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Only Playing?
Ethnographic perspectives on ludic fascism in Germany

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Abstract

In my research on far-right meme practice many of my interlocutors claimed to be "larping" fascism. This paper addresses the question of how to make sense of such emic explanations anthropologically. Are fun and playfulness inextricably linked to the contemporary far right? What do we do with emic theorizations of racism as "larping," queerphobia as fun, and antisemitism as "just a joke"? The question I am addressing in this paper is, what is the analytical gain of analyzing contemporary, digital forms of metapolitical activism as "play"? What can be learned about the successes of the contemporary far right if we take the "only playing" claim literally and seriously? I make use of classic anthropological play theory (Bateson, Geertz, Schechner) as well as critical humor studies to approach ambiguous forms of play and transgressive humor as a particular form of ludic fascism in the (post)-digital age.

Die Autorin / The author

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Introduction

In May 2024, a video clip went viral on social media that showed young people partying and singing openly racist slogans to the catchy tune of Gigi d'Agostino's Eurodance classic "L'amour toujours." A young woman who was in the camera's focus at the beginning of the video, smiling and chanting "Ausländer raus, Deutschland den Deutschen" – literally "Foreigners out, Germany for Germans" – was soon identified by outraged social media vigilantes and excused herself with the claim that she had "merely participated in a meme." Variants of that disclaimer of "only playing" or "just joking" struck a familiar chord with my research about transgressive humor, trolling, and far-right meme cultures. Some of the people I interacted with claimed to be "larping" fascism, that they were "merely trolling," and that they did so with racist or queerphobic positions for the sole reason that these were most likely to stir the most outrage (or in emic terms, "lulz"). Highly transgressive Twitter/X accounts were framed as a "fictional character, an avatar," or as "satirical art figures play[ing] right-wing agitators." Others insisted that "fun" and "memes" were helpful in spreading far-right narratives, but that the real reason for their activism was deadly serious: namely, the supposed threat of "white genocide" through "orchestrated mass migration." Whereas some embraced the characterization as "trolls," others firmly rejected it because they felt that the label "troll" was belittling their political activism.

"Only playing" refers to both ends of that spectrum and captures the inherent paradox of ludic fascism as being at once "playful" and linked to positive feelings such as "fun" and communion, and political, harmful, and violent. This paper will start from these emic reasonings of fascism as play and ask: what if we allow ourselves for a moment to take that claim at face value? What can be learned about contemporary digital fascism, when we consider it to be a form of play? The major problem of theorizing these activities as "play" or "trolling" lies at hand. First: it is a kind of paternalistic move to theorize young people's political activism as "play," as it denies that even if it appears "playful," memeing, for

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example, might be an inherently serious and political practice in the context of an information war over opinions and positions. Second: reframing racism as "trolling" moves the responsibility away from the perpetrator (who after all was "merely trolling") to the victim who "feels offended" (see Romano 2017). Third: what if the stakes of this "play" are high? Can it still be considered "only play"? What if what was merely "virtual play" suddenly bears consequences in real life, e.g. when in Grevesmühlen the singing of the meme at a town fair coincided with the racist attack of two black girls, or – less violent but equally real – doxing, swatting, and other forms of cyber-bullying? And last: what if the "play" frame is used to deliberately "hide" the serious and strategic efforts of a young political generation to mainstream radical political positions?

The verb "play" downplays the dissemination of transgressive and discriminatory racist and misogynist memes and texts; the collocative word "only" adds to that. But what is perhaps more important is its strongly appellative character: play along – it's fun to be a "far-right agitator." What is needed, thus, is close ethnographic readings of the digital practices of "only playing." As an anthropologist, it is my concern to take the emic theorizations of my research partners seriously. This paper addresses the question of how to make sense of such emic explanations anthropologically. What do we do with emic theorizations of racism as "larping," queerphobia as fun, and antisemitism as "just a joke"? Are fun and playfulness inextricably linked to the contemporary far right, as recent anthropological studies (e.g. Sienkievicz and Marx 2022; Udupa 2021) seem to suggest? So the question I am addressing in this paper is: what is the analytical gain of analyzing these forms of metapolitical activism as "play"? What can be learned about the successes of the contemporary far right if we take the "only playing" claim literally and seriously (Pasieka 2017) and how does that link to ethnographic practice in a more abstract way.

Ethnography as play

> "A good clown is like a good anthropologist, he or she observes the social world as a participant but is clumsily integrated into the surroundings and thus ironically detached." (Manning 1983: 12).

Indeed, doing fieldwork in the company of digital Nazis and trolls I often couldn't help feeling like a clown – ironically detached and poorly integrated. It is only in retrospect that I understand that this paradoxically was the closest I could get to the mood, affect and practice of trolling and far right digital practice. As a clown, navigating a terrain where nothing was to be taken seriously, everything was wrapped in layers of ironic distance or "play".

Not only did many of my interlocutors insist that they were "only playing" or continuously and repeatedly shattered claims they had just made as "larping" or "trolling." At times field encounters themselves felt like playing a game. They would try to "troll me away" – by making use of extreme language, misogyny, pornography, racist memes or through threats of doxing my identity that were always placed in a half-joking manner. And once I realized that I could not get out of the game, I at least partly put on the role I had been given in these semi-public digital exchanges: like a living meme, a mid-aged leftist-woman (even worse: a social scientist) who was in so many ways "matter out of place" in the digital spaces my interlocutors claimed as theirs – gaming and streaming, 4chan and meme culture. In that role, I deserved the hate and the lulz. I turned myself into a lolcow – but at the same time, putting on that role also meant I had understood at least partly the game's rules. I played along. In retrospect, it was through "playing a meme-like social scientist" on the internet that I learned most about trolling as a far right digital practice. And to some extent, it even was "fun" – in the way how most fieldwork is fun once one has understood enough about social rules that one feels comfortable enough to join in, yet at the same time still enjoys the *Narrenfreiheit* [a beautiful German word that lacks a fitting translation, literally "the chester's liberty") of the outsider. Understanding ethnography as play means accrediting for that typical simultaneity of inside and outside,

closeness and distance, ethnographic intimacy and detached analysis that characterizes anthropological epistemic practice.

In "ethnography as play," Tayler (2022) argues for the many similarities between ethnography as practice and play as a particular mode of human interaction:

> "Navigating entry processes and learning to inhabit a space, puzzling out how the system works and its forms of discovery, intensely enjoying the experience despite its many frustrations and failures, moving through it all in embodied and affective ways, grappling with unknowns, and eventually setting the experience aside and moving onto something new are common moments in both ethnography and play" (Tayler 2022: 34).

These ideas about ethnography and play as "kindred spirits" (Tayler 2022: 34) are not new. We can find traces of it in experimental ways of writing and teaching anthropology with Victor Turner (who would let students enact ritual practice from fieldnotes scratches) or Clifford Geertz whose "thick description" of "deep play" included accounts of how he and his wife learned to "play along." I will come back to some of these in the final section of the paper. But before that, let us have a look at the particularities of the field I have been studying.

Far-right play and humor

A growing body of literature has pinpointed the importance of social media and digital community platforms from imageboards to gaming platforms as breeding and recruiting grounds for right-wing extremists (Nagle 2017; Ebner 2019; Udupa, Gagliardone and Hervik 2021; Braddock et al. 2022; Wels et al 2023; Schlegel and Kowert 2024). Political activism on social media has been conceptualized, also from within these cultures as "trolling,"

communities are forged on gaming platforms such as Steam, Twitch, or Discord,[1] and "raids" are being organized to discredit political opponents or to gain visibility within digital subcultures. (Post)-digital protest more generally has also been analyzed as "play" (Dalsheim and Starrett 2021; Grobe 2022), and "fun" has been declared a kind of "meta-practice" of digital hate culture (Udupa 2021: 96). "Comedic hatred" (Sienkievicz and Marx 2022: 140) or "playful hate" (Munn 2023: 17) appear to be central modes of political agitation of the far right that have long been neglected in both humor studies and the study of play (Billig 2005; Sienkievicz and Marx 2022). Memes and trolling – both connected to 4chan – have been discussed as post-political forms of activism and critique especially with regard to the alt right (Phillips and Milner 2017; Nagle 2017; Strick 2021). And whereas both alt-right trolls such as Milo Yiannopoulos (2016) and the US media celebrated (or shuddered at) the assumption that 4chan trolls had helped Trump into office with their "meme magic," the real connection among humor, politics, play, and memetics is a little more complicated (see Phillips, Beyer and Coleman 2017). Yet, that something is considered "play" or takes the form of humor does not mean that it does not at the same time have serious impact. A racist joke is never "just a joke" (Pérez 2022). Pérez (2022: 8ff) develops the concept of "amused racial contempt" to describe the affective mechanisms of pleasure and community carried out by racist jokes. Laughing together creates strong social bonds, particularly if this laughter is exclusionary. Humor and play are also strategically employed by far-right movements to shift the boundaries of acceptable discourse. The logics behind this is that repeating e.g. racist stereotypes over and over again, even if in some kind of ironic twist or in the form of play, will eventually result in the affirmation of these stereotypes, which then no longer appear to be "only jokes." In a recent edited volume of the *European Journal of Humour* (2024) Kuipers et al. trace the links between affective polarization and "humor scandals," or more generally, carefully curated joking and

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[1] Discord – one of my major field sites – is a VoIP service, developed for online gamers to connect and talk to each other while playing. Twitch and Steam are streaming platforms focusing on video game live-streaming.

trolling, as part of public debates. "Humour can be divisive and aggressive. Despite its playful 'non-seriousness,' it can have real consequences" (Kuipers and Zijp 2024: 11). And even though humor has always been part of far-right politics (see e.g. Sartre's comment on antisemites who "like to play" dating back to 1948, or Billig's 2001 research on the racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan), the participatory cultures of social media and their "affective economies of transgression" (Deem 2019; see also Strick 2021) have certainly contributed to a massive rise in transgressive joking (Attardo 2023). In her work on Indian nationalism in the digital age, anthropologist Sahana Udupa argues that we need to scrutinize the visceral aspects of fun (and play) in order to understand how it "signals collective aggression as constitutive of identity [blending] with and [deriving] strength from the new media ecology of playfulness and outrage" (Udupa 2021: 109). Digital fascism, it seems, in many aspects is ludic fascism. Should we regard the practices of online fringe communities using memes and trolling as play? Or is it rather pretending to play in an attempt to disguise a political agenda?

Setting, data, and methods

Social media, gaming cultures, and other forms of participatory internet have been described as a "digital accelerant," as a "transmission belt" for the far right (Fielitz and Marcks 2020), or as "radicalization machines" (Ebner 2019). But what metaphors such as these tend to obscure is that these are not automated processes – even though algorithms do play a role – but rather we have to take the actors with their complex human agendas seriously in understanding how e.g. memes and the use of "hateful humor" work. Playing and gaming are not isolated activities but rather very social, and they therefore need to be studied as social practices. This is where anthropology provides suitable methods and concepts with which to dig into the social dimensions of far-right meme culture, not as some kind of (post)-digital form of propaganda but as ludic fascism. My approach is rooted in a media anthropology perspective that puts people and their use of media at the center of attention and questions binary dichotomies such as "fun" versus "serious" or "play" versus "politics." I thus focus less on the

ideological content of far-right meme culture and more on the social aspects of memeing and the ludic or playful aspects of far-right digital culture. The approach also draws from the research on the gamification of terror or extremism – ISIS propaganda videos that present becoming a jihadi as some kind of video-game-like adventure (Aly et al. 2016; Schlegel and Kowert 2024) or the live-streaming of far-right extremist terrorist attacks, such as in Halle or Christchurch (Lakhani and Wiedlitzka 2022; Thorleifsson 2022; Andrews 2023). However, although a number of studies have pointed to the importance of gamification, few have actually studied the phenomenon empirically. My paper – based on 12 months of digital ethnography among a virtual and scattered German fringe community of right-wing internet activists – will provide answers to these questions.

I started my research with the content of a German youtuber, Bernd,[2] who from 2018/2019 became successful and famous among his followers for his blunt, humorous, and coarse style of videos, where he combined political talk with obscene language and videos of, for example, burning the Qur'an to fry bacon. By the time Bernd's YouTube account (with approx. 60,000 subscribers) was banned, he had already gathered a community of supporters or followers around him. Using mainly Discord, a network emerged serving a wide range of interests within the metapolitical field of that fringe community. Although I focused on one particular Discord server and one forum, by following users' digital promenades I also occasionally hung around on 4chan, Telegram, and later X (formerly Twitter). It is this network of activists, prosumers, trolls, and fans that provided the setting of my research. I mostly did non-participant observation online, interacted with users through text and voice channels, watched

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[2] I have consciously decided not to use the name/pseudonym of this youtuber and other public figures in the community in publications in order to not allow them to draw reputation from it and in order to protect myself. The community is infamous for doxing, and researchers who have written about it in the past have been dragged to discomforting attention on social media. To make it easier to read, I decided to name him "Bernd," which is the equivalent of "Anon" in the German troll scene, and accordingly rename the co-hosted podcast "2Berndstream."

hundreds of livestreams, and followed community-building in live chats. Later on, I also conducted mostly chat-based interviews with followers, fans, and content creators.

Ways of becoming through participation

There are numerous ways in which users can participate in right-wing activism as play. In many life story interviews, actors recalled a process of becoming through intensifying participation. This usually started with passive lurking – that is, "consuming" content, subscribing to Telegram or YouTube channels, following livestreams, looking at memes, and so forth. "Lurking" is an emic term, coming from image boards such as 4chan, where new users are habitually reminded that they should learn the rules, conventions, and vernaculars of the site before becoming active users e.g. by posting. Someone who asks "stupid questions" or does things in the wrong way is mocked as "noob" and asked to "lurk moar." So lurking – even though it appears as rather passive – is already an active form of participation as an apprentice. And it certainly is no coincidence that a popular meme refers to outsiders as NPC's – Non-Player-Characters.[3]

In a next step, a user who has successfully been "redpilled"[4] – that is, started to question what is considered mainstream left-wing propaganda – finds that their "old" offline friends and family do not share this "critical" gaze. Often this is the moment when people start to engage in alternative community-building online, e.g. subscribing to a Discord channel or a Telegram chat group or participating in live chats, or participating in financial support e.g. by donating subs (on Twitch) or subscribing to the Patreon of individual content creators. Call-in livestreams or online live chats on Discord or Telegram are another form of digital socializing. And since far-right content creators on YouTube have to calculate the risk of getting strikes on

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[3] The term NPC stems from gaming culture and refers to automated, or in-game characters in a game that are not steered by other (human) players and thus have no agenda of their own.
[4] The notion of "being redpilled" is a common pop-cultural reference within far right digital networks to describe the process of becoming "right-wing." It refers to a pivotal scene of the movie *Matrix*, where the hero Neo is confronted with the choice of swallowing the blue pill and remain in deceptive comfort or swallowing the red pill and seeing the world how it really is (see Munn 2023).

their videos or getting banned altogether, another form of participation or support is to mirror content on open fan channels or share banned content on TikTok. Some of these forms of participation have explicit competitive or game-like aspects. For example, when the TikTok account of AfD (Alternative for Germany) candidate Maximilian Krah was "shadowbanned" in the midst of campaigning for the EU elections, Bernd and others initiated the notion of the "TikTok guerrilla" and asked their followers to share Krah's TikTok videos, advertising with prizes to be won for the most successful (viral) video.

Some of these competitive or game-like facets are inscribed into platforms' affordances. On Discord, for example, there are different categories of membership and members can climb up a hierarchical order by being active users. New members are characterized as "aspirants." If they behave well and are for some time active in voice or chat channels, they are eventually promoted to "members." On the Discord server on which I spent most of my time during digital fieldwork, members who proved trustworthy and wanted to participate in "the thing" eventually became "internal members" – which gave them access to a restricted sub-server.[5] On X, users may manipulate hashtag trends by massively tweeting with a particular hashtag (often coordinated in some way or another) or hijack existing hashtags, as was the case with the hashtag #SilvesterinBerlin, which was flooded with xenophobic tweets about migrants.

Another form of playful participation is to join in raids – that is, collectively showing up in a livestream on Twitch or YouTube and spamming the live chat. In many cases this takes a hostile form, with the aim of annoying streamers considered to belong to the adversary group. Similarly, users may participate in concerted actions such as spamming the comments sections of YouTube videos or X posts, with the goal of annoying people to such a degree that either they block troll accounts or close the comments section altogether – both of which can then be

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[5] I never became member of that internal server, so I cannot really tell what happened there. From chats and interviews, I know that this was where new, large-scale coordinated actions were planned. Smaller coordinated group actions, such as raids, often developed rather spontaneously, e.g. during live chats.

decried as "undemocratic" or "anti-free speech." Trolling is a particularly attractive form of playful participation – one that allows participants to feel part of a powerful group and yet comes with the backing-out option of declaring it all "just a joke" or 'satire' or "art." Being part of a group of people that raids the stream of a person considered an enemy or belonging to the opposing fraction will make people feel not only connected but also powerful – especially when there is some kind of reaction to it. For example, when the Amadeu Antonio Foundation[6] published an article about Bernd as the "leader of a far-right online troll community," for several weeks in streams, live chats, comment sections, and chat groups people would jokingly refer to their being part of a troll army as a source of pride. When one superchatter asked for "a pay raise for the troll army, since we have to pay for our gas," Bernd answered: "Until the day before yesterday we didn't have a clue that this army exists, let alone that we have to pay them, so I suggest you turn towards the Amadeu-Antonio Foundation, they shall boost their donations to us [laughter]."

Calling someone a troll or referring to oneself as a troll can thus be read as a two-fold strategy. On the one hand, Bernd repeatedly rejected the idea that he orchestrated a troll army, since, from his perspective this would mean reducing his "investigative journalism" to a mere joke and not serious political practice. On the other hand, for his community, being characterized as part of a larger, powerful army apparently felt empowering and was affirmatively, even though jokingly, taken up. Even "passing as" a conscript of a troll army was connected with a positive feeling. Subscribing to a group that is considered by large parts of society to be deviant, hateful, and morally wrong, if not dangerous, comes at social costs. Participating in community practices such as raids, or being considered – even if from the outside – part of a troll army felt consoling and empowering. Instead of grasping this in terms of radicalization

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[6] The Amadeu Antonio Foundation, founded in 1998, is engaged against xenophobia, antisemitism, and right-wing extremism both online and offline.

or "online hate bubbles," my insights suggest that we pay attention to the performative or generative power in aggressive laughter (Pérez 2022) or ludic, memetic political activism.

Knowing how to play: the use of memetic speech and dog-whistles

Games are usually structured by rules. This is the case even in non-game contexts when playing is the central modus of interaction (see e.g. Massanari 2015: 95ff, on Reddit as a locus of play). There are explicit and implicit rules of playing, and especially the latter always also serve to distinguish long-time players from newbies. In fringe spaces where most rules are implicit and stem from having learned through playing, such as 4chan, it is through lurking that new users learn the rules, conventions, and vernaculars before becoming active players. But playing along by the rules is almost inevitably accompanied with attempts to bend or alter them in order to turn the game into something else. Alexander Galloway uses the concept of countergaming as "oppositional cultural production" in which games are transformed, often for political reasons (Galloway, 2006: 109). "Modding"– when it abbreviates "modifying," i.e. changing a game's rules or procedures (see e.g. Salvati 2019; Wells et al 2023) – is one way to do that; collectively raiding online video games is another. A prominent 4chan example is the "pool's closed" raid of Habbo Hotel, where numerous users showed up with Afro-American avatars, blocking entrance to the pool with the claim that it was "infected with Aids" (see Higgin 2013). Often this involves creative adaption of the possibilities or affordances of games or social media. For example, X rules say that a hashtag appears in the trends when it is used by a significant number of users, and that hashtag trends therefore reveal something about what are the current topics of societal (or at least X users') interest. It is thus not surprising that manipulating X trends is a means of metapolitical activism, backing the narrative that many far-right positions really reflected "the people's" position and were thus not "radical" or "extremist" but "normal."

I want to look at one particular rule of social media spaces and their inversion by the far right: the use of emojis and memetic speech in order to display and perform belonging. Here the rule

is that by making use of particular forms of speech you display your political loyalties, your interests, but also your gender, your sexual identity, your age, and so forth. For example, by giving your pronouns in your X bio, by making use of gender-neutral language, you position yourself as a progressive, left-wing liberal person sensitive to power hierarchies. On the other hand, by making use of references to Germanic culture, to tradition, homeland, or folk culture, you position yourself as being far right. Outright references to national socialism are long gone, not least because they are easily detected by social media moderators and will lead to the banning of your account or worse. So bending the "rules" of social media identity involves two steps: the first is to make use of coded language and symbolism and dog-whistling, the second to subvert progressive symbols.

That far-right dog-whistling and coded language often make use of humor is not a new phenomenon connected to digital culture (Miller-Idriss 2018). It has, however, gained much prominence within the online rise of the alt right and meme wars (May and Feldman 2019; Tuters and Hagen 2020), the (post)-digital activism of the Identitarian movement and its heirs (Maly 2024), and far-right troll culture (Phillips 2015; Coleman 2023). Research has focused on the use of dog-whistling as a way to "hide" openly racist and extremist discourse or in mainstreaming radical ideas (Akerlund 2022; May and Feldman 2019). However, if we look at the social, the ludic dimensions of coded language, we can show how important it is for community-making and as a marker of belonging. Far-right community-building strongly relies on communication in patterns of friend versus foe, good versus bad, or us versus them (Hervik 2019). It might therefore be surprising to discover a wide array of coded language that actually builds on the enemy's speech. In ironic subversion, dog-whistles or codes are taken from anti-racist or diversity-sensitive language and turned upside down. An example are terms that refer to migrants with seemingly positive notions such as "Goldstücke,"

"Raketenwissenschaftler," or "Bereicherung."[7] All of these originate from progressive, pro-migration discourse. They have been taken up and are used in in-group communication in order to not only dismiss this interpretation as false or nonsense, but also to ridicule progressive discourse and practice as such. Another example is in taking the pejorative terms used against the far right and their digital practices, e.g. as "hate speech" or "Nazi," and reappropriating them in a positive way – often making use of deliberate misspelling (e.g. "Nadsi"). Recall the excitement with which the outside ascription of being a "troll army" was taken up by the community. I first encountered the label "troll army" in the field as an ironic appropriation of a foreign attribution – in this case by the civic, anti-racist documentation work of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation. "Aren't you afraid [to talk and engage with us]? We are a really bad troll army," was one of the first speech acts directly addressed to me in the field.

A whole vocabulary has evolved that is being used as a marker of belonging and that often makes reference to memes, trolling subcultures, and/or gaming. Linking back to the language conventions on German imageboards such as Krautchan or Kolchan is the creative re-translation of English words into German. For example the verb "to post" is often re-translated into the neologism "pfostieren." The practice of "copying and pasting" is re-translated into "Kopierpaste" and – especially with regard to the metaphor of the honeypot – the term "newbie" is re-translated into "Neubiene" (literally meaning "new bee"). Apart from the invention of new words, or the ironic misuse of existing terms, right-wing community language as it appears in the realm of the Berndversum is characterized by creativity and a fast pace of change. An example is the ironic use of gendered speech, particularly versions that

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[7] The term "Goldstück" is usually used to praise someone (perhaps comparable to "You're a ten"). It links to the notion of "Bereicherung" (literally, "enrichment") and refers to the claim that migration is a positive thing for the receiving society. "Raketenwissenschaftler" (literally, "rocket scientist") is linked to the pro-migration claim that Germany is in need of skilled workers and hence the immigration of "rocket scientists" and the like should be highly appreciated. Akerlund (2022) has analyzed similar forms of dog-whistling in Sweden, where the term "kulturberikare" (literally, "culture enricher") has circulated in far-right digital culture.

are easily discredited as "ridiculous" such as gender-neutral pronouns (e.g. "my pronouns are 'He' and 'Tler,'" combining to from the name Hitler) or gender-neutral plurals such as "ens" ("good evening to all of my beloved Hetzens" – the plural of the German word for violent agitator, "Hetzer," with the gender-neutral suffix "ens").

If we look at coded language, emojis, memes, and so forth from the perspective of sociolinguistics, we understand that they are a form of insider communication that targets those already "in the game" and encourages continued participation. The successful use of memetic speech creates a community through participation. I don't have to see the others; they don't have to agree that I am part of the group: it is through speaking, through participating in insider speech, that I become part of the group. Memetic speech is to some degree a performative action. However, since memetic speech is a marker of belonging, it can also be used to demarcate and exclude outsiders. And if you are doing it "wrong," you are suspected of being an undercover federal agent or a leftist troll.

Being in the game? Using humor to negotiate belonging and deal with mistrust

Not surprisingly, right-wing extremist fringe communities on the internet that are characterized by anonymity and relative openness have to deal with the question of who actually participates in these communities, and for what reasons. According to "Rule No. 29" of 4chan, "In the internet all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents." In a context where everything is play, and nothing is to be taken seriously, it is difficult to tell which story told is genuine and which is mere "trolling." When in late summer 2022 a media news article revealed that the German secret intelligence agency (Verfassungsschutz; VS) had paid hundreds of undercover agents to research and participate in right-wing extremist internet groups, the suspicion that had been part of the community for a long time seemed to have been proven justified. In chats and Telegram channels and on Discord, people who behaved "suspiciously" were accused of being VS agents. One of the factors that was used to nurture

this accusation was the inappropriate use of humor and the failure to make use of appropriate language.

On several occasions I witnessed internal conflicts that evolved over the question of how "liberally" the idea of free speech was to be handled when it came to posts or memes that "unironically hailed Hitler" or were "openly racist."

> some shmos here have Nazi symbols in their profiles and believe [that] to be funny. But shit like this is endangering our image and optics. Also all these jews or blacks are close to apes memes seem to be more than jokes for some. […] We should draw a clear boundary here.

The person this referred to replied:

> Anyone who doesn't see that I am parodying or copying a fucking gaming ideology, who doesn't understand that I don't mean that shit seriously, is having serious problems. Whether it is funny or not is a different question. And whose image am I damaging anyways? Mine? Bernd's? Himmler's?

The conflict evolves not around the question of whether particular antisemitic or racist memes are funny or not but rather around who will see these memes and what conclusions they will draw. So what these debates were really about was the question of how the (in)ability to understand and appropriately use edgy humor could exclude one from being in the game. In some cases, references to gaming culture were accepted to disguise hateful postings, because they had a self-ironic subtext (see Figures 1 and 2).
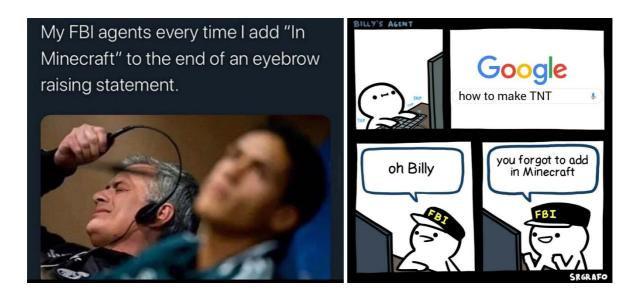
Figure 1: FBI agent gaming meme

Figure 2: "In Minecraft" meme

But if that subtle, self-ironic twist was missing, or if the para-memetic context (e.g. where a meme is posted, by whom) leaves more room for doubt than was acceptable, then free speech and play had their limits.

In summer 2022, in the midst of the VS debate and the German gas crisis resulting from sanctions against Russia, a user posted a meme showing Pepe the Frog in SS uniform, placing a gas mask over the mouth and nose of a meme known as "Jewish Merchant" with the text "Gas Party Germany – We make sure that there will always be gas where it is needed."

Another user comments on this with the words "seems like they have placed the VS trainees on us? […] This thread is glowing[8] brighter than the children form Chernobyl." Similar posts

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[8] The term "glowing" or "glowie" refers to the expression used in reference to federal agents (in right-wing fringe communities) that they "glow like n****** in the dark," which was abbreviated to the expression "glown******" or "glowies" in 4chan memes. A glowie is someone who is easily detected as "fake," because they "glow" either by showing their inability to make appropriate use of memes and coded speech or by expressing positions too radical or without a humorous undertone. This is understood as "bait" or a "honeypot" meant to seduce others into violent speech or action. Suspicion about somebody's "real" sympathies or affiliations were expressed verbally through variations of the term "glown*****," or variations of image macros showing a neon-green "glow" surrounding a person.

openly flirt with extremist and violent action and moreover criminally liable content, such as belittling the Holocaust. The theorizing behind such accusations is that federal agents would deliberately post extremist content not only in order to "pass" as right-wing extremists, but moreover in order to push other users to engage in practices that in turn would justify criminal investigation.

Let me illustrate this with a specific exchange, where Bob, a long-time member and moderator of the discord server, harshly criticized the development of the 2Berndstream as too appealing. He uttered his critique in a rather aggressive tone, making use of memes with explicit and violent content, such as calling for media representatives who "lie" to the people about the real dangers of "mass migration" and "islamization" be killed. Additionally he argued that the YouTube channel of 2Berndstream had not yet been subject to bans or deplatforming because it didn't pose any "real threat" and therefore was "useless." Rather unusually, Bernd himself got involved in the ongoing discussion:

Bernd: If we get media attention with stuff like your hang the journos meme […] it is because it suits their cause. Because you are their useful idiot, that allows them to successfully construct their boogieman narrative [of the dangerous extremist far right] without even having to engage content-wise with our arguments. […] Consequently playing edgy boy with murder calls is helping them.

Bob: There is no longer a peaceful political solution. Only a quick or a slow end …

Bernd: No joke, it is starting to glow in the dark here, dude.

Bob: They are killing children, boy, they are abusing children. I am the storm that is coming, if this continues …

Bernd: [...] I am not saying that we are going to tidy up this place until it looks like Twitter[9] [...]. Say [n-word] as much as you want, but as a mod pretty unironically playing the Tarrant game is out of question.

In this case, the user's skillful use of memes is rather regarded as suspicious precisely because they seem to be too violent, too radical, and appear as "bait." In several expressions ("fedposting," "glow in the dark") other users express their suspicion that Bob might be a federal agent, deliberately pushing the boundaries of what can be said and thus putting the server's community as a whole at risk of being banned or worse. Following this, Bob was removed as moderator, since "unironically playing the Tarrant game"[10] apparently exceeds the limits of larping fascism (after this, he left the server altogether). At the same time, Bernd affirms the ludic character of Bob's utterances by referring to them as "playing." In this context, it is noteworthy that several far-right terrorist attacks – among them Brenton Tarrant's killing of 51 people in Christchurch – have been carried out and mediated as a kind of IRL first-person shooter video game, often live-streamed online as if they were "let's play-streams." Media coverage and scholarship has dubbed cases such as this the "gamification of terror" (see Andrews 2023 and Fizek and Dippel 2020 for a critical reading).

It is important to reflect on the fact that the play frame is at least partly a strategy of disguise and belittlement, used by right-wing extremist activists as a loophole. But taking the play frame seriously in the analysis of right-wing extremism does not mean that it is less dangerous or harmful than openly violent speech. Treating hate speech as "shitposting" and hostile internet practices as "trolling" or "play" thus bears the risk of falling for this strategic

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[9] The exchange took place before Elon Musk, at a time when the far right considered Twitter "too woke."

[10] Brenton Tarrant, the assassin of the Christchurch massacre, is celebrated in many far-right digital spaces as a hero (see Thorleifsson 2022, Maly 2024: 213ff.).

belittlement and failing to see the danger of these practices. Indeed, there is strong evidence that "metapolitical terrorism" (Maly 2024) or "memetic violence" can eventually lead to real violence (Thorleifsson 2022: 300).

It thus seems indispensable to explore at greater depth the limits of play, not only from the perspective of community-making and the negotiation of belonging but also politically and epistemologically. In the concluding section I will therefore make use of anthropological concepts of deep or dark play in order to read the play frame against the grain.

Is this play?

The question "Is this play?" is an anthropological classic. In *A Theory of Play and Phantasy* (1955), Gregory Bateson structures his argument around what he calls the metacommunicative frame "This is play!" It is by making use of tone of voice, body language, or setting that an action or a communication is considered "playful" – a nib not a bite. In one of the first systematic theories of play, *homo ludens*, Johann Huizinga defines play as free, distinct from ordinary life, structured by rules, creating and demanding order, not connected to material interest or profit (2023 [1938]: 28). Very much in line with Huizinga, folk sociology considers play an action that has no "real consequences." When children play at war and shoot each other with sticks, no one dies. When an actor "plays" a love scene in the realm of theatre, no real feelings are involved. When I pick up an empty cup, bring it to my lips, and pretend to take a sip, I will still be thirsty. Another folk assumption of playing is that all those involved are aware that they are engaging in play.

However, there are a number of play forms that violate either or both of these folk rules of playing. From an anthropologist's perspective, we immediately recall Clifford Geertz's widely read "thick description" of cockfights in Bali, from which he developed the concept of "deep play" (1973). Here, games function as proxies for social orders, as is the case in liminal rituals (Turner 1982). More timely examples are the very concept of gamification (as discussed above)

or different kinds of trans-identity hoaxing, which have also been described as "play," that exceed the confines of "as if" and lean into seriousness. The 2015 controversy around the trans-gendered or trans-racial performances of Caitlin Jenner or Rachel Dolezal, or the distinction between Otherkin and larping conventions for elves and vampires, are vital examples of how politicized drawing the line between play and non-play can be (on Jenner and Dolezal, see Brubaker 2016; on Otherkin, see Proctor 2019).

Bateson suggests to approach these more complex forms of play with the question "Is this play?" rather than the exclamation mark form of the sentence, "This is play!" Among those more complex or ambiguous forms of play or related forms of human interaction such as histrionic play, bluff, playful threat, teasing play, or deceit (Bateson 1955: 70), one could include post-digital forms of play such as trolling or scamming (Newell 2019). Trolling establishes a play frame, but only partially. Only the troll is aware they are playing. The recipient is expected to take it seriously. If they don't, if they unmask the "play," the troll has failed (see Phillips 2015: 33).

Here we may build on performance theorist Richard Schechner's concept of "dark play." According to Schechner, dark play "occurs when contradictory realities co-exist, each seemingly capable of canceling each other out […]. Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed, as in spying, con games, undercover actions, and double agentry" (Schechner 1993: 36). This form of play could be grasped as playing *with* the rules rather than *by* the rules. It is disruptive rather than affirmative and could – making use of the figurative trickster – be described as a kind of a social laboratory. It is through "trolling" or "dark play" that the existing rules or norms become visible. It is by transgressing these norms and rules that tricksters, scammers and trolls perform their deep knowledge of the rules. Dark play is thus, at least to some extent, performative. And it is consciously ambiguous to the extent that "the players themselves are not sure if they are playing or not" (Schechner 1993: 38).

In his study of populist, transgressive humor, Zijp introduces the notion of "comic innocence" to get hold of the paradox that humor is deemed both "innocent and harmless" and "powerful and heavily politicized" (Zijp 2024: 117). The same could be said of memes and trolling as central ingredients in a ludic digital fascism. Anthropological concepts such as "deep play" and a focus on the performative aspects of "dark play" can help us to capture the pleasure actors take in participating in digital racist play and at the same time point to the serious consequences of that play (one could also refer here to critical humor studies; see e.g. Pérez 2022).

In some cases, actions "become play retroactively: the events are what they are, but by telling these events, by reperforming them as narratives, they are cast as play" (Schechner 1993: 39). This retrospective reconceptualizing of an action as "only play" can be provided by numerous actors with different agendas: by strategists as a means of strategic belittlement, by people who suddenly realize from the harsh reactions that they have transgressed society's norms and now fear the consequences, or even by scholars or analysts who may use the notion of "play" as a way to discredit political positions they dislike. In that sense, the anthropology of ludic fascism and trolling will have to reflect on how the ethnographer themself – through research and writing – is a co-producer of ludic fascism (see Zijp 2024 for similar thoughts on the humor researcher in politicized contexts) and how the anthropology of the far right risks contributing to the "humanization of fascists" (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021) and thus eventually serving their metapolitical goals .

Even though I consciously did not "play along," I remember moments during fieldwork, after long hours spent in livestreams, slowly immersing myself in strange virtual communities, when I shivered over having laughed with my interlocutors. Feeling attached, comprehending sensorily how and why memetic community-building worked, made me deeply uncomfortable. At times I wished that right-wing extremists actually were what common sense believed them to be: ugly, dumb skinheads, bawling "Ausländer raus" or "Germany to

Germans," instead of employing a nuanced and witty sense of humor in their deconstruction of contemporary progressive discourse. In fact, most people in the bubble I studied would agree with me that neo-Nazis are ugly and dumb and should not be talked to. When the Gigi d'Agostino song turned into a sort of ironic Rickrolling meme, I realized how humor and play in fact lend themselves as vehicles to even the most brute forms of racism. Popular variants of the meme used, for example, nonsense rhymes such as "Rauchmelder aus, Rauchmelder aus, Leuchter beleuchten, Rauchmelder aus" (making use of the characteristic repetition of the vocals "au-au" and eu-eu") or simply "döp, dö dö döp" verbalizing the sound of the first tunes and thus added further ironic distance. Here it was precisely the ironic distance, or the performance of "larping neo-Nazism," that allowed people to identify with what they would otherwise have rejected. Yet not only did those who celebrated the meme online know the original text, but most of them at the same time agreed with the original message. This is why binary dichotomies such as "play–politics" or "fun–serious" are not helpful in getting hold of the ludic and playful facets of far-right digital culture. The "metapolitical" success of the Gigi d'Agostino meme, moreover, soon prompted international variants – e.g. in France with the AI-generated "Je partira pas" from young Bardella supporters.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

If humor is considered as an alt-right media strategy, this is usually boiled down to two more or less functional or strategic aspects: first to hide and push forward discourses and images that are publicly "unsayable" disguised as "jokes," and second to use the "it was only a joke" excuse when controversial statements are criticized. But from an anthropological perspective, the social dimensions of play and humor are often left aside in these scholarly debates. A look at the anthropological classics of research on play and critical humor studies, however, offers a fruitful analytical toolkit with which to analyze the right-wing extremist use of humor and play in a more comprehensive manner. Grasping political (post)-digital activism as "play" allows us (1) to focus on the social and community aspects of extremist right-wing internet

activities (and to get a glimpse at why they are successful) and (2) to look at humor and play as a particular form of digital hate.

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