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Peer-reviewed Article

Silence, Distance and Disclosure. The Bleed Between the Far-Right and Gaming

Imo Kaufman

Abstract
Through a close reading of oral history data, this paper demonstrates how far-right ideas circulate through discursive discourses that simultaneously conceal and disclose in gaming space. Henry Urbach's theory of the closet and queer disclosure will facilitate this, providing a framework in which we can observe how the far-right exists within gaming space whilst obscuring its proximity through fantastical distance and absence. Gaming spaces are understood as an ecosystem in which ideas can be naturalised, denaturalised and (re)produced, and this ecosystem represents the room in which Urbach's in-wall closet sits. The conceal/disclose dichotomy the far-right operates through will be explored by looking at modes of implicit identity and spatial policing. The representative possibilities of the closet will allow us to scrutinise how said identities and spaces are characterised as under threat through narratives of (self)victimisation. Said narratives, in turn, lean into far-right discourses that justify and activate certain emotions and world views. The unstable boundary the closet manifests by housing the mess (the far-right) allows the wider room (gaming space) to appear tidy; in other words, for the far-right to circulate in obscure and unaccounted for ways.

Keywords: Gaming Spaces, Gamer, Far-right, Oral History, Queer Spatiality, Transformation, Concealment, gamevironments

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The *far* in far-right feels deceptive. It suggests the safety of relative distance. If they are far, then they are not here: the sense of space allowing us to distance ourselves

quite literally from them. They (the far-right) are far away and probably, out of sight. However, this farness is not actually indicative of distance but of obscurity; the abstract idea of distance is a part of this ambiguity. The fantasy of distance allows us to disengage. As if they are out of sight (and out of mind), we seemingly do not have to worry about them. Through a close examination of oral history data, I will demonstrate that the distance between the far-right and gaming is not a literal spatial distance, as the far-right and gaming are undeniably *proximate*. It is an affective one. The distance I refer to here is the spatial scale we are afforded from the pain and harm the far-right (re)produces in gaming's ecosystem: the site of the bleed. Importantly, this affordance is not available to everyone equally or is sometimes a necessary protective action. The distance from the far-right only exists *within us*, through the extent to which we confront, or do not confront, the harm. A lack of confrontation sometimes simulates fictional distance.

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To understand the ideas in motion here two terms must be briefly defined: *far-right* and *Gamergate*. Far-right is not just used here to refer to explicitly far-right movements, groups, and beliefs. Far-right instead here refers to softer, more subtle ideas that can easily circulate in conversation without being overtly far-right or even political, which uphold, often colonial, beliefs that reflect the naturalisation of and valorise white, cis, heteronormative masculine ideals.

Gamergate happened in 2014. It was an ambiguously organised movement of hate towards women (and people perceived as women) in the game industry and game journalism (Mortensen 2018). More broadly, it saw harassment directed at anyone in gaming spaces outside the white, masculine, cis, hetero norm. The harassment those targeted received was mostly online, such as indie game developer Zoe Quinn whose former boyfriend/romantic partner accused them of trading explicit images for

positive game reviews (Lewis 2015). This story, in particular, led to a lot of concerns being expressed about ethics in games journalism, but this was not the only hook of Gamergate (Braithwaite 2016). Vitriol was not just directed at people in gaming but at ideas deemed leftist or feminist in nature, such as criticism for games dubbed *walking simulators* (not *real* games). Such criticism highlighted wider anxieties about videogames as a medium changing, with change often meaning becoming more accessible or diverse (in other words: games no longer catering only to a white, male audience) (Chess and Shaw 2015, 216). Despite being a primarily online movement, it had (and still has) real implications for the lives of those affected. For example, Anita Sarkeesian is a games journalist whose feminist work wrought such serious backlash she has faced numerous bomb threats (Campbell 2019). It is impossible to neatly summarise Gamergate as it was a messy and disparate event, but its political significance in and beyond gaming has been noted by scholars such as Bezio (2018, 556), who has written on "GamerGate as a precursor to the rise of the alt-right."

Henry Urbach's (1996) theory of the closet and queer disclosure in *Closets, Clothes, Disclosure* will facilitate analysis of how the far-right circulates in gaming spaces, appearing far away yet in close proximity and with plausible deniability despite said proximity. Importantly, this disclosing and concealing is not just a product of far-right mechanisms but a machination that many of us in gaming spaces can unintentionally partake in, for example, when we brush off the implications of in-game harassment. The use of a seminal queer framework to discuss the operations of fascist bodies and ideas will be unpacked and justified below, though I acknowledge this justification can never be complete or exact. Whilst the far-right is not actually marginalised, they *perform* marginal experiences and identity through discursive frameworks that reframe the closet as a device which not only holds concealed possibilities but allows the far-right to disclose their ideas whilst evading accountability.

Using oral history data drawn from interviews with participants from gaming spaces, I will explore how we talk about the far-right in gaming and how we talk *around* the far-right even when we do not explicitly talk about them. Identifying and exposing this interrelation will allow me to scrutinise the wound on the body of the gaming community that the circulation of far-right ideas and ideology manifests. I am concerned with how some interview participants distance themselves from this wound or do not acknowledge the injury in the first place. In other words, how the far-right can present themselves, or be presented as far away to conceal circulation within the mainstream, and how we (those in gaming spaces) can intentionally or unintentionally contribute to narratives which facilitate such concealing.

The room the closet sits within is understood here as gaming's ecosystem. It is not a single space but a system of interlinking and overlapping spaces in gaming that include, but are not limited to: online gaming, in-game spaces, the gaming industry, streaming platforms, and gaming heritage (such as museums or archives). My oral history interviews have generated their own gaming space, a part of the room with the closet in the wall. Whilst I will advocate for opening the closet and tidying up the mess, I am not necessarily advocating for a tidy room (versus the room that appears tidy but is not), but for a different kind of mess – a mess that is not tidied away and ignored in favour of presenting neatness, but a mess we turn to, acknowledge, and confront. This work seeks to explore how those who exist, play, and move through gaming spaces can confront the far-right in the room more productively but simultaneously recognises that this work can often be painful. Acknowledging issues which are directly connected, or tangential to, far-right discourses is not supposed to be an all-consuming, fatalistic practice but an intervention which seeks to prevent the far-right from circulating without accountability (as they will circulate regardless).

First, I briefly establish the relevance of Gamergate and the far-right within and beyond it in gaming. Second, I summarise the methodology. Then, I unpack the theoretical frameworks in play here, primarily that of Henry Urbach but also incorporate Sarah Ahmed's discussion of whiteness and affect and Stuart Hall's understanding of ideology. The analysis follows in two parts: firstly, how far-right ideas in circulation implicitly police identity and spaces, and how those outside of such belief systems can (and do) unconsciously perpetuate their ideas (even if countering their narratives); secondly, how such ideas can explicitly characterise said identities and spaces as minoritised and/or under threat. I then conclude by considering how we might turn to the closet in ways that can disrupt the narratives identified above, which allow far-right ideas to circulate, police spaces and identities, and characterise themselves as victims.

Gamergate and the Far-Right

The far-right, and its associated toxicity, are an issue in gaming. Kristin Bezio (2018, 56), a games researcher with a particular interest in historical games and power, connects Gamergate clearly to the "subsequent rise of the alt-right" and, importantly, signals to the influence of gaming and internet histories in this trajectory. Other scholars have also explored how Gamergate and gaming's historical white, male codification have serious implications for far-right ideologies (Blodgett and Salter 2018, Salter 2018). However, we can look beyond/before Gamergate and games themselves to recognise this problem. The presence of the far-right online, and their adaptions to/within technology in the digital age are evident (Atton 2006, Back et al. 1996). A year before Gamergate, in 2013, masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel stressed that white angry men were a "*virtual* social movement" (Kimmel 2013, 20) in

which men feel they can “make it” (Kimmel 2013, 37). Issues of identity policing can be traced to community spaces outside of explicitly online frontiers too, such as Graeme Kirkpatrick’s work looking at gaming magazines published in the UK between 1981 and 1995, in which he traces the “masculine codification” of gaming culture throughout the period (Kirkpatrick 2017, 454). Whilst gaming as a whole is not inherently male or white, it still stands as a “bastion of hegemonic white heteromasculinity” (Gallagher 2017, 9). And, as games scholar and creator Anna Anthropy (2012, 3) aptly tells us, “most games are about men shooting other men in the face.” Games as a space are saturated with whiteness, maleness, and violence; concepts which when intertwined so innately have relevance for far-right ideologies, intentionally or not. And, importantly, this intertwining can be traced back through gaming, and broader online cultures, as a historical problem.

The problem that the far-right in gaming manifests is not going away and arguably getting worse. Whilst gaming as a space is definitely becoming more diverse with, for example, 41% of players who own a PlayStation 4 or PlayStation 5 being women (versus 18% with the PlayStation 1) (Ryan 2021, 7), the problems we can observe connected to Gamergate, gaming communities and the far-right are escalating. The 2019 Christchurch shooting in New Zealand, which saw 49 people lose their lives, was tangibly connected to mainstream gaming spaces, as the shooter stated in his Facebook livestream before the attack, “subscribe to PewDiePie” (Romano 2019) in direct reference to the PewDiePie meme and PewDiePie himself. PewDiePie was at the time, and still is, a very successful videogame content creator, with over one hundred million subscribers on YouTube at the time of writing. He produces mostly gaming and gaming adjacent content (PewDiePie channel 2023). PewDiePie has had political controversies in his own right too, once paying two men to hold a sign that read “death to all Jews” in a video (Mahdawi 2017). We can also observe this phenomenon

in the United Kingdom, where my interviews have taken place. In 2021, the United Kingdom saw one of its first mass shootings where the gunman could be directly connected to toxic online communities, specifically incel communities, with five people being killed in Plymouth (Weaver and Morris 2021). These are just a handful of relevant incidents from the past few years, but they demonstrate the significance of the problem that gaming and its insidious intersection with the far-right gaming presents. They demonstrate that these issues have serious ramifications for real, lived lives and can have devastating consequences. Even PewDiePie's absurdist joke, "death to all Jews" (Mahdawi 2017), indicates that mainstream gaming space (as with over one hundred million subscribers, he is absolutely mainstream), is a space which can seemingly make space for jokes with overtly fascist undertones.

Theoretical Framework

It is significant for queer theory to play a part in eroding ideological ground that threatens the existence and happiness of queer bodies themselves, though I must emphasise it is not only queer bodies that the far-right in gaming threatens but all those outside the white, cis, heteronormative, able-bodied norm – and even many within that norm. My use of Urbach's theory (1996) here is not intended to equate fascist bodies with queer ones, or to erode queer bodies, but to demonstrate two phenomena: how far-right ideas can be disseminated through codes and implicit ideas, which can, in turn, police identities and boundaries; and how said ideas can be effectively minoritised through narratives that circulate in gaming space which allow far-right ideas to appear to be tidied away into the closet (out of sight, out of mind) yet are integrally part of the wider room. In other words, to *circulate without accountability*.

Henry Urbach is primarily an architecture and design scholar, his relevant piece here being *Closets, Clothes, Disclosure* (1996). Urbach's theory of the closet, and the ante-closet, tells us how homosexuality is both concealed and disclosed. In addition, queer theorist Eve Sedgwick has highlighted the potential for the closet to be applied beyond the hetero/homo binary in her own work, arguing that the known/unknown, explicit/unexplicit relations of the closet "have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally" (Sedgwick 1991, 3). I argue that far-right ideas, or ideologies, also exist in this in-between space within a techno-social gaming context. In other words, I argue that the explicit/unexplicit binary of the closet can reveal operations of far-right ideas within gaming spaces. In Urbach's words:

> "It [homosexuality] is represented through coded gestures that sustain the appearance of uncertainty." (Urbach 1996, 62)

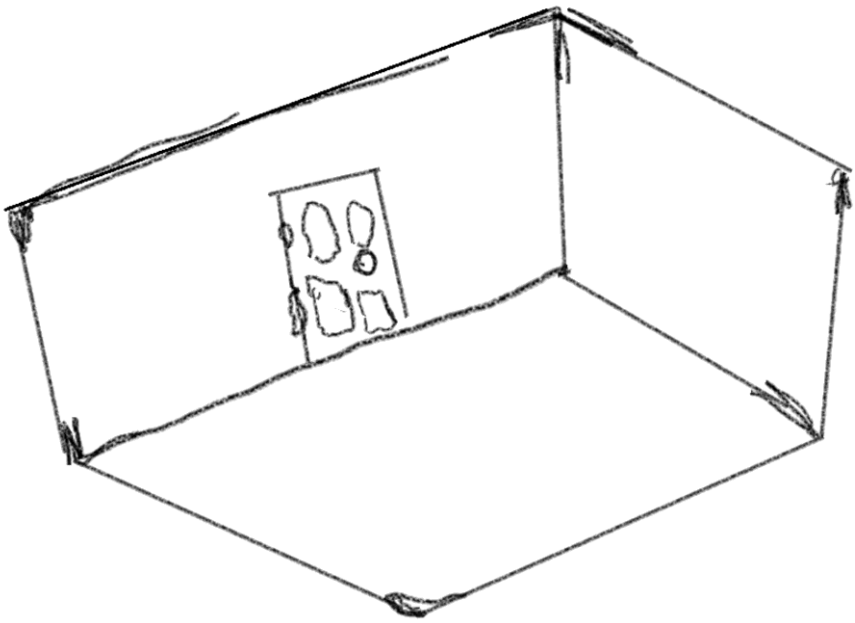

Figure 1. The closet in the wall. Illustration © Imo Kaufman.

The closet, the walk-in closet door more specifically, sits in the wall of the room, always sealed but accessible. It is never completely invisible, its door seam, handle or joints giving it away (Urbach 1996, 66). This spatial representation of the closet can be applied to how we understand the far-right's relationship to gaming. For most people, the door remains shut and concealed. The hinges, the door handle, can sometimes be seen in online harassment, throwaway comments about nationalism and white pride, or pushbacks to diversity in games under the guise of concerns about realism or the genuine gaming market being left behind. For example, when Mike, an owner of a gaming café, tells us about making sure café patrons do not "gatekeep" gaming, referring to judging peoples' choices of game, he highlights the very real possibility of this happening (Michael/Participant 2, Personal Interview, 31 May 2021).[i] However, the closet is not consistently acknowledged, or if it *is* acknowledged, it is often unintentional. We can implicitly acknowledge the closet when we fail to realise the insidious implications of the words we both say and leave unsaid. When asked *why* some people gatekeep gaming, Mike tells us that "it's ... a sense of ownership ... they want to protect their idea ... of that identity" which he connects to nerd culture and *gamer* as a label, but he significantly never unpacks the intersectional implications of said "identity": the interplay of whiteness and maleness (Michael/Participant 2, Personal Interview, 31 May 2021). In other words, the ideological implications of people in gaming *gatekeeping* against diversity in gaming space.

The ante-closet is the space where the door opens, a space in a constant state of concealment and un-concealment; somewhere you select clothes with transformative and/or cloaked possibilities, the selection of garments meaning a specific identity can be made visible or invisible, within the ante-closet space (Urbach 1996, 65-70). This aspect was not so relevant in interviews, as I explicitly did not invite participants who

openly identified as far-right or significantly right-wing. However, the transformative and cloaked possibilities of the closet can still demonstrate the codes and gestures the far-right can circulate through. The subtle nature of such codes means that they can simultaneously conceal and disclose their true intentions. We can see this with memes such as *Pepe the Frog*, which can circulate under the guise of being a meme or a joke whilst signalling far-right ideas. This can also be true of specific words or phrases. Peeter et al. (2021) look at the vernacular of online antagonistic subcultures. They write: "obfuscated by a thick layer of irony, the vernacular of the community reveals … their political preoccupations" (2021, 12). This humour creates uncertainty about where far-right ideas do and do not lie, reflecting how Urbach (1996, 62) describes the closet as being "represented through coded gestures that sustain the appearance of uncertainty."

Urbach (1996, 67) points out the closet is messy, and through this messiness keeps the room clean, not eliminating dirt but hiding it in plain sight and across a boundary. The closet then functions to keep gaming clean, not only working to conceal far-right ideas but denying the severity of the problem in the first place. The act of hiding, or moving, dirt across the fantastical boundary that the closet manifests allows us to deny the seriousness of the far-right's presence, even if it betrays our initial awareness. Importantly, this act of obscuring can be protective, not just reflective of ignorance or apathy. For example, when Sally downplays the seriousness of receiving harassment in online games in her interview, which will be explored further in the analysis, this is a partly protective act, allowing her to sidestep confronting the implications of in-game harassment – that players with feminine sounding voices are not welcome (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021). This spatial obscurity is integral to the far-right's permanence in gaming space, as it can concurrently be recognisable, signifiable, and yet maintain deniability. Across this

variance, significantly, the distance the far-right maintains from/to gaming does not change; the closet is still in the wall of the room, and part of the ecosystem.

My understanding of ideology is guided by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, and feminist theorist Sara Ahmed when looking at specifically the ideological operations of whiteness and white supremacy. Hall (1985, 104) writes: "ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate, in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations." He stresses the centrality of language and that ideology is always contradictory (Hall 2018a, 2018b). In my interview segments, participants rarely allude directly to far-right ideologies whilst acknowledging the far-right explicitly. However, their language choices can and do reflect far-right ideas, or ideas that are tangential to far-right world views. They do not "operate through single ideas" but through discursive connections. When writing on affect, Ahmed discusses the emotion of hate and fascism and how it "bring[s a] fantasy to life … by constituting the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim" (Hall 2014, 43). This is evocative of how far-right ideas construct victimhood. Important here is while we can understand this victimhood as fantastical, we must remember that it *feels real*. Jonathan Allan (2016, 27), affect and masculinities scholar, writes that "by turning to affect the men's rights activists do not need to prove the truth of their claims because their affects – the feeling that it is true." The operation of ideology through an affective frame is especially important when considering how one might disrupt the circulation of far-right ideas in gaming space. To surmise how affect and ideological outlook are entangled I turn to feminist affect scholar Clare Hemmings (2012, 150), who writes: "in order to know differently we have to feel differently." So, when breaking down far-right ideas in circulation here, I am not so concerned with their thesis – whether games are or are not getting more diverse, for example – but what ideas such affects generate and justify.

Method and Methodology

Interviews were conducted with twelve participants who exist within gaming spaces beyond play alone, such as the gaming industry, streaming or heritage. All participants were either from the United Kingdom, had lived in the United Kingdom for at least several years and/or had considerable experience of the United Kingdom's gaming spaces. The majority of participants were white, male and middleclass but there were efforts made to include participants beyond this identity intersection. Some interview participants, independently of one another, referred to gaming space/culture as an "ecosystem": a space in which certain ideas and behaviours are naturalised (Mata/Participant 9, Personal Interview, 7 July 2021, Participant 10, Personal Interview, 22 July 2021).

All interviews were conducted online, most via video chat, and were entered into with an open and reflexive approach. Interviews were intended to collect participants' gaming experiences and opinions, and whilst there was a loose question framework in each interview, the interaction of the participant and interviewer (myself) led to each interview producing a unique order of, and some original, questions. One consistent question across all interviews was approximately *what does the word gamer mean to you?* which generated a rich variance of responses, often leading to a discussion of Gamergate or issues of online abuse. Notably, some responses around gamer were wholly positive. The absence of discussing online abuse or toxicity (often referred to as a *vocal minority* in interviews) also felt significant. Interview participants were never explicitly asked about Gamergate unless they mentioned it first. In analysis of the interviews, I am invested in respecting every interview participant's agency and narrative. Though I anticipate that "a private world is unlikely to become public without some alteration" (Lewis 2013, 74), speculating about the degrees of alteration feels valuable in and of itself.

My methodology has had a huge emphasis on the importance of positionality, connecting ethnographic sentiments with a non-traditional oral history approach. The interview process was "fluid, adaptable and malleable" (Leavy 2011, 7), the focus on my work lead by the interviews themselves. The interviews are an inherently intimate interaction between myself and the participants, and my whiteness and female presentation as a result affected the interviews. For example, some male participants felt the need to qualify their maleness before speaking on issues that affected women (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021, Stuart/Participant 12, Personal Interview, 11 August 2021). Having pronouns on my ethics sheet may have indicated queerness, which in turn may have made some participants more comfortable talking about queer experience (which many did). In the act of interviewing participants, I myself embodied part of the interview data whether I wanted to or not (Taylor 2022, 50). Other games research has explored the intimate interplay between data and researcher, such as Giddings and Kennedy with *Lego Star Wars: The Video Game* (2005) and explorations of the relation between bodies/subject/machine, and Taylor with *EverQuest* (1999) and its surrounding culture (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, Taylor 2006). There is value in embracing the messiness that the researcher brings to the data. Taylor (2006, 11) tells us their work is "in a very grounded sense … based on numerous player hours logged in the game (over several characters and several years)" and this is arguably true of myself also. This work is reflective of the thousands of hours I have myself logged into games and spent in gaming communities, which have led to me becoming inquisitive about gaming culture and space beyond the act of play alone.

Implicit Policing: Gaming Identities and Gaming Space

This first section of analysis will explore how subtle codes and gestures in interviews effectively policed gaming identities and spaces. The codes explored below vary in terms of their subtlety, from the significance of literal silence, the words left unsaid, to the act of online verbal harassment. Especially important here is the wider implications of the quotes shared below, how breaking down the connotations of participant responses can be revealing about the disclosing of far-right ideas more generally: how far-right ideologies can be disseminated and signalled to in obscure (often unconscious) ways.

The term, or identity label, *gamer* provides a lens through which we can observe the implicit identity policing that circulates in gaming spaces. For example, the manner in which Participant 14 goes out of his way below to positively identify what gamer *can* mean has implications for what intersections gamer is implicitly policed against in wider gaming spaces. Interview participants did not consistently define gamer, with some understanding it as enjoying games or playing games, others discussing it as maybe a hobby taken too far and, finally, some concretely associating it with Gamergate and/or the far-right and online toxicity. The uncertainty of gamer reflects the same "uncertainty" Urbach (1996, 62) describes in terms of (in)securely performing an identity. The instability of the gamer identity is echoed in game scholar Rob Gallagher's (2017, 6) work: "the term gamer brings with it a range of associations, and like all collective identities, it fits some of those it is applied to more snugly than others." These associations are reflective of the garments which can be shed or put on in the ante-closet space, in other words, they can transform the meaning of gamer as a term. The ambiguous nature of gamer as a term is partly what allows it to house far-right ideas, as it can simultaneously disclose and conceal oppressive structures, as demonstrated with Participant 14's quote.

Participant 14 is a streamer, whose interview demonstrates how we can talk around the closet without acknowledging it. He tells us:

> "Erm when I think of the word gamer I think of er just anyone playing games they enjoy like it it like a gamer could be anyone any gender any any sexuality doesn't matter like it is someone who enjoys playing games that's what I think what that [unclear] defines a gamer." (Participant 14, Personal Interview, 22 October 2021)

Gamer can be for anyone, any gender or sexuality. Participant 14 defines gamer as inclusive and joyful, not deriving from skill or game choice. Whilst he tells us that sexuality and gender don't matter, the fact that he felt the need to bring them up when defining gamer implies that, to some, they do. The notion that gamer is exclusive to certain sexualities or genders is not voiced, but exists in silence, as Participant 14 intentionally talks around and over it, going out of his way to disagree with a non-present voice. This is evocative of how the closet represents an "absence" – a part of the "not so" solid wall (Urbach 1996, 66). In other words, the coding of gamer as entangled with far-right values can be expressed through silence/emptiness yet still be signalled to effectively. The notion of mattering here feels important too, when he tells us it "doesn't matter" (Participant 14, Personal Interview, 22 October 2021). But if these characteristics of gamer did not matter, at all, then why would he have gone out of his way to bring them up? Rather than policing gamer as a term, here, Participant 14 is pre-emptively defining it *against* exterior policing that could limit its inclusivity. Significantly, Participant 14 does not mention Gamergate or the far-right throughout his entire interview, the idea that exclusive policing exists in gaming spaces only highlighted through the words unsaid, and the words that he thought did not matter. Despite its observable affect, the proximity of far-right ideas (specifically the idea that games are for heterosexual men) goes unacknowledged.

Significant here is that a far-right idea can implicitly circulate in silence, in *absence*, yet the door inherently destabilises the room. Whilst Participant 14's actively inclusive definition of gamer erodes the far-right's attempts, conscious or not, to code game as male and heterosexual, it betrays the wider efficacy of those ideas in circulation.

We can also observe implicit identity/spatial policing through issues of toxicity and abuse when Sally, Participant 4, a game developer, discusses receiving abuse in online games:

> "I haven't put myself out there [in online games] because … as soon as people know that you've got a feminine voice they're like rah rah rah like straight away and I'm just like I can't be bothered to even like entering myself into that that I can't be bothered … there's just a chance that you'll get someone who's just not like that and I can't be bothered [laughs] to deal with it so yeah." (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021)

It is evident that this spatial policing, based on identity markers such as having a feminine voice, does affect what games Sally does and does not play. She tells us she can't be bothered, and even though she laughs whilst making this declaration, I cannot confidently say that Sally found it funny; her laugh could express discomfort, or exasperation. Her repeatedly telling us that she can't be bothered conveys a kind of exhaustion. This is evocative of Ahmed's (2006, 62) discussion of bodies and spaces in *Queer Phenomenology*, where she writes "for bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home … involves painstaking labor." Whilst the people in online games harassing Sally, or any player with a feminine sounding voice, might not overtly be far-right this behaviour still reflects the kind of right leaning discourses that Gamergate perpetuated: that games and the spaces they provide are for men. It demonstrates the effectiveness of such policing, as Sally tells us she does not enter herself into that space, and whilst she does not say she is guaranteed to get harassed

the *chance* is enough to affect her digital movements. This suggests that far-right-adjacent behaviours do not have to be consistent in their circulation to be effective, and that they importantly do not just police gaming space but by implication gaming identity too, as those who belong in gaming spaces are seemingly anticipated to be male/masculine, and those who fall outside said expectation risk verbal abuse.

What is significant here is not only the spatial policing, but Sally's insistence later in the interview that:

> "I don't take those kind of comments to heart … I'm really not bothered by it but I think it's just if I could choose to have to deal with it or not then I might as well not … I'm not that fussed on playing super competitive games anyway so the additional hassle of potential hassle is not worth it for me like if I really enjoyed those types of games and it was my favourite type of game I would do it anyway and just endure whatever came my way." (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021)

Sally tells us she's not bothered by online in-game harassment despite it stopping her playing certain types of games. Whilst she assures us that if she really did enjoy those types of games she would "endure" (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021), it is hard to confidently separate her experiences of harassment from the games she feels she enjoys. Sally somewhat downplays the seriousness of this abuse, telling us she does not take it "to heart" and shifting from telling us that "I can't be bothered" to "I'm really not bothered" (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021). This minor narrative deviation reflects an unwillingness to confront the issue truly at hand: the further implications of this harassment, that women, or people perceived as women, are not welcome in gaming spaces. This lack of confrontation is potentially protective for Sally, as someone who receives said abuse, however it is still indicative of being aware of the closet (the presence of behaviours that implicate far-right discourses in circulation) whilst refusing to truly confront it. Sally, akin to

Participant 14, does not mention Gamergate, even though the behaviours she described are a direct continuation of its dogma.

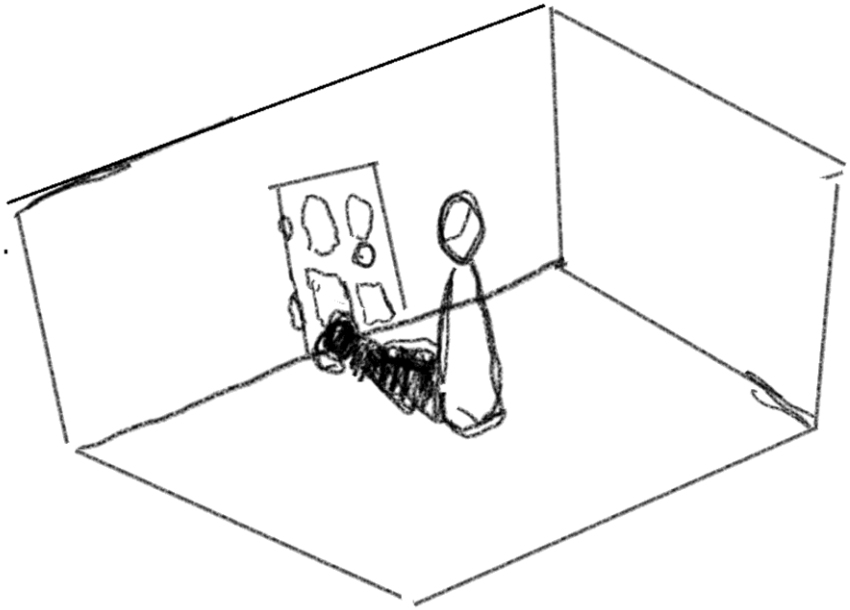

Figure 2. Turning your back on the closet. Illustration © Imo Kaufman.

Both Sally and Participant 14 effectively turn their backs on the closet in the sense that they do not directly confront or prise out the implications of their words. Instead, more insidious implications are blanketed over by actively inclusive statements, or assurances that they (Sally) are not bothered. To be clear, I am not critiquing them for not doing so. Confronting the wider implications of discourses around spaces and identity, to which certain types of people or bodies are not welcome or do not belong, is a discomforting process. Sometimes it is a process that we *unconsciously* avoid. But, even then, the narratives interview participants do and do not tell betray their wider experiences of gaming space. Steve Benford et al. (2012) argue for a kind of productive discomfort, where uncomfortable cultural experiences can be powerful in their own right, especially when thinking about a person's values. Whilst protective, not confronting the issue in its own right – that far-right ideas are still in circulation in

a post-Gamergate gaming world – is potentially unproductive. We can turn our back on the closet (Figure 2), the codes and gestures through which the far-right discloses (implicit identity policing, harassment), but this only allows these discourses to continue to circulate without confrontation or accountability.

In contrast to Sally, Participant 11, who works in gaming heritage, discusses issues of online harassment in games but directly connects this to Gamergate:

> "It's like 15 year olds just arguing and arguing online and they don't maybe don't know about this whole Gamergate stuff but if it if they find out the other person is a girl or something then it becomes derogatory where you're a stupid whore you're a bitch that duh duh duh duh and or even if it's not a girl it's derogatory language like that which is perpetuating you know that women are maybe lesser all or they're using like the N word and stuff." (Participant 11, Personal Interview, 9 July 2021)

Participant 11 clearly describes issues of abusive language which in turn implicitly police gaming space. If you are a girl you become a "whore" or a "bitch" in gaming spaces. He stresses a racial component of policing in addition to being gendered, "using like the N word and stuff" (Participant 11, Personal Interview, 9 July 2021). Significantly, Participant 11 connects the use of abusive language to the "whole Gamergate stuff" but stresses that the 15-year-olds partaking in said behaviours "don't know about [it]" (Participant 11, Personal Interview, 9 July 2021). This suggests the far-right has an insidious ability to circulate, not just through ideas but through the abuse those ideas afford, without said ideas being connected back to wider belief systems. Participant 11 making this connection means he is directly confronting the presence of the far-right in gaming in a way that previous participants have not, perhaps because it did not occur to them or they did not feel able to. He faces the closet (Figure 3) in that he prises out the insidious implications of the verbal abuse *beyond* the abuse itself.

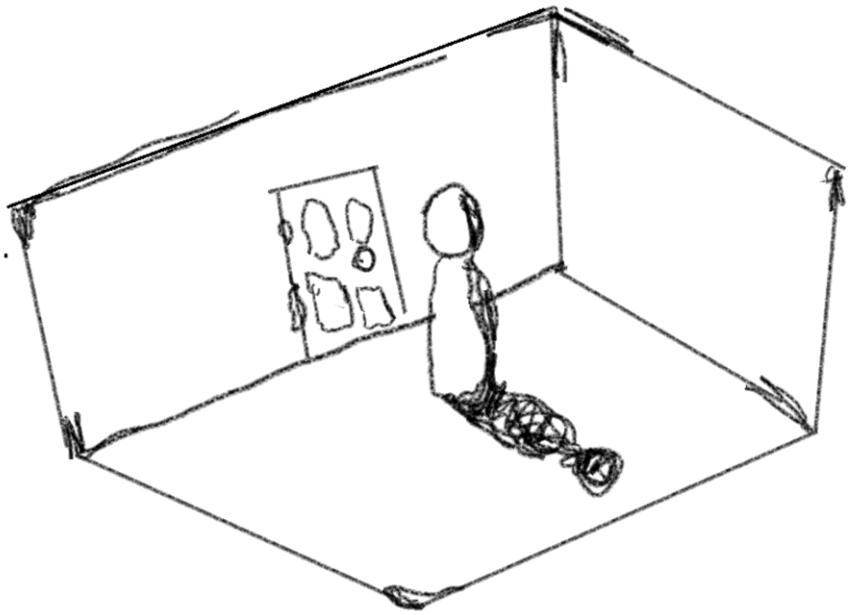

Figure 3. Turning and facing the closet. Illustration © Imo Kaufman.

It is important to remember as well that the implicit policing that occurs around identity and space does not just subtly push certain identities *out*, but pulls others *in*. The behaviour Participant 11 highlights not only pushes certain bodies out of gaming but pushes those who can collectively involve themselves in said policing practises closer together. As Kimmel (2013, 265) writes: "if you are feeling lonely, isolated, or emasculated, the White Wing is your new family, your new set of best friends, your new community, your new home." Whilst some bodies are ostracised from gaming space or the gamer label, others can experience the very opposite: inclusion and connectivity. The white, masculine, heterosexual gamer and his belonging in gaming space is repeatedly naturalised and reaffirmed. This sense of belonging can bleed into a sense of entitlement which leads us to the second part of analysis: how the discourses in circulation contribute to narratives of victimhood.

Mobilisation and Maintenance: Narrativising Minority Status

This second half of this analysis will explore how these implicitly policed identities and spaces (explored above) are characterised as under threat. I will explore how this narrative of (sometimes self) victimisation is maintained, and how such narratives lead to mobilising defence (or attacks in the name of) said spaces and identities. The most obvious example of the latter, being, of course Gamergate, in which much of the harassment can be connected to anxieties about gaming changing. A very important dynamic distinction between my application of using the closet to understand how the far-right exists in gaming space, and how it conceals/discloses homosexuality in Urbach's (1996) work, is that queer people are minoritised by oppressive structures in wider society, and the closet has a complex relationship to those structures; a potential safe haven only deemed necessary by the original oppression, and a space where one can transform to conceal one's transgressions. The far-right, in contrast, only imagine oppression – usually from movements to diversify gaming or, as they put it, silence their free speech – and whilst the closet represents safety for them (the plausible deniability of being out of sight and out of mind) it very much represents a *danger* to gaming and the bodies within/out it, as the closet (the far-right) *is* a part of the wider room.

Four out of twelve participants used the phrase "vocal minority" or similar when describing a more toxic or abuse gaming subculture online. Here are two examples:

> "It's straight white man vision that's what that's what it is so it's hard to have conversations outside of that cause you get such push back from what is *ultimately a vocal minority of people* they're just very vocal and they have a big platform in the space compared to who they are representative of the actual demographic of people that play games these days." (Participant 7, Personal Interview, 19 July 2021, emphasis added)

> "I think it's the there's er extremely loud but yeah *the vocal minority* I suppose is the phrase who love to complain whenever they don't [clears throat] ironically don't see themselves represented because they're not playing as a straight white male." (Jim/Participant 8, Personal Interview, 7 July 2021, emphasis added)

The phrase vocal minority is complex and contradictory here. It simultaneously delegitimises the "vocal minority" (Participant 7, Personal Interview, 19 July 2021; Jim/Participant 8, Personal Interview, 7 July 2021) in question – they are a literal minority, they do not speak for gaming as a whole, but simultaneously legitimises their claims of being minoritised. As Jim, who works with videogames in the theatre industry, tells us, "they don't see themselves represented because they're not playing as a straight white male" (Jim/Participant 8, Personal Interview, 7 July 2021). Not only does Jim highlight their entitlement here, he highlights their sense of *loss*; a sense of (potential) loss attached to a very specific demographic. In Participant 7's words, who works in game creation and education, it's a "straight white man vision" (Participant 7, Personal Interview, 19 July 2021). And despite all four participants using the phrase vocal minority, the fact that the term emerged in a third of the data does undermine their minority status somewhat. If they are truly such a minority, "ultimately" (Participant 7, Personal Interview, 19 July 2021) a minority, then how do they so successfully exist in gaming's zeitgeist? Let's turn to the other two quotes (please note, Sally does use the term vocal minority later in her interview):

> "I feel like sometimes the gaming community has been I guess unfairly labelled because of some bad eggs [laughs] and they are very you know the people that are quite vocally bad are loud but I don't think they represent the majority of the community." (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021)

> "There's a group of people who are just dicks and are just awful people and they were the vocal I wanna say vocal minority I'm maybe being naive in thinking it's a minority but erm they were the vocal minority that really just

> ruined it for everybody … it's the narrative of Gamergate … a bunch of largely entitled white male pricks." (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021)

Both Sally and Matthew betray an additional aspect to the narrative of the vocal minority: a desire to downplay their significance. Sally assures us, "they [don't] represent the majority of the community" (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021), and Matthew tells us "I wanna say vocal minority" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021), almost as if he is reassuring himself. This is where the disclose/conceal functionality of the closet flourishes, as within the ante-closet space (the space of transformation) the vocal minority can be presented as both undeniably present yet a *minority* and not a real or significant threat. The fact that eight interview participants did not mention a vocal minority is also important here: the significance of words left unsaid, of what can exist and circulate in silence. This is reflective of how Urbach describes the ante-closet space (Figure 4), the space where the door cracks ajar: "it resists the violence of fixed identities" (Urbach 1996, 72). Whilst I do not think any of the four interview participants quoted above are incorrect, they (the far-right or the "Gamergate … bunch" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021) *are* a vocal minority who do not "represent the majority of the community" (Sally/Participant 4, Personal Interview, 16 July 2021). In fact, that they are *not* the majority is a source of the anxiety, a source of their feelings of "entitle[ment]" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021). The language and terminology that has developed around the far-right in gaming is tangled up in ideological contradictions, that both works? to delegitimise the far-right and to legitimise their fears and anxieties. Through the circulation of such language the far-right can effectively minoritise themselves, a process we sometimes stumble into, meaning their minority status is simultaneously and consistently being maintained *and* undermined.

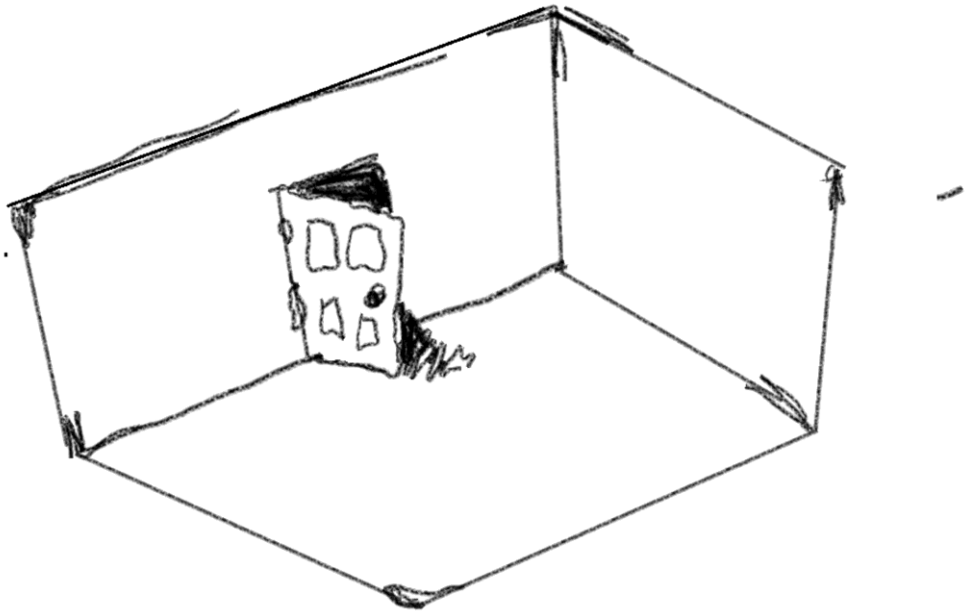

Figure 4. The ante-closet space. Illustration © Imo Kaufman.

Another important aspect of the *vocal minority* is the comfort it can afford. Even Matthew tells us that he "*wants*" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021, emphasis added) to call it a minority. This desire is reflective of another aspect of the closet, its ability to not eliminate dirt but to keep the room clean, the "room proper" and the "closet abject" (Urbach 1996, 67). The closet does not create a clear boundary but "undermines their separation whilst stabilising their difference"; it hides the mess in plain sight (Urbach 1996, 67). The closet provides the fantasy of a tidy room, of a gaming space that is inclusive, or safe (Figure 5). This maintains the illusion of an ecosystem without injury. Even Participant 14, in his efforts to inclusively define gamer, unintentionally blankets over acts of insidious identity policing (which Sally and Participant 11 describe). If referring to the vocal minority as a *minority* and stressing their *minority* status has not effectively discoursed them out of existence, out of relevance, yet then I have to question whether it ever will.

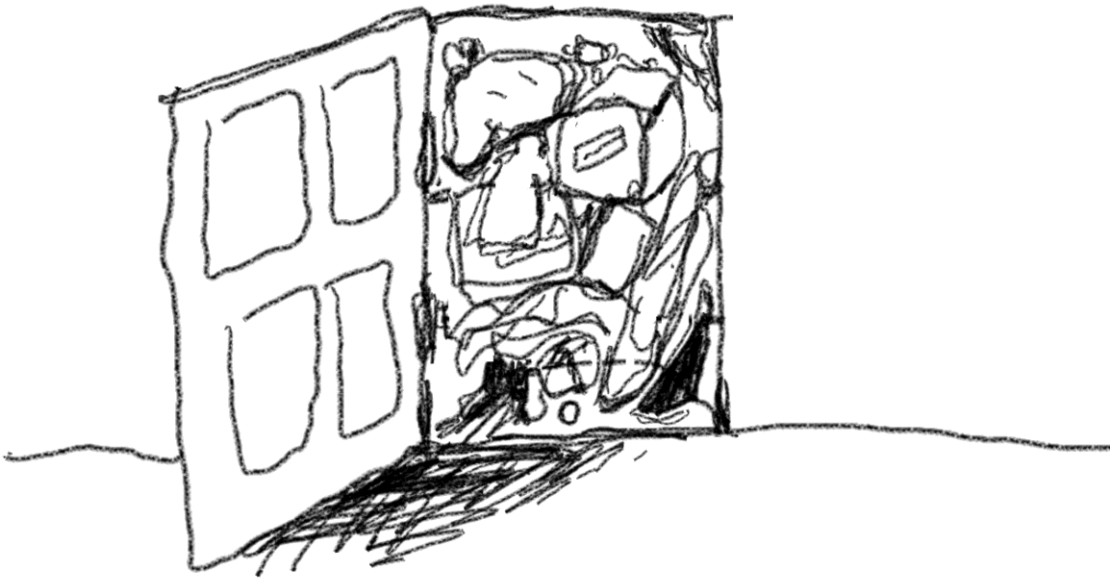

Figure 5. The mess rammed into the closet. Illustration © Imo Kaufman.

Finally, I want to explore how these feelings of entitlement, or being under threat or attack, do not only work to maintain far-right victimhood but to mobilise. Matthew, who works in gaming education, discusses:

> "He [a student] kicked off and started just sort of saying that you know women are ruining games and games are for him or for his you know that they don't understand games." (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021)

Matthew's quote here demonstrates discourses from online, gaming space bleeding into the material world. He describes a lot of important claims this student makes that "women are ruining" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021) games presumably through proximity, or lack of "understand[ing]" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021). Most importantly games "are for him for his *you know* (emphasis added)" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021). The "you know" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021) could be gesturing to maleness, to whiteness, to Gamergate and the far-

right more explicitly, but I cannot *know* for sure. This sense of entitlement but also the significance of this action, to "kick off" (Matthew/Participant 6, Personal Interview, 8 July 2021) in class, can be unpacked through Ahmed's writing on whiteness:

> "Too much proximity with others … could threaten the reproduction of whiteness as a bodily or social attribute. The existence of such a threat is required to enforce proximity as an ethical duty: we defend that which is at risk. In this way, whiteness is sustained as a demand to return to a line, where the return takes the form of a defense … *a defense against an imagined loss*." (Ahmed 2006, 128)

Whilst writing on whiteness and not masculinity, here Ahmed's point about an imagined loss still stands. If we return to Sally's quote in the previous section, that the sound of her feminine voice was enough to trigger verbal abuse in turn, we can observe the idea of proximity. And the verbal abuse, in turn, becomes a form of *defensive policing*, legitimised through the fantasy of being at risk. If we return to Participant 7's quote, it is evident such defensive policing can also be *anticipatory* as he references them using racial slurs in general language practice, a policing against identities that could be, but are not yet definitely, in the room. The actions of Matthew's student demonstrate how the discourses in circulation effectively mobilise actions in the real world, that the closet can crack ajar and that the mess can spill out.

Ahmed's (2006, 128) call to an "ethical duty" feels important too. When writing on the men's rights movement, a space adjacent to far-right and conservative beliefs, Jonathan uses castration as a metaphor to not only represent a potential loss (specifically a masculine loss) but a loss of control; their central claim, or feeling, being that "something has gone horribly wrong" (Allan 2016, 28). I can almost observe this anxiety in the interview with Dale, who streams games:

> "D: I think there … will be probably a lot of negatives if people try and change the way that gaming is right now – it's the same with anything really if you love a certain thing and then because of that certain thing it becomes very popular and then other people who don't understand the … genre come in and try and change things certain aspects of it it'd make anybody angry.
> I: Could you give an example of an aspect that like [that] has changed already or could change that you that would affect your enjoyment of games?
> D: Erm hm I'm not sure [pause] yeah I'm not sure on that one."
> (Dale/Participant 1, Personal Interview, 10 April 2021)

Here Dale evokes very similar anxieties to Matthew's student, that "people who don't understand the genre … [could] try and change things" (Dale/Participant 1, Personal Interview, 10 April 2021). And despite telling me there will be "a lot of negatives" (Dale/Participant 1, Personal Interview, 10 April 2021) if gaming is changed, Dale cannot tell me how gaming might change. I think this anxiety around change itself mirrors the ways in which far-right ideas function as *anticipatory*. Dale almost draws an affective binary between people who *love* games and people who *don't understand* them. The ambiguous and sinister "people" (Dale/Participant 1, Personal Interview, 10 April 2021) who might come in and do this are not described or gestured to clearly. This ambiguity is perhaps a part of their very threat. Dale's quote is demonstrative that fears of change or ruination can bleed beyond such overtly political rants, as Matthew describes, and into wider discourses and concerns in gaming space. The obscurity of the closet means that sometimes we might struggle to tangibly locate such ideas beyond their affect; to notice the instability of the room is jarring, even if we cannot pinpoint the "not so" solid part of the wall (Urbach 1996, 66). When he says "it'd make anybody angry" (Dale/Participant 1, Personal Interview, 10 April 2021), this calls to Kimmel's (2013, 21) idea of "aggrieved entitlement" which he tells us can act as a site of connection across different groups. When Dale says *anybody* he is, in fact, referring to specific types of bodies whilst simultaneously naturalising their anger. Dale's quote here reveals that the far-rights ideas can mobilise us in more

subtle ways beyond standing up and ranting in a classroom. Dale is anticipating change from the other, he is angry about it, but he cannot tell me what *it* really is. The shared narrative across Matthew's student and Dale is that gaming is under threat, and to dismiss such narratives as a *vocal minority* whilst it may well be true, effectively tidies them away out of sight, into the closet, and into the mess (Figure 5). To dismiss or delegitimise, whilst powerful actions in their own right, such non-confrontations cannot deal with the problem the far-right presents in its entirety – as to dismiss is to affirm their original anxieties all over again.

Conclusion: A Different Kind of Mess

Urbach's closet demonstrates how contradictory experiences, ideas and associations can simultaneously circulate in gaming spaces. The closet's ability to transform and obscure ideas not only allows them to be tidied away across an unstable boundary but can conceal their true threat and intention when they bleed out into the wider room. Importantly, such obscurity not only gives ideas deniability, through a guise of a joke, for example, but gives us the ability to claim that we did not know the joke is not funny, that the idea is dangerous, or that the dangerous idea was in circulation. The closet not only houses far-right ideas, but facilitates their subtle disclosing in the wider room whilst maintaining fictional distance. They are *over there*; they could not possibly be *in here*. They are a *minority*, and yet seemingly successfully circulate in *mainstream* discourse.

Awareness of the closet is not enough to break down its unstable boundary, to empty it out and confront the mess. Even those aware of it can still turn away, with varying degrees of ease and unease. Ahmed writes:

> "So much happiness is premised on, and promised by, the concealment of suffering, the freedom to look away." (Ahmed 2010, 196)

We all have experiences, privileges and feelings that affect how we are positioned and orientated in the room (gaming's ecosystem). Such disparate positions afford us different degrees of freedom and harm, affording some the freedom to look away despite awareness of the closet. This looking away, intentionally or not, feeds narratives of naturalisation through inaction and absence. Notably, we do not all have the same privilege to *look* either, as to confront the far-right in gaming space can be uncomfortable, sometimes even dangerous if we attract the wrong kind of vitriol. The answers to how we more explicitly confront the far-right are not, and cannot be, simple, as far-right discourses circulate in complex, contradictory ways.

I have explored how ideas in circulation work to police gaming and gaming space within a white supremacist framework, one that valorises whiteness and maleness, and specifically a kind of maleness and masculinity that folds into heteronormative expectations. This policing not only works to maintain at least the *idea* (if not sometimes the reality) of exclusive gaming space/identity but connects those who fall into such spaces together. In turn, these identities and spaces are characterised as under threat and in need of protection. Importantly, this threat can merely be *anticipated*, not realised, to be effective, allowing the far-right to minoritise themselves through language as well as narratives of ruination or change. This minoritising works, again, to smush the identities and spaces the far-right has effectively policed closer together through a sense of shared aggrievement and entitlement. This perceived threat can mobilise those it affects, both in anticipation and in action, through a feeling of victimhood, through intricate processes of *self*-victimisation. This victimhood houses another contradiction, as whilst the victimhood is fantastical (diversity in games is not ruining them or taking *their games* away), it is

simultaneously *realised* by the successful circulation of far-right discourses – as the white men taken in by them are victims of a toxic, dangerous world view.

I do not know how to eradicate the far-right in gaming spaces, but I would like to advocate for the importance of discomfort here. Discomfort can give us the desire to transform and the potential for solidarity (Benford et al. 2012, Hemmings 2012, 158). The action of looking can harm us, can kill happiness, but is necessary, because some of that happiness is "premised on … the concealment of suffering" (Ahmed 2010, 196). Some of the ways we talk around the far-right in gaming, even if protective and legitimate, can and do disseminate far-right narratives. This is in part due to the contradictory operations of ideology; the cyclical nature of their survival.

I cannot advocate for making the wider room messy, as it already is, the mess is just concealed. Instead, I advocate for embracing mess, losing the desire for tidiness and confronting the proximity of the far-right in gaming, their ideas, discourses and even people. The room was never tidy, and the illusion of tidiness only allows us to pretend the far-right are *far* away, to circulate without accountability. Tidying is not necessarily about eliminating mess, but working out where you want things to go, what items you want or need to be in reach. To reach for the far-right, to successfully throw it out, requires touch and proximity. It requires acknowledging it is here in the first place.

Figure 6. An open closet, still messy inside, with some things thrown out. Illustration © Imo Kaufman.

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[i] Some participants wished explicitly to not be anonymised and so their names are used. Others wanted to remain anonymous and so are simply referred to as "Participant" followed by a number to distinguish them.