideologically organized affective communities which grow within digital political cultures.

A brief note on the case study before proceeding: although our example comes from a Trumpist community, our goal is not to offer an analysis of American presidential politics, nor to make claims about the extent to which Trump's electoral success was driven by "extremely online" reactionary groups. For us, r/The_Donald exemplifies and indexes how platform affordances interact with ideologies and shape affective investments in global politics. As our case study shows, r/The_Donald community members were not interested solely or even primarily in US politics: they discussed US mass shootings and the Muller report alongside shootings in New Zealand and church fires in Paris. The Info War that these Redditors fought assumed the shape and scale of the digital information space. The political game became global, extending well beyond established jurisdictions. Thus, the distance from Trump's 2016-2020 presidential term and from the banning of r/The_Donald from Reddit offers a methodological advantage. This particular social media "stream" is now frozen, which makes it possible to isolate the logics, structures and narratives of the political game - albeit one which is certainly not over and may have only just begun - the better to see the games that others play.

The Politics Game

To "be political" is, in part, to have learned to inhabit and to employ a set of conventional discursive arrangements, expectations and practices. Generic arrangements, in Lauren Berlant's words (2008: 4), provide an "aesthetic structure of affective expectation" and political action is in part constituted and governed by just such conventions and their recognition. Political forms - such as particular political positions, ideologies and outlooks - are, as one analyst of alt-right rhetoric

puts it, recognisable through their styles and moods (Salazar, 2018); political communities are constituted not only through *noêsis* (shared concepts) but also through *aisthêsis* (common sense perception). In combination these create shared ways of apprehending and experiencing things as political (or not), and of ranking them (as, say, attractive/unattractive, good/bad, just/unjust), or valuing them as appropriate or inappropriate modes of discussion and contestation.

Contemporary politics is closely intertwined with popular culture (Grayson, et al, 2009) and with the media forms that shape the dissemination and reception of cultural texts. Online platforms for digital communication have disorganised established *aisthêsis* and fragmented *noêsis* that take shape through popular culture, leading to the creation of novel political forms. Digital systems disperse “political” activities, re-placing them within and across modes of speaking and acting, instantiating what Stiegler called a “mutation in grammatization,” a new way of organising and formalising behaviours, creating new kinds of political and micropolitical relations (2009: 47). As Downing (2020) has argued, political discourse changes in both form and substance as it moves across platforms which impose particular combinations of constraint and creative opportunity that, while not wholly determining the content of communication, give rise to distinct communicative arrangements and practices. The 240-character tweet (and the “thread” or exchange) is a new way of expressing political opinion and analysis in a condensed form (one tending to the simple, impulsive and uncivil as Ott (2017) argues). Conversely, YouTube provides a means for articulating political perspectives at length, reviving the long-form oral address and bringing into being new kinds of audio-visual essay, polemic and image-rhetoric (Finlayson, 2022).

Whilst digital platforms shape communicative genres, they tend to dislodge the established gatekeepers of ideological and generic purity, blurring ideological traditions and political cultures. This creates opportunities for grassroots activism in the form of “connective action” (Bennett and

Seegerberg, 2013), but it also clears space for “ideological entrepreneurs” (Finlayson, 2021) to spread reactionary ideologies. That is to say, “connective action” is not necessarily progressive; affective networks of racist and misogynist resentment and anger also circulate online in ways that promote hate and facilitate racist harassment (Ganesh, 2020) articulating it with in new ways with other forms of resentment (and with sectarian hostility to “progressives”) and with the distinct orientations to the world induced by online experiences and practices. Consequently, racially motivated and anti-feminist harassment campaigns often take the form and structure of games. As Uygur Baspehlivan (2023: 19) has argued, the “affective connections” formed in playful online interactions can create space for “leakages” of reactionary and racist ideologies excluded from the space of the dominant liberal order. Most infamously, in the “#GamerGate” controversy of 2014, groups of predominantly male “gamers” undertook coordinated targeted harassment campaigns against women gaming journalists (much as “raids” are coordinated in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) (O’Donnell, 2020)).

Gaming is a major driver of online activity (which is also often a form of participatory social media). With three billion active gamers worldwide driving an industry worth \$178 billion in 2021 (Lewis, 2021), the cliché of the young basement-dwelling male fails to capture the extent and influence of this gaming culture. As Kirkpatrick (2013) has shown, games were integral both to the technical development of networked computing and to ideas of cybersociety as a potentially empowering new frontier of the social. Digital culture *is* a gaming culture. Social media platforms are products of that culture and thoroughly shaped by the logics and structures of gaming: every social interaction earns a score; “winning” is measured in clicks, likes, retweets, followers, and other metrics. As Nguyen (2021: 418) suggests, such forms of measurement “refract our interests

through the particular prism” of platform affordances, offering the “value clarity” characteristic of computer games but instrumentalising complex social processes. Thus, in digital spaces political and gaming cultures may meet and modify each other. As Wark and Wark (2019: 307) argue, platforms do not register the actions of human subjects but those of “the user,” which is always “a platform construct.” Online, the potentially political subject is just such a construct, with users adapting to the particularities of the platform and the distinct discursive and aesthetic community that has grown upon it, defined by a particular *aisthêsis* and shaped by an emerging *noêsis* which has the potential to open onto some forms of politics while closing off others. As we shall see, in turning to the example of Reddit, this means that some users are oriented to politics as to a game.

Reading Reddit

Reddit users often describe themselves as nerdy outsiders, but with 330 million active monthly users (Murphy, 2022) the platform is increasingly mainstream. Reddit combines the social media “feed” with features of early internet message boards, organised as thematic “subreddits” or “communities of interest” created and moderated by users (Squirrel, 2019). Reddit’s basic structure is that of a game: pseudonymous users “upvote” or “downvote” content; all posts, comments, and users earn a score and high scores push content further up the page; individual users receive “karma” points when their posts and comments are upvoted (and while they frequently mock their own desire to win “useless Internet points,” evidently enjoy playing for them).

Reddit’s game structure supports a broader culture of “play”. Meme-making, pile-on threads, humorous reaction gifs, and customising logos all contribute to what Massanari calls the “playful participatory culture” of Reddit which is in turn “informed by and reflective of larger dimensions

of geek culture” (Massanari, 2015: 128). This can entail a certain ideology of masculinity, that Massanari (2017: 333) has connected to aspects of “toxic technoculture,” including racist “trolling” (Phillips, 2015, Topinka, 2018) and anti-feminist attacks on so-called “Social Justice Warriors” (Massanari and Chess, 2018). Indeed, Redditors played a key role in the abovementioned “#GamerGate” controversy, using the site to coordinate and plan attacks (Chess and Shaw, 2015, Massanari, 2015). This event drew considerable numbers into the orbit of anti-feminist, conservative and “alt-right” politics.

Created a year after #GamerGate, *r/The_Donald* described itself as a “never-ending rally” for “God Emperor Trump.” The subreddit exploited Reddit’s affordances, turning the tacit rules of the game against the broader platform. Through coordinated upvoting, or “brigading,” *r/The_Donald* users routinely drove pro-Trump content to the top of Reddit’s “front page,” disseminating their views across the platform. In some senses, *The_Donald* users were so committed to the game that they were not so much playing as “grinding”, a name given, in gaming culture, to completing repetitive tasks to unlock experiences or capacities. To counter the effects of this upvote grinding, administrators tweaked the algorithm to reduce the “hotness” of posts from “overrepresented” subreddits (spez 2016). They also “quarantined” *r/The_Donald* in June 2019 for promoting organised violence, removed its moderators in February 2020, and banned it in June 2020. *r/The_Donald* users retreated to an external forum notably named “thedonald.win” and later “patriots.win.” The subreddit is a vivid example of “alt-right” or Trumpist political phenomena, of how platforms orient people to politics and of the key role of gaming in all of this. With this context in mind we turn now to a reading of what was being communicated on the forum.

Methodology: Digital Hermeneutics

A lesson from the recent “platform pivot” (Barns, 2019) in media studies suggests one cannot generalise the shape and scope of digital media without attending to the specificities of platform interfaces and infrastructures (Gekker and Hind, 2019). In this paper we take draw on “digital hermeneutics” (Romele, et al, 2020), which seeks to combine computationally-assisted methods of data analysis with interpretive methods drawn from the humanities and social sciences. This approach was particularly useful given our combined interest in the platform affordances of Reddit and the communicative and interpretive strategies of the platform’s users. Digital ethnography can facilitate a deeper understanding of meaning-making in online subcultural spaces (Tripodi, 2022b). We therefore began with a twelve-month period from February 2018 to February 2019 of ethnographic immersion on the subreddit, gaining a sense of how the “ensemble of practices” (Pink et al, 2016) available on the subreddit—linking, upvoting, commenting, replying—embedded as habits and routines. We noticed a few key patterns. First, activity typically spiked in response to political events or in response to events interpreted as political by the subreddit’s users. We also noted how users negotiate the platform to shape a distinctive subculture with peculiar linguistic, aesthetic and technical “styles,” a new and distinct *aisthêsis*. For example, hyperlinks to “anti-Trump” URLs were banned; as a result, users shared banned URLs by archiving screen captures on archive.org, displaying content without directing traffic to the banned URL. In a pattern repeated among other reactionary online groups, users repeated similar phrases over and over again (Topinka, 2022), and also settled on shared interpretations of events rather quickly; dissenting opinions to these shared interpretations were, in Reddit parlance, “downvoted into oblivion.”

To investigate the subreddit systematically, we wrote a Python script to gather posts, comments, and other metadata. Our ethnographic immersion in the community revealed a consistent pattern

of “news response” posts sparking frenzies of activity. As Fancesca Tripodi (2022a) has shown, US conservatism is both a worldview and a media practice, and one that relies heavily on developing and disseminating alternative interpretations of mainstream news. To explore how Reddit users developed these interpretations in the game-space of r/The_Donald, we selected six posts that generated spikes in activity around interpreting “breaking news” and gathered all comments and metrics including upvotes, downvotes, post time, comment time, reply numbers, and other metadata. The posts we selected were: the racially motivated murders of 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15th March; the arrest of Julian Assange on April 11; the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral on April 15; the release, on April 18, of the “Mueller Report” into alleged Russian state interference in the 2016 US Presidential election; the murder of one person at a synagogue in Poway, California on April 27; and the racially motivated murder of 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas on August 3. Although these events are ostensibly quite distinct, on r/The_Donald they were connected insofar as they were experienced as first and foremost media events construed as moves in an ongoing and all-encompassing Info War. In this sense, the game-space was not limited to US presidential politics, or even to the US: it expanded to any space where the Info War might be fought and won. We then focused our analysis on the 600 top-rated comments on these events. Adopting a “grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2014) approach, we coded the content of the comments separately before discussing differences and then refining these initial codes accordingly. To explore the relationship between the content of comments and Reddit’s affordances, we also explored upvoting patterns, measured post activity over time, and tabled the frequency of user “flair,” the user-selected visual labels that appear next to usernames.

The Political Theory of r/The_Donald

As various scholars have shown (Carman et al, 2018; Rieger et al, 2021; Gaudette et al, 2021), r/The_Donald hosted and promoted a politics with a long history and which might be termed radical conservative (Dahl, 1999) or reactionary (Robin 2018). In common with other online avatars of the “alt-right,” the subreddit rearticulated and recreated that politics in new, affectively intense ways, representing a foundationally divided world in which hostility between “liberals” and “conservatives” is absolute, and the liberal state exists only to increase its power over individuals (as demonstrated by key issues such as gun control and online censorship). That state, working to a larger “agenda” of both domination and enrichment, cultivates the support of (and in turn supports) immigrants and minority ethnic groups, and anti-racist, feminist and other kinds of “identity” politics through which traditional family and liberty are undermined, and the essence of white Christian America diluted. This, then, is a politics built on the Schmittian distinction between friend and enemy, and which is always existential, a matter of identity and its survival, and eschatological, demanding preparation for both a last stand and an ultimate reckoning. On r/The_Donald this politics - in some respects a core component of US political culture - was supplemented and animated by the forms and logics of gaming. This was particularly clear when platform participants responded to real-world news. High-scoring posts were regularly those concerned with mainstream news coverage. These posts sparked a kind of interpretation game providing opportunities to compete in developing alternative counter-narratives, intensifying and clarifying the familiar antagonisms of reactionary and populist politics. These afford considerable insight into how r/The_Donald users responded to, thought about and oriented themselves to political events, representations and arguments.

Our analysis showed that, through competitive, live and collective (re)interpretation of news events seen as part of an unfolding Info War, r/The_Donald users deployed, refined and propagated a distinct theory of politics.

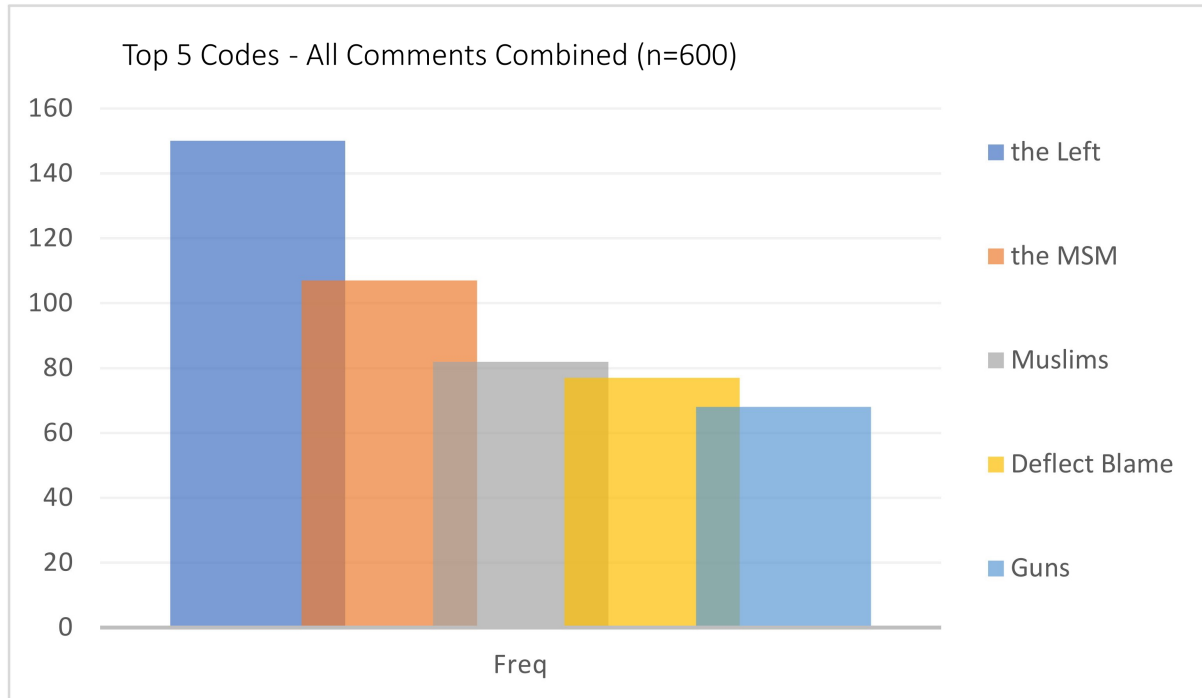


Figure 1. Top 5 Codes All Comments Combined

Within this political theory, unsurprisingly, “the Left” and the mainstream media (MSM) were the primary enemies. Events that might be thought to indicate the dangers of the political right were routinely reframed as evidence of the Left’s and the MSM’s complicity in a conspiracy to control information, disarm citizens, and leave the United States exposed to the fate of a “cucked” Europe

overrun with Islamic enemies.¹ “The Left” was defined in some familiar ways (as support for social welfare and gun control) but widened to include any opponent of Trump and his supporters. As users came to anathematise the “Left” completely, part of their interpretive challenge became showing how everything “the Left” did was proof of treasonous politics. This became an epic construction of political events in which historical, economic or contingent forces had no place; everything that happened could be explained with reference solely to “the Left” and the “MSM” whose motivations were unchanging - to destroy the world of r/The_Donald users. Politics here goes beyond familiar antagonism between left and right, becoming global and eschatological: there is no negotiation or struggle, only an ultimate conflict undertaken in a kind of pure space, undetermined by social interests and intelligible only through the actions of the protagonists and antagonists at war within it.

This conceptualization of politics and of “the Left” led to counterintuitive responses to explicitly right-wing violence. One high-scoring comment responding to the attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand read: “sounds like a larping lefty to me. Source: division is the left's m.o.” That is to say, because the murderer’s citation of white supremacist digital subcultures might turn people away from the Right, he must therefore be on “the Left,” role playing as part of a broader leftist game of delegitimization and censorship. Responding to the Poway shooter’s bizarre claim that popular YouTube gaming celebrity PewDiePie (who had been criticised for previous use of racial slurs) had funded his operation, one user complained, “Now they’re going to demonize pewdiepie (again),” the implication again being that the event was part of a wider plot to expand online censorship. Thus another user wrote: “According to plan. This is all linked to the Smollet stuff and the anti-lynching bill. They want...nay NEED to be able to shut down all free

¹ On the term “cuck,” see McMillen (2018).

thinking internet message boards (like this one) ahead of the 2020 election.” Here “the Left” becomes a conspiratorial, amorphous “They” responsible for the actor Jussie Smollet faking a hate-crime attack, the US Senate approving legislation making lynching a federal crime, and critical reactions to PewDiePie’s racist jokes. Note how right-wing violence is construed as no such thing but instead as strategic simulation, not existing apart from the Left’s grand strategy to demonise the right. There is nothing more to explain because there is nothing outside of this antagonism.

Another example responds to the 2019 Notre Dame fire. More than half the top comments on news of this event argued that it was “no accident”. Users noted how then Fox news anchor Shephard Smith, or “Shep Cuck Smith” as they called him, immediately “freaked the fuck out” when a French politician raised church fires as a wider problem: “They could have video of 19 Muslims running from the scene with gas cans and the report would have been the same.” Users of r/The_Donald were intensely anti-immigrant and deeply Islamophobic, but their political analysis was overwhelmingly governed by belief in the unlimited, malign, agency of “the Left” and “the MSM.” Here commenters drew on a logic common in a range of reactionary online spaces, including among right-wing Chinese social media users, who criticise the Left and the “liberal elites” for their failure to protect “the West” from the “threat” of Muslim immigration (Zhang, 2020). The accidental fire at the restoration of an ancient Cathedral, reimagined as a deliberate act, became an opportunity to participate in a “civilizational” struggle, and to combat “the Left” and the “MSM” which were represented as the primary cause of persecution users believed they experienced. Breaking news was a site for tactical struggle and personal validation, the latter eliciting an obsession with blame and victimhood (charges they regularly made of the Left). Regardless of their relevance to the “God Emperor” Trump, events stimulated comments that linked the antagonists allegedly responsible into one coherent chain of conspiratorial malfeasance.

Evidence for this conspiracy could, in principle, appear anywhere, requiring perpetual participation in a global “Info War.”

These examples of what Marasco (2016) calls “conspiratorial reason” - the linking of all negative outcomes to a single, malevolent actor - acquired additional force on r/The_Donald, generating motivation and momentum for the pursuit of victory. In a sense, for these Redditors, there were no events, just staged moves in a game necessitating efforts to uncover and expose how the “Left” and “MSM” shape information flows. As the second-most-upvoted comment on the thread about the Mueller Report had it, “People here should try to make an effort to read the report so that we can combat the lies that the UNHINGED are going to spin!” On r/The_Donald, politics was, then, implicitly theorized as an absolute conflict between left and right, with all virtue concentrated in the latter, all vice in the former. The “MSM,” the “deep state,” feminists, immigrants, non-Christians, and indeed all minority groups were imagined to work under the tutelage of “the Left.” There were no forces at work other than these. To become political, then, was to realise this fact, to work to see it in all things and then to propagate the truth and combat the enemy.

Playing the Affordances of Reddit

As Apperley (2006) suggests, games are defined by both the narrative or representational content of the game, and by how its affordances orient players. Similarly, understanding the subreddit requires identifying the political outlook - the global “narrative” of “Info War” within which participants played - but also how they played, the form that went with the content and that was shaped by and took place on the platform itself. Instead of focusing only on the representative content of videogames, it is crucial to attend to the forms of interaction they facilitate (Robinson and Whitakker 2021), and to how videogames cultivate forms of communal action (Hirst, 2021,

2022). In game scholar Ian Bogost's (2007) terms, computer games are "computational artifacts" shaped by the interplay of hardware and software, one outcome of which is "the game" players experience. Both hardware and software are, in turn, composed of various "units," or component parts of the game, including the gaming platform, the controller, the Graphical User Interface, the algorithm, the movements the avatar can carry out (run, jump, shoot), and so on. Each "unit" makes certain "unit operations" possible, and the combination of these "unit operations" combines in a metastructural experience of gameplay.

Our study of the subreddit involved attention not only to the words but also to the "ensemble of practices" (Pink et al, 2016) that comprised activity on it including linking, upvoting, and replying. Digital platforms are also composed of a combination of "units." A platform is not just its servers, Application Program Interface, algorithm, or "like" or "retweet" button. It is a metastructural combination of these "units" and of the "unit operations" they afford the user. In this sense, units are a particular type of affordance. As Jenny Davis (2020) argues, affordances are technical specifications that enable and constrain, making some actions more likely than others. The affordances of social media platforms convert communication into a game. This does not mean that everything that happens on social media platforms is inevitably part of a game (and indeed all games involve behaviour that is not strictly part of the game, from flopping in football to covert signaling in chess), but that the affordances make it much more likely that users' communication on social media platforms will be oriented as to a game. The "units" and "unit operations" of social media platforms *are* directly playable. "Platform society" (van Dijck et al 2018) makes gamers of us all, even those who have never played a First-Person Shooter, joined an MMORPG or accepted a Candy Crush invitation on Facebook. The Reddit platform oriented users of r/The_Donald

towards their politics as to a game and they in turn situated their political outlook in relation to digital media in general - the ebb and flow of information and communication - as participants committed to a game of Info War. Central to that war was a collaborative effort to subvert, reframe and supplant the dominant narrative of the MSM and the Left through the strategic manipulation of Reddit's unit operations.

The table below summarises the key “unit operations” available on Reddit.

Unit	Operation
Subreddit rules	Create “magic circle”
Linking	Create shared reference points and set ideological framework
Stickyng	Focus attention, team-building
Removed downvote button	Maximise algorithmically-driven visibility; prevent dissent in advance; promote “never-ending rally”
Downvote button	Bury dissent
Flair	Adopt avatar or “menu-driven identity” (Nakamura 2002)
Upvote button	Organise support (see also Gaudette et al. 2020)
Automoderation	Delete “anti-Trump” posts
Post	Begin new thread on a topic

Comment	Shape conversation
Reply	Consolidate response

Table 1. Units and Unit Operations on r/The_Donald

The first unit is the subreddit’s general rules which enabled moderators to establish what game studies calls the “magic circle” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003), the inevitably permeable boundary that defines the game space. In our case-study that is the “safe space” participants established for the endless celebration of President Trump. Maintenance of the “magic circle” of the game required participants to continually affirm and reproduce the rules. For example, r/The_Donald’s moderators configured Reddit’s AutoModerator bot so that it automatically deleted links to “anti-Trump” sources, such as CNN. However, users still posted “enemy sources,” making use of a second unit operation by using *archive.org* to archive and link to the source. Thus enemy content and information was shared on the subreddit, but no internet traffic was directed to the “anti-Trump” site. Here the internet became part of a game space within which participants fought the Info War, “raiding” the enemy without it “seeing.” This was part of a larger effort to dominate information flows by extending the reach of the subreddit’s posts while restricting the reach of enemy information. For instance, r/The_Donald users coordinated efforts to manipulate Reddit’s unit operations in order to direct traffic to their own posts. By the middle of 2019, of the top 100 highest-scoring posts of all time on r/The_Donald, 54 were explicit calls for users to “game” the platform. At one point a theory emerged on the subreddit that administrators were artificially lowering scores of posts including an image of Trump’s official presidential photographic portrait. They fought back by collectively upvoting the image, pushing it to Reddit’s frontpage. The third

most popular post on the subreddit linked to this portrait and was captioned “The New Algorithm Was Designed To Keep President Trump From The Front Page...But Sadly, That Won’t Happen.”

Users’ engagement with politics, then, took the form of attempting to manipulate the procedures of the platform, aiming to “win” by making their posts - their information - appear at the top. Another means of doing this was “stickyng,” a unit operation that keeps a post at the top of the subreddit. Typically used as a kind of “news bulletin” feature, r/The_Donald moderators used it to facilitate continuous upvoting. In our sample, the active lifespan of posts without stickyng was short, with most comments made within 36 hours. Stickied posts attracted a steady stream of upvotes, inflating scores and preventing posts from losing momentum over time. “Stickyng” was a key tactic in r/The_Donald’s efforts to win the Info War in the intra-Reddit battlespace. It was so successful at manipulating Reddit’s “hot” ranking algorithm and driving content to Reddit’s front page that Reddit administrators modified the ranking algorithms in February 2017.

Despite this adjustment to Reddit’s ranking algorithms, as late as 2019 Reddit users were still complaining about r/The_Donald “spam.” One reason the algorithm adjustment was unsuccessful was that r/The_Donald moderators took advantage of the custom styling available to subreddits by removing the “downvote” button. By doing so they re-fortified the “magic circle,” making it impossible for pro-Tump posts from r/The_Donald to “lose” in the battle for attention. Reddit administrators eventually “quarantined” the subreddit, and moderators lost access to the custom styling feature, and the downvote button returned. Anti-Trump posts were still routinely either deleted or - in Reddit parlance - “downvoted into oblivion” (their score falling below the visibility threshold). For example: when r/The_Donald users concluded that Muslims had conspired to set the Notre Dame Cathedral on fire, a user received a score of -24 for writing, “Renovations, not some Muslim conspiracy did that.” After the subreddit collectively interpreted the mass shooting

in El Paso, Texas as the work of Antifa, one user was penalized with a score of -30 for commenting, “Has Antifa been behind any mass shootings ever?” Note that there is no thought here that such comments might be engaged with and refuted. To give them any credence would be to risk breaking open the magic circle of political gameplay.

Politics here is not an exchange of opinions, as Liberalism tends to have it, nor even a “marketplace of ideas,” since all opinions and ideas already belong to one side or the other. Arguments for “no-platform” or other restrictions on what can be said where and when, are usually justified on the grounds that the “cancelled” perspective or person creates a context in which others are unable to act as free and safe participants in spaces of political expression. Here, as it were, we are oriented to politics as to a seminar discussion or some other form of collective reflection, problem-solving and decision-making. This is not how politics is understood on the sub-reddit nor, more broadly, by the online reactionary Right. Politics consists of identifying to which side an opinion or idea should be assigned, in conformity with *aisthêsis*; politics is a war-game centred on identifying enemy opinions (which are construed as a kind of ordnance) and removing them from the battlefield. The reactionary critique of speech-codes or “cancel culture” is not a plea for the inclusion of marginalised “free-thinking” about race and gender (though it may present itself as such). Rather, it is a means of identifying – through language use and style – who the enemy is and who should, indeed, be truly cancelled. Thus, on the subreddit, for example, when the downvote button returned to r/The_Donald, it was also converted into a kind of ordnance, able to create “losers” in the Info War against other online players. By setting rules that formally structured the subreddit as a “never-ending rally,” such as stickying posts and removing the downvote button, the moderators exploited the metastructure of Reddit and established a

framework for game action that also enrolled users in a particular way of thinking about, orienting oneself to and thus of doing politics.^[OB]

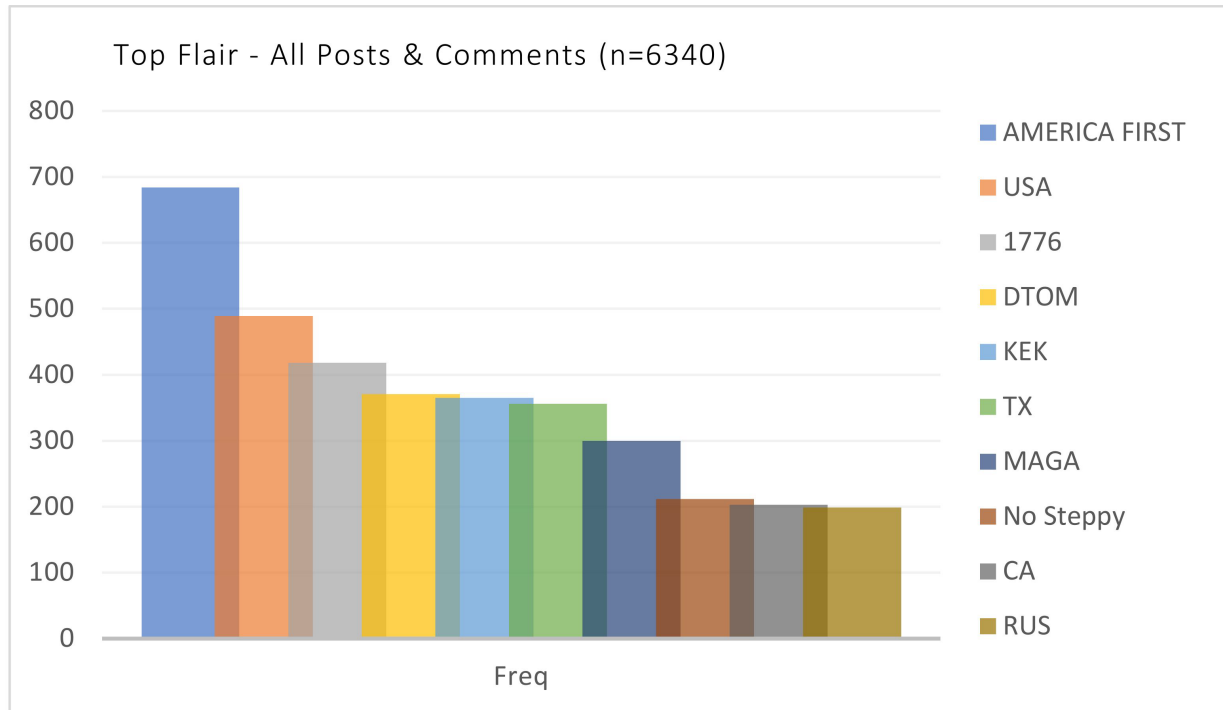


Figure 2. Top User Flair from All Posts and Comments]

Another aspect of the game space of Reddit is the opportunity to create an avatar, an online player character, similar to the “menu-driven identities” players assume in the graphical world of videogames (Nakamura 2002). On Reddit these avatars take the form of labels appearing next to usernames, called “flairs.” On r/The_Donald they were points where gaming culture fused with the expression of the ideological worldview of participants and through which, within the magic circle, users could recognise themselves as virtuous, patriotic, shit-posting “players,” battling their conspiratorial liberal and progressive political enemies. Figure 3 shows the categories of “flair” found on the subreddit. In our sample, the most frequent flairs included: “America First,” a longstanding Trump slogan; “1776,” referencing the declaration of independence; “Make America

Great Again,” Trump’s campaign slogan; and “Don’t Tread on Me,” a slogan frequently added to the Gadsden Flag associated with the Tea Party, Libertarianism and gun rights campaigns. There are also references to US states, most frequently Texas, but also to Russia, an ironic reference to allegations that Trump colluded with that country. The frequency of “Kek” as a flair deserves some attention as it is a link between r/The_Donald, trolling, and gaming culture. The “Cult of Kek” is an ironic born-digital “religion” that references Pepe the Frog memes, the Ancient Egyptian god of chaos and darkness, and the “Horde” faction in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. “Kek” was a dominant flair on comments made in discussing five of the six news events we studied, and the most frequent on posts discussing the arrest of Assange. It signals familiarity with gaming and troll subculture, and allows users to take up a position with the “Horde” of fellow pro-Trump warriors fighting the Info War.

What we find on the subreddit is, then, the collective reinforcement of a particular political orientation, through the competitive struggle to impose an interpretation on news events. But this is not simply affirmation of an ideology. It is a part of a kind of political action, centred on the inventive use of platform affordances - manipulation of Reddit’s ranking algorithm and use of “flair” to perform political character - as part of a wider battle to control events as they appear online. Such political practice takes shape within the “magic circle” of users who must learn not just the argot of the game but also the metastructural combination of “unit operations” shaping the game space in which digital-political characters win points, tally scores, and fight an all-or-nothing Info War.

Through the subreddit, then, Manichean reactionary politics fused with logics of gaming, creating a distinct political form (and a distinct sort of game). Central to it was a heroic narrative in which the community could become conscious of the battle between those who want to erode or

deconstruct the community by propagating a politics of equality (or race, sex, gender identification and so on) and those who want to protect and defend it from feminists, migrants, Muslims and other minorities. Once conscious of this battle, one also becomes a participant in it, able to identify and so expose and eventually overcome the liberal and egalitarian enemy everywhere. The affordances of the Reddit game structured this reactionary ideological narrative. On r/The_Donald users could act under the guise of their online avatar or character, and work together to “hack” the system, overcoming attempts by “them” to silence “us,” pushing their message to the front page, and so winning a battle in the Info War. Everything that happened could be an opportunity for play, although in a sense nothing ever happened except for the game of Info War. For instance, as we noted above, posters understood the 2019 fire at Notre Dame not as a tragic accident but as the outcome of a conspiracy to destroy European Christendom itself. As one commenter wrote, “Keep Invaders out for thousands of years. Maintain historical works of art throughout. Let them in, and within 3 years it’s burning to the ground. Obviously coincidences.” This is clearly a racist narrative. It is also a narrative adapted to the logics of gaming: there are no historical or contextual forces, nor even accidents that might exist outside the frame of the game story; there is only the game space of victory and defeat populated by a cast of characters who can be enrolled either as allies or enemies while one searches for the ultimate “boss” to be overcome so that victory might be declared. “Real-world” events, capable of being endlessly and articulated with and through a reactionary anti-equality politics, are manipulated and manipulable munitions on the battlefield of online politics. The evil doings of the “the Left” and “the MSM” are inevitable, fated almost, but their details unimportant; each is an opportunity to identify a guilty agent which, in opposing, gives rise to an experience of agency within the magic circle of being a player, not the played. In that game space, a narrative can be experienced which assigns r/The_Donald users full agency, as

patriots, soldiers in Trump's winning army. This is an outcome of the interaction of actors with the game structure of Reddit, its unit operations, with the extant modes of anti-liberal American conservatism. It is a distinct manifestation of digital political culture.

Conclusion

On r/The_Donald, a range of phenomena converged and coagulated: a particular sort of populist, reactionary anti-equality politics; the cathecting symbol of Trump; the metastructure of Reddit, designed as a game space; and the cultural practices of gaming. These gave rise to a particular sort of political game. That is just one instance of a much more general phenomenon that includes the rise of the alt-right, the increasing salience of culture wars (Phelan, 2023), and the global spread of conspiracy culture. We have argued that r/The_Donald provides a unique opportunity to explore the intersection of politics and gaming at the level of everyday media practices which encourage an ontological orientation to politics as to a battle to win an "Info War" with global scope – an orientation which is also, necessarily and not incidentally, anti-liberal, anti-egalitarian and marked by racist and misogynist affects. Understood as a game, politics is not about the exchange of ideas or opinions but about the elimination and destruction of enemy ideas, opinions, and interpretations of the world (which is one reason Liberalism has great difficulty understanding it). "Winning" in this form of politics is not just about attracting votes in regularly scheduled elections but about the perpetual accumulation of platform metrics and the constant development and dissemination of interpretations of events that favor one's side, intensifying the division, widening the battle fronts and hastening the day when the "boss" behind it all can be confronted and destroyed.

Once politics becomes a game, political narratives and platform affordances become mutually constitutive; shaping the narrative requires playing the platform affordances, and the affordances, in turn, shape the reception and dissemination of the narrative. This is why r/The_Donald users focused both on coordinated upvoting campaigns *and* on coordinated interpretations of breaking news. Platforms and the cultures of practice that grow upon them provide different sorts of “interface” between users and politics; this “interface effect,” to use Galloway’s (2012) influential term, gives rise to particular political ideas and practices. With online politics we are faced not with a single new object of analysis (“digital politics”) but many, each in need of specification. The way the politics game functions on Reddit will therefore, and by necessity, be different from the way the game is played on YouTube, or Facebook, or Twitter, or TikTok. How platforms encourage people to participate in politics will depend also on the political-ideological narratives, sensibilities, and expectations (the *aisthêsis* and *noêsis*) *in* play: Liberal content on YouTube, for example, will assume a different form than Leftist or conservative content. Future research into politics on social media platforms should seek to understand the specific interactions of the apparatuses of platform technologies and political ideologies, how these constitute and stabilise forms of political discourse, of representation and argumentation which users inhabit and which orient them to political practice and political ideology in particular ways. The question of what defines a form of digital politics is, then, a question about this organisation of forms of politics out of platform affordances, the distribution of their communicative elements across technological systems, and their rearrangement into something that is identifiable, inhabitable, shareable - and playable.

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