8-BIT-FASCISTS AND C64-NAZIS:

GAMIFIED RACISM AND VIRAL ANTISEMITISM IN WEST GERMAN 1980s HOMEBREW PROGRAMMING

Kai Werbeck

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

After the Commodore 64 had become a common item in West German households around 1983, primarily located in the nation's children's rooms, heated debates on the negative effects the games available for the bestselling personal computer may have on minors soon followed. While another mass media development—the introduction of the VCR in the late 1970s—stood at the center of these debates and the changes in regulatory politics they eventually initiated, the popularization of computer games also contributed to a moral panic that revolved around a fear of "bad" media.[1] Whereas the neoliberal Christian-Democratic administration of the time quickly relegated the arcade coin-ups to the age-restricted safe-spaces of the so-called *Spielhallen* in 1984 and cartridge-based video games were by default difficult to program or bootleg, home computers proved much more conducive to the creative needs of a growing and largely underage gaming scene. Even when the computer game industry eventually became more regulated as the result of a ratified West German penal code in 1985, a sizable portion of the massive commercial output—the official Commodore 64 library alone contains around 100,000 titles—remained *terra incognita* to many politicians and parents alike. This already staggering number of releases, however, does not include the countless games that were released by non-

[1] As Tom Chatfield points out in the context of early computer games, "one nation that already seems to have taken the most radical anti-games school of advice to heart is Germany" (67).

professional programmers. In this essay I examine a specific subset of these homebrew games, the so-called Naziware, overtly racist and antisemitic games that were traded at schools or sold at flea-markets without the involvement of professional distributors.[2] Examining two of the most infamous examples of German Naziware from an estimated total of 140 titles, *Anti Türkentest* (1986) and *KZ-Manager* (approx. 1988), through the lens of Cultural Studies, I argue that these games were not necessarily created as propaganda tools by the extreme right but rather came into existence in West Germany's middle-class environments—and that they must be understood as indexes of a large-scale shift in the perception and evaluation of Germany's authoritarian past and the singular nature of the Holocaust.

It is necessary at this point to briefly discuss the socio-political developments of West Germany in the 1980s, which frame the digital subculture of early Naziware. The period under consideration saw not only a return of right-wing parties to the stage of West German federal politics, but also changing discourses around German guilt. Then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan's 1985 visit to Bitburg cemetery "gave rise to sharp criticism about concerns to 'normalize' Germany's past" when Reagan suggested that the SS soldiers buried there were themselves merely victims of a fanatical Nazi high command (Cooke and Silberman 5). This event, in turn, fueled the so-called Historians' Debate, which addressed the attempted revisionist rewriting of a national past and the use of historiography as a political instrument. During the Historians' Debate, as Eric Rentschler puts it, "reputable scholars reevaluated Nazi crimes and sought to justify them (even if monstrous and misguided) as defensive reactions to real threats"

[2] In his comprehensive study, *Replay: The History of Video Games*, Tristan Donovan writes in a footnote that "22 per cent of students had encountered these games, which included concentration management games and quizzes how Aryan the player was. The Bundesprüfstelle für Jugendgefährdende [sic] Medien [Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons] successfully sought bans on seven such games between 1987 and 1990" (229).

(940). The decade also saw the Cold War come to its conclusion, stoking fears of a strengthened, soon-to-be reunified Germany among neighboring countries. These developments—to connect the socio-historical to the cultural-technological arena—ran parallel to the appearance of digital and interactive right-wing elements during the early 1980s. As Salzborn and Maegerle show, these early instances can be traced back to Usenet, "in dem Neonazis zunächst unorganisiert agiert haben" [which Neo-Nazis had initially used in unorganized fashion] (217).[3] Naziware constitutes a subset of these interactive elements that presents a gamified reflection of these discourses and their "recalibrated" perspectives, including those of the Kohl-administration itself, which already in the 1980s—like the Alterative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) does today—openly talked about "remigration" and endorsed xenophobic sentiments.[4]

We see this shift also in quantitative terms when looking at the numbers of young people embedded in right-wing structures. In the late 1980s, right-wing radicalism in West Germany was increasingly identified as a specific youth-related issue.[5] While precise nationwide statistics for minors were often bundled into general constitutional protection reports, contemporary data suggests a correlation between the broader socio-historical changes outlined in the paragraph above. The overall numbers show a significant rise in membership in far-right organizations. The Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, BfV) recorded a rise in the overall far-right potential in West Germany, growing from approximately 22,000 in 1986 to around 28,500 by 1988, the period bookended by *Anti Türkentest* and *KZ-*

[3] All translations are mine.

[4] See for example Güngör and Loh, here p. 306.

[5] See *Radikalisierung oder Pubertät* (2023) for more details.

Manager.[6] The increase in numbers accompanied a turn towards greater militancy among members. A key feature of the late '80s was further the radicalization of youth subcultures, particularly the Skinhead scene.[7] This period is marked by the emergence of militant structures characterized by high levels of violence against migrants and political opponents. The ideological reach of these groups also grew. Studies from that time indicate that a significant portion of young people were susceptible to far-right ideological elements like nationalism or xenophobia, even without formal ties to extremist organizations. This potential lack of ties to extremist organizations, coupled with the presence of emerging youth subcultures—primarily along the lines of an underground music scene—also helps to explain the appearance and success of Naziware. The attempted recoding of national narratives of German responsibility and complicity, changes in structures of feeling—to evoke Raymond Williams—in the perception of the Holocaust, and statistically evident ideological shifts all contributed to the emergence of racist and xenophobic computer games in West Germany, an emergence that, to be sure, also had to do with mass media developments.

Let us take a step back and discuss West Germany's changing media landscape of the 1980s and the role it played in the advent of homebrew programming. The rise of affordable home-computers used primarily as entertainment machines coincided with a political sea-change in West Germany that occurred when the Christian-Democrat Helmut Kohl became chancellor in 1982. The subsequent socio-cultural shifts affected the then-booming computer game market in that the regulatory bodies displayed a growing suspicion toward the industry's unchecked output.

[6] Data taken from the website of the Bundesamt für Verfassungschutz.

[7] See *Jugendarbeit, Polizei und rechte Jugendliche in den 1990er Jahren* (2023) for additional information.

The production of computer games trying to meet the significant demand for software had indeed happened in an underregulated environment still suffering from the birth pangs of an industry that had become very profitable very quickly. Yet, suddenly these producers faced increased scrutiny and potential backlash from the German government that made the distribution of certain titles legally problematic. In most cases, this occurred in the context of §131 StGB (German Penal Code), a paragraph that regulates *Gewaltverherrlichung* [glorification of violence; alternatively *Gewaltdarstellung*, representation of violence], which became law in 1973 and was revised in 1985 and 1992, respectively. Among the openly available games were titles—often from Great Britain or the United States, but also from Germany; some published by professional distributors, others released without the involvement of a company—that triggered counterreactions from the authorities. One such entry is Robert Pfitzner's *Commando Libya* (full title: *Code Word Blizzard: Commando Libya Part I*) from 1986, a simple, self-published shooter, in which the bonus round prompts players to execute prisoners on a firing range by moving a machine gun's crosshairs across the screen.[8] The game remained on the Index in Germany until 2012, even though it was never banned. Arguably because of the controversy part one had caused, the implied second installment was never released. Programs such as *Commando Libya* alerted the West German state to the existence of games with graphic representations of mass murder framed as a fun activity.[9] The Commodore 64 (henceforth abbreviated as C64)—which computer-historian Brian Bagnall has tellingly termed the *Volkscomputer*, the people's computer,

[8] After these executions, comments will appear on screen, proclaiming, for example, that the executed prisoners "were Ghaddafi's [sic] children" or that "this is geil [awesome; German in original]."

[9] See also Chatfield, who notes that "to deny the link between games and violence in society is not, however, to say that gaming is a medium without its hazards" (71).

in his book of the same name, due to its immense success in the West German market—was comparatively easy to program so that the coding of a game could be done by one or two programmers without much formal training. The C64 thus became the ideal platform for everyone in Germany seeking to circumvent the regulatory state apparatus and to create inappropriate content not otherwise available to consumers via official channels.

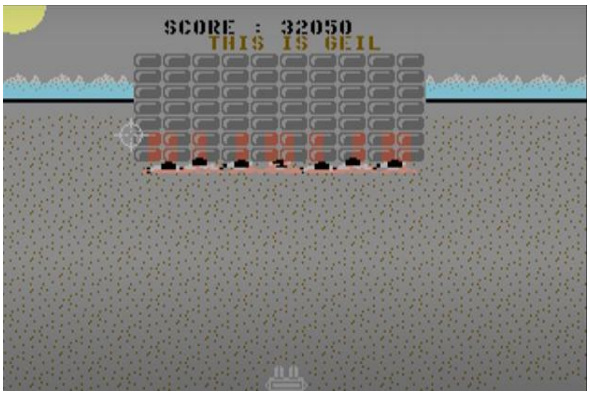

Figure 1: The 8-bit aftermath of a firing-range execution in *Commando Libya*. All images used in this essay were captured online.

In his 2016 book *Retrogame Archeology: Exploring Old Computer Games*, John Aycock calls for the reevaluation of old computer games to productively rethink both their specific historical configurations and the ways in which they connect to the present.[10] Along these lines I read Naziware as surface symptoms of the conservative and reactionary tendencies in 1980s West Germany, framed by the historical and sociological reassessments outlined in the paragraphs above, but also as precursors to the use of digital media in the present. These games warrant a closer look not merely as pop-cultural ephemera, but more importantly as attempts to

[10] In 2003, Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron announced that scholars had finally started to take computer- and video games "seriously as a cultural object worthy of attention" (1).

turn officially inacceptable ideological positions into entertainment, a strategy that is also a medial key element of contemporary politics—an issue that I discuss toward the end of this essay. At this point it is necessary to point out that the elusiveness of 1980s Naziware and the anonymity surrounding their publication makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the actual ideological position of an individual programmer—especially since the games under consideration here are usually not in wide circulation 35 years later; they cannot easily be found (or played) in archives, nor are they usually circulated among collectors because they do not exist as originals. Arguably because of this absence, racist and anti-Semitic computer games from the 1980s have rarely been the focus of German Studies, and if they do come up in research, it is usually as the product of concerted right-wing efforts to recruit new supporters. Salzborn and Maegerle, for example, claim that *KZ-Manager* was "ein wesentlicher ideologischer Werbeträger für den Rechtsextremismus" [an integral ideological advertising tool of right-wing extremism] (2016: 220). Similarly, Waldemar Vogelsang et al. already argued in the early 1990s on the topic of Naziware:

> Ein Teil dieser Spiele wird sicherlich von jugendlichen Programmierern erstellt, die keine gezielten ideologischen Interessen verfolgen. Auffallend an diesen Spielen ist ihre sehr dürftige Handlungsstruktur und die sehr schlichte graphische Umsetzung. Häufig fehlt dieser Art von Naziware auch das entsprechende historische Hintergrundwissen, was ihren dilettantischen Charakter noch zusätzlich unterstreicht. (32)
>
> [To be sure, some of these games are being programmed by juvenile programmers who do not pursue any clear ideological interests. Tellingly, these games have in common a lack of narrative structure and the use of quite simple graphics. Often, this type of

Naziware also lacks the respective historical background knowledge, which only further highlights their amateurish character.]

Whereas Vogelsang et al. state that "besorgniserregender ist jedoch die Herkunft 'professioneller Naziware'" [more concerning is, however, the production of 'professional Naziware'], I submit that the appropriation, trivialization, and, eventually, gamification of racist and fascist ideologies encoded in programs such as *KZ-Manager* and *Anti Türkentest* constitute an equally alarming phenomenon as it points to a deep-rooted, if "repressed," hateful rhetoric disseminated via under-supervised channels as DIY Naziware remained largely out of sight of the authorities, both at the parental and at the state level (ibid).[11]

Figure 2: Hard-to-find screenshot of the opening screen of the original C64-version of *KZ-Manager*.

Eventually, however, concerned parties did become aware of the existence of Naziware. With some parents becoming increasingly curious about and perplexed by what their kids were doing while alone or with their friends, the topic of antisemitic games attracted media attention,

[11] Gamification refers to "using elements from games repurposed in nongame settings […] which give us roles, rules, and ways to win, setting boundaries and mechanics for that experience" (Lamphere-Englund: 32). Of course, games are at the core of this essay, so the object of gamification is the external historical or socio-political referent which these games signify.

both domestically and abroad. In 1991, the *New York Times,* as a case in point, ran an article with the headline "Video Game Uncovered in Europe Uses Nazi Death Camps as Theme." In the article, Rabbi Avraham Cooper—then the Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center—is quoted saying that "he believed that the games were neo-Nazi propaganda aimed at influencing youths through a technology that their parents are largely unfamiliar with" (May 1st, 1991). While there have been games that were indeed released by neo-Nazi groups as ideological click-bait and recruitment tools—such as the notorious 2002 first-person shooter *Ethnic Cleansing*, developed and distributed by the white supremacist group *National Alliance* or, more recently, the 2D-platformer *Heimatdefender: Rebellion* made by the German hyper-nationalist group Identitäre Bewegung (Identitarian Movement) in which the player is tasked with killing Antifa and police rendered in a "colorful" retro-16-bit style—Rabbi Cooper misread these earlier German entries in one crucial aspect: they appeared in the disk-drives of minors without any direct connection to contemporaneous right-wing parties and neo-Nazi organizations of the time, such as the NPD, Die Republikaner, Aktion Widerstand or the NSPAD/AO.[12] Omitting both the identity of the programmer(s)—the *Anti Türkentest* cynically states it was "Made in Buchenwald" by "Hitler & Hess," for example—and any contact opportunities renders them relatively ineffective as traditional recruitment tools. Instead, early Naziware used a nascent form

[12] As journalist Linda Rohrbough, affiliated with the Simon Wiesenthal Center, wrote in the Washington Post on May 3, 1991, "the games range from displays of German pre-World War II symbols to complex graphics of tortured prisoners and bizarre death images like the grim reaper, according to the center. Some games are merely multiple-choice quizzes, most are totally in German, and bear titles such as "KZ Manager," "Aryan Test" and, surprisingly enough, "Bruce Lee," researchers said. […] As far as Center researchers have been able to determine, the Bruce Lee games only rotate and display Nazi symbols. Why they bear the famous Oriental martial arts movie actor's name is unknown, but ironic, researchers said." While there is no way for me to conclusively identify the file that Rohrbough cites, this is likely a case of "hiding" *KZ-Manager* under a different name, in this case that of a popular action beat-'em-up platformer, *Bruce Lee*, officially published by DataSoft in 1984.

of media to challenge the regulatory state apparatus and establish new ways of ideological broadcasting.

Figure 3: Opening screen of *Anti Türkentest*. Note the references to Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Hess, and the extermination camp Buchenwald.

Reacting to the increase in offensive and legally problematic content available to minors, the West German authorities—in the form of the *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* (*Federal Department for Media Harmful to Minors,* BPjM)—put several games on the Index from the mid-80s onward, which meant making them available only to persons of legal age and forbid any form of public advertisements. As briefly indicated above, the BPjM in conjunction with state attorneys also banned some of the games due to their alleged glorification of violence—a direct violation of West German federal law—or their display of unconstitutional symbols, such as Swastikas, in non-"artistic" forms of entertainment. While, in retrospect, the limited graphical abilities of the C64 make it somewhat difficult to take charges against these games on the grounds of glorification of violence too seriously, the use of fascist imagery (and language) in some titles presents a more pressing problem, even in 8-bit and in sixteen colors. What may have been acceptable as entertainment and, more importantly, legal in other countries, was illegal in Germany. Most homebrew games, it should be noted, remained firmly within the legally sanctioned parameters—in fact, text-based fantasy role-playing games and so-called

demos of the computers graphical abilities were the most successful genres—yet a non-monolithic gaming scene also created and circulated programs that used the relative anonymity of the medium as well as its convenient distribution channels to disseminate openly unconstitutional texts. Naziware thus occupied a unique cultural position: potentially available to millions of users at little to no cost, they remained invisible to a substantial portion of the older demographic due to their digital nature. Because they were never distributed officially, their critical reception also tends to differ from early mainstream games that deal with Nazism, such as Muse Software's original *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981; ported over to the C64 in 1983) and its sequel, *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* (1984), which, as some critics have convincingly argued, "only superficially wrestle with Nazism" and, what is more, usually exclude Jewish suffering from the narrative (Grieb 194).[13]

This said, Naziware differs from games such as *Commando Libya* or *Castle Wolfenstein* for several reasons, not least because it violates § 86a StGB—the use of the symbols of unconstitutional organizations. Outside the framework of a for-profit industry (and even the self-published, legal middle-ground), this "anonymous" subset of DIY games signaled a "private" racism and antisemitism cultivated at home and in semi-public places such as high schools and soccer clubs. Like *KZ-Manager*, *Anti Türkentest* had never seen an official release and was instead copied from disk to disk, making it difficult to trace back its lineage to the school in Berlin where it had originated (I discuss this in more detail below). Whatever the programmer's ideological intent may have been, the program perpetually multiplied itself as it continually

[13] These games are part of the debates on the use of the Third Reich (and by association the Holocaust) as a backdrop in computer and video gaming. As Jeff Hayton writes, "while the Holocaust remains central to understanding National Socialism, the video game industry mostly sidesteps the representation of genocide: indeed, how can one depict the Holocaust digitally, especially in a game meant to be *fun*?" (211).

moved away from authorial intention; to be sure, some gamers wanted to get their hands on the program due to word-of-mouth about the forbidden text, yet others accidentally discovered it hidden among other files. As a result, *Anti Türkentest* transformed into a sub-cultural phenomenon that reshaped the concept of political indoctrination. Not only did these files reach players who were neither part of the organized right-wing spectrum nor actively looking for fascist propaganda, the games they transported also gamified hate. When *KZ Manager* used the Holocaust as a backdrop for a genre that—in the form of soccer and/or resource managers—was already a profitable genre in the early 1980s, the gamification of the atrocities that occurred under National Socialist rule partakes in a new form of a Benjaminian Aestheticizing of Politics: here, the crimes of the Third Reich are reframed as inherently "non-real" histories that not only deflate national narratives of guilt and complicity, but also illustrate the ways in which these narratives had already been distorted in postwar Germany's imaginary as "unserious" before they resurfaced as digital entertainment. Darkly postmodern texts, Naziware was thus simultaneously ubiquitous and ephemeral, serious and ironic, hateful and playful—and thus proved to be hard to pin down altogether. Their message, then, reinforced lingering biases in the context of gaming, and as such differed categorically from conventional manifestos and other recruitment efforts.

As digital snapshots of a critical period in West German history—the mid-1980s, a period that also witnessed a renaissance in the collecting of Third Reich-memorabilia, the so-called Hitler-wave—early homebrew games have become elusive over time. A superficial *Google* search yields hardly any visual traces of their existence, at least within the confines of the *Bright* Web, which is noteworthy given the otherwise ubiquitous availability of offensive content on the Internet. Just as they had found their way into the disk drive as programs attached to bootleg versions of mainstream titles that were copied in large numbers using cracking tools, Naziware's

virtual absence today can be explained through the state of technology in the 1980s; before the emergence of the World Wide Web as a global archive and communication platform, players would rarely record their gaming sessions—and thus, proof of the games can be hard to find today, given that there were no promotion materials published and that they received no coverage in official gaming magazines. In addition, because of their reliance on German text, programs such as the original *KZ-Manager* and the various *Anti Türkentest*s never crossed the borders of the German-speaking countries in large enough quantities to secure a digital afterlife elsewhere. Usually stored on flimsy 5 1/4inch floppy disks, these codes have been literally and figuratively rotting away in attics and basements, potentially forgotten artifacts that still have shaped the cultural imaginary of a whole generation.[14] In this essay, I, too, draw largely from my own encounters with these games on the C64 in the late 1980s, while the screenshots all come from the Internet. It is worth mentioning that racist computer and video games are by no means limited to the German speaking countries. As a case in point, the infamous *Custer's Revenge*—a game produced and officially released by third-party developer Mystique for the Atari 2600 (aka Atari VCS) in 1982—sold 80,000 copies in the US alone. It features the eponymous U.S. Army general whose sole goal in the game is to rape Native American women tied to a pole. *Custer's Revenge* suggests that games released into an under-regulated market are conducive to the populace's suppressed desires for revisionist histories, producing (sexually charged) power fantasies of "acceptable" violence against the Other executed as play.

[14] After all, as Sebastian Ostritsch notes in his book on ethics in computer games, "Die Kinder und Jugendlichen, die in den 1980er [...] Jahren mit Computerspielen aufgewachsen sind, […] machen heute die Kerngruppe der Gamer aus" [the children and teenagers who grew up playing computer games in the 1980s, now constitute the core demographic of today's gamers] (15).

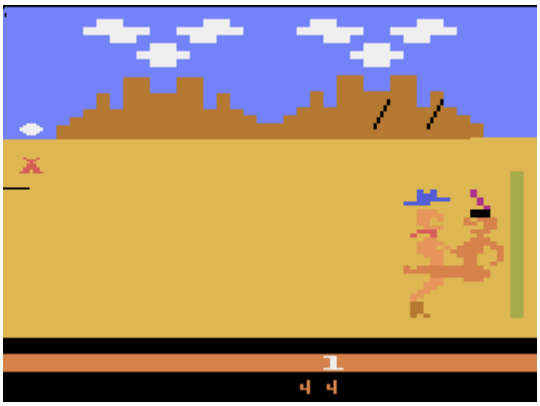

Figure 4: *Custer's Revenge* on the Atari 2600 (aka Atari VCS). The Custer-avatar is shown raping a Native American woman.

Turning to my examination of West German Naziware, I begin my discussion with *KZ-Manager*—arguably the most notorious of the C64 releases—in which players are tasked with running an extermination camp like a business, a cynical detail given that the Nazis approached the Final Solution like an industry. The game appeared around 1988 and was put on the Index by the Federal Department for Media Harmful to Minors in July 1989, before being banned one and a half years later. Unsurprisingly, the ban did little to remove *KZ-Manager* from circulation. Compared to later adaptations—such as the one on the more advanced Commodore Amiga with its significantly improved processor—the C64 version must be considered technically limited with little to no non-textual elements. *KZ-Manager* does not contain representations of human beings dying in the gas chambers. As such, it exemplifies the "super-rational element […] reflected in the early games' graphics, which have a spare, modernist feel," adding a dark twist to the frequently abstract quality of 8-bit games in that it gives pixeled gestalt to the Nazis' inhumane "rationality" (Slovin 139). The goal of the player is to kill a specified number of people—some versions mention Jews while certain mods focus on Turks or Sinti and Roma—in a race against time, while keeping an eye on the public opinion and other contingent factors that determine the success of the virtual death camp officer. The interface uses drop-down menus to

allow players to execute certain orders and most of the information is displayed in writing as *KZ-Manager* makes explicit the murderous goals that the player must meet. Along these lines, it is noteworthy that it takes real effort to fail in this game, the program suggesting that the Final Solution is only a matter of time, and that the extermination of European Jewry can hardly be botched. As such, the game mechanic utilizes and then corrupts ludology's tenet that "one of the primary reasons to play a game is to gain a sense of being effective in the world" (Skelly xiii).

The *Anti Türkentest* is entirely text-based—except for a swastika intermittently placed prominently in the center of the screen—and presents the player with a selection of ten randomly selected multiple-choice quiz questions whose content is racist throughout. A "correct" answer to any of these questions will yield a euphoric "Richtig Nazi" ("Correct, Nazi"), one of the rare voice effects on the C64. After the test's completion the player will be judged according to his answers, similar to the popular "character tests" that can be found on Facebook and other social media sites today. The questions in the game are culled from ethnically charged jokes that circulated in West Germany during that time, making it immediately obvious which answer is the desired one and often offering only one that is clearly deemed incorrect, which in this case is synonymous with "not racist." *Anti Türkentest* differs from *KZ-Manager* not only in terms of genre, but also in that it hides its xenophobia behind a shield of faux humor.[15] In contrast to *KZ-Manager*, the genesis of *Anti Türkentest* has been better documented. In 1989, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* published an anonymous interview with the Berlin-based programmer of the *Anti Türkentest*, quoted in their article "Bravo, Hitlerjunge" [Well done, Hitler-Youth], who claimed "dass er sein Spiel im Informatik-Unterricht entwickeln konnte, der Lehrer 'habe nichts

[15] Galen Lamphere-Englund writes that "dark humor" is frequently used by the far-right today in an attempt "to weaponize video game aesthetics for effective propaganda among their target audience" (37).

geblickt" [that he was able to develop his game during IT-education, since the teacher 'did not realize what his student was doing']. The interviewer added, "die Eltern offenbar auch nicht" [same with the parents, apparently] and concludes "Das Produkt des 18jährigen fand sofort reißenden Absatz" [the 18-year-old's product became a hot commodity immediately]. The programmer finally confirms that: "Viele in meiner Klasse wollten diesen Test haben, weil sie über Ausländer genauso denken wie ich" [a lot of my classmates wanted to get their hands on the Test because they have the same opinion about foreigners that I have] (29/1989). The last statement makes it clear that the impetus to code *Anti Türkentest* grew out of a deep-seated bias toward Turkish immigrants in Germany that was amplified by the programmer's assenting cohort. This said, as soon as the game left behind the school environment in which it had been initially conceived, the original intent of its programmer ceased to play a major role. The offensive software spread across Germany—it went viral, to use today's parlance—by being copied from storage medium to storage medium, often hidden among several other, professionally produced games so that there would not have been any direct connection to the Berlin programmer who had written and originally distributed it among his classmates—but not, it should be noted, as part of a right-wing group. In many instances, to speak from personal experience, one simply came across the game, whether one had been aware of its existence or not.

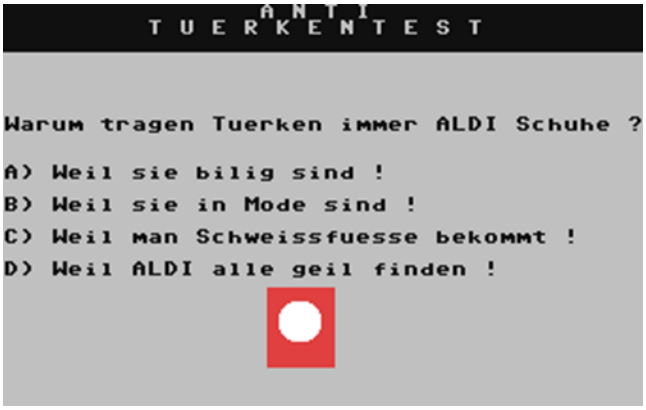

Figure 5: An example of *Anti Türkentest*'s type of racist humor. "Why do Turks wear shoes from Aldi? A) because they are cheap B) because they are fashionable C) because they give you smelly feet D) because everyone loves Aldi"

While these examples of 1980s Naziware have now largely disappeared as playable texts, their legacy must be considered urgent in the political and techno-cultural climate of the 21st century. The "gamification of terror," as Schlegel and Kowert submit, has continued, and grown into a critical tool of postfascism (2).[16] Schlegel and Kowert identify the Christchurch shooting of 2019 as the apex event in the history of gaming and radicalized, right-wing aggression, the nexus between "gaming culture and extremism" (2). In the German context, the 2009 terrorist attack in Winnenden—which led to the death of fifteen people at the hands of a 17-year-old assailant—is noteworthy. While not a racially motivated attack, it brought violent computer games "in das Bewusstsein der breiten Öffentlichkeit" [into the public's eye], since the shooter had been an avid *Counterstrike* player (Ostritsch: 8). While, to be sure, the first-person shooter *Counterstrike* cannot be considered Naziware, open multiplayer games like *Counterstrike*, as sociologists have shown, are a virtual space where "racial epithets spewed by complete strangers over voice chat," for example, are the norm (Steinkuehler and Squire: 20). This includes the potential for grooming. In addition, they inform bespoke Naziware titles, such as the aforementioned *Ethnic Cleansing*, games that, as Steinkuehler and Squire state, "in the early 2000s took playing hate to a new level, moving beyond unpolished reskins of popular game mechanics to games whose narrative and treatment align and amplify their procedural rhetoric" (16).

[16] I adopt the following definition of the term: it is a "historical period in which policies and ideas associated with the extreme right have become part of mainstream liberal politics […,] policies formed in democratic societies that go hand-in-hand with the anti-welfare sentiment of neoliberal capitalism" (Koutsourakis 2024: 16-17).

The lessons of Naziware—whose domestic lineage begins with the C64 titles discussed in this essay—has become timely again over the last twenty years. In the post-Wall context, racist and xenophobic "hate games" evoke the case of the Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund [National Socialist Underground, NSU]. Between 1998 and 2011, the NSU had assassinated nine immigrants of Kurdish, Greek and Turkish descent, crimes that remained unsolved in part because the German police failed to see the links between the murders and a Neo-Nazi organization that promoted white supremacy, instead blaming the victims for alleged ties to the criminal underworld.[17] The connection between gaming and radicalization is most visible, however, in the Halle-shooting of 2019, in which a 17-year-old neo-Nazi murdered two people and wounded two more in a synagogue, livestreaming his killing spree on Twitch. My goal is not to join the debate that links violent games to real acts of violence, but rather to show how first-person shooters in particular have become part of the public discourse on right-wing violence once more. At the same time, the Internet has helped to establish the Alternative for Germany as a major political force. As Salzborn and Maegerle rightly posit, "wer politisch etwas umsetzen, durchsetzen, oder verändern will, ist auf die kommunikative Vermittlung seiner Ziele ebenso angewiesen, wie auf die mediale Vernetzung mit Gleichgesinnten" [whoever wants to implement, push through, or change something in politics, is as much dependent on the communicative exchange of their goals as the medial networking with like-minded people] (215). Along these lines, the AfD as well as many other right-wing parties and groups have successfully established and exploited a digital presence, including content on social media channels such as TikTok and Instagram, but also by making available ideologically charged

[17] History repeated itself on February 19, 2020, when a racially motivated terrorist attack on a Shisha bar in Hanau left nine people with an immigration background dead.

games. A look at the immediate pre-reunification period shows that these strategies are not new and have been in circulation long before the era of social media and ubiquitous computing.

To conclude: in this essay I have argued for a reevaluation of the effects that early Naziware had on the young gamer scene in the West German 1980s and to acknowledge these early computer games as lessons to be learned from today. I disagree with Vogelsang's (et al.) assessment that the more professionally made programs must be seen as more problematic, arguing instead that the homebrew variant was equally dangerous, precisely because it worked differently. In terms of content, I have discussed how these relatively simple programs couch their openly racist and antisemitic messages in established game mechanics, which in turn makes their hateful worldviews more palatable. In addition, the historic precedents and socio-political realities surrounding the events depicted in Naziware, are marked as virtual and, consequently, supremely unreal. What is more, the relative anonymity of the programmers—and the lack of contact opportunities—renders these games ineffective as straightforward recruitment tools. Instead, they function as "fun" affirmations of existing sentiments that may or may not deliver potential recruits to neo-Nazi organizations, yet do normalize fascist ideologies, nonetheless. As far as the distribution of the games is concerned, it is important to note that they often found their way into the disk-drives of gamers as Trojan horses. Whether deliberately mislabeled as a different, highly popular game—as was the case with *Bruce Lee*, discussed in one of the footnotes above—or simply hidden among cracked games, the exposure to Naziware happened uncontrollably as the programs moved away, in a viral pattern, from their respective Ground Zero. As such, *KZ-Manager*, *Anti Türkentest* and their ilk must have appeared as less in-your-face, less "didactic" to minors, making it much easier for "grassroots" right-wing ideologies to break through the affective filter. Even if individual games were not concerted efforts by groups

to recruit new members, they clearly catered to existing preconceptions in some and trivialized these ideologies for others by presenting them as a joke. This digital virality of hate, to be sure, is again (or perhaps still) of considerable concern in today's hyper-networked society in which, as Oliver Knabe has shown in detail, "Germany has repeatedly been confronted with its antisemitic past" in the wake of the Hamas terror attack in the fall of 2023, a period that has also seen the AfD become the second-strongest party in the 2025 federal elections (160). They stand as both a precursor to and a warning against new generations of Naziware, driven by a memetic ludology that uses "dehumanizing humor, dark irony, and gamified hate online [to] allow extremist users to enter into 'play frames'" (Lamphere-Englund: 48).

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