

# Nostalgic Ludopopulism and Neoreactionary Movements in Game Development

**Jim Malazita**

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
110 8<sup>th</sup> Street  
Troy, NY, USA 12180  
[malazj@rpi.edu](mailto:malazj@rpi.edu)

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the spread of neo-reactionary rhetoric and codebases among online game development and programming communities through live streams, forums, and code repositories. This rhetoric, which I characterize as “nostalgic ludopoulism,” appeals to nostalgia for “a greater past” in game development and lionizes a form of game development practice that centers the highly skilled, craftsman developer over the seemingly unskilled developers using off-the-shelf game engines and programming environments. These discourses and technologies shape both designer identity and the development of new programming practices and software intended to support neo-reactionary political movements. Further, ludopoulism’s “thin ideology” (Mudde 2004) allows for the ideological capture and undermining of labor organization, consumer rights and right-to-repair advocacy, and other solidarity movements which stand against the consolidation of capital.

## Keywords

Populism, livestreaming, game programming, neo-reaction, labor, tech ideology

## INTRODUCTION

Prior research on the impacts of polarizing discourse in gaming cultures, as exemplified in Gamergate, an anti-women online campaign in the mid-2000s, has largely focused on how game texts and memes circulate within fandom cultures and extremist movements, and how those memes become weaponized for political polarization both within and beyond popular culture (Chess et. al. 2015; Massanari 2024; Gray et. al. 2025). Less studied, however, are internalist accounts of radicalization among game and software developers and themselves. Independent programmers, artists, and game developers are now regularly livestreaming their creative and technical practice to online audiences, as well as actively engaging those audiences on platforms like X, Twitch, and Reddit, leveraging the aesthetics, conversational styles, and economies of attention of social media influencers (Harpstead et. at. 2019; Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Woodcock and Johnson 2021). These kinds of performances can act as vibrant forms of pedagogy, where streamers build communities of practice that support learning, creativity, and skill sharing (Consalvo and Phelps 2019; Faas et. al. 2019; Parker and Perks 2021).

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These communities, however, can also serve as venues for using ostensibly technical content to introduce political content, particularly to new and eager audiences who lack sufficient prior topical knowledge to critically evaluate that content. Technical conversations about the difficulty of a particular kind of game development practice, for example, are easily transformed into conversations about who is to blame for that difficulty, all presented to an audience of willing, trusting learners. Given that these spaces are centered around technical production, polarizing discourse can be used to shape not only ideological and identitarian values within these communities, but also the sociotechnical textures of software itself (Alfano et. al. 2018; Dehghan and Nagappa 2022; Malazita 2024; Corrina 2025). Game development software and knowledge communities are thus fracturing along ideological lines, creating rippling effects on how games and digital media get made, and by whom (Smith and Burrows 2021; Malazita 2025).

This talk examines game development personalities, live programming streamers, and podcasters who together comprise a techno-ideological social media ecosystem. In particular, this talk will focus on three interlocking social media spaces: that of popular independent game developer Jonathan Blow and his Twitch live programming stream and community; programmer and podcaster Casey Muratori, star of the popular game programming stream *Handmade Hero*; and Łukasz Ściga, host of the Wookash Podcast, which features weekly long form interviews with game and graphics programmers. While some members of this social media ecosystem, such as Epic Games developer Ryan Fleury, are explicitly supporters of authoritarian and fascist political movements, Blow, Muratori, and Ściga are major figures who represent different, more subtle forms of ideological formation. Persistent across all three of their web presences, however, are forms of populist rhetoric against a perceived enclosed corporate “elite” capture of game development practices which mirrors rhetoric of Dark Enlightenment political blogger Curtis Yarvin, and a call for a return to a nostalgic, imagined craftsman past of game development—a past that is imagined as free from corporate or “woke” pressures on developers, and also as one where the skill of individual, dedicated and talented developers was championed over more accessible toolkits such as off-the-shelf game engines.

Through a discursive analysis of these three figures as case studies, this paper will argue that online game development and programming communities are fomenting a politics of “nostalgic ludopopulism,” a neo-reactionary movement which blends technical practice, gaming and computational nostalgia, and populist ideological language. Through in many ways they drink from the same well, ludopopulism is distinct from similar neo-reactionary and technofascist political movements in Silicon Valley and Big Tech (Golumbia 2024) in that its craft-oriented political rhetoric decries the strengthening of corporate power, the use of AI in creative spaces, and tech capital’s alignment with government. This anti-corporate position and seeming lionization of creative labor, however, also make ludopopulism a dangerous discursive ecosystem, as its “thin ideology” (Mudde 2004) allows for the ideological capture and undermining of labor organization, consumer rights and right-to-repair advocacy, and other solidarity movements which stand against the consolidation of capital.

## **CASES**

Jonathan Blow and Jai: Blow, the creator of major indie game successes *Braid* (2008) and *The Witness* (2016), uses his stream to discuss his thoughts on design best practices, the current state of the games industry, and to advocate for greater

adoption of custom programming language, Jai. Blow's performance ecosystem blurs the lines between technical and political discourse, where he frames Jai as both a more efficient programming language and also a counter-action to the corporate and governmental "Cathedral" (an antisemitic conspiracy dog whistle coined and spread by Yarvin), and advocates for a change in software development practices inside and outside of games that exclude "sloppy" programmers, a term often used in stream to stand in for women, programmers of color, and other game makers who use proprietary software like game engines to develop their work (Smith and Burrows 2021; Jones 2021). Jai is distributed to select members of the Twitch stream who demonstrate coding aptitude and political alignment, who are encouraged to use the language to develop new games media and new software development environments.

Casey Muratori and *Handmade Hero*: Muratori is a former game graphics programmer who specialized in engine tools, video compression algorithms, and character rigging systems from the early 2000s to the mid 2010s. In 2014, Muratori launched the Twitch / YouTube series *Handmade Hero*, a video blog where he live programs a game from scratch. While Muratori's public political leanings are vaguely libertarian, he traffics heavily in development-centered gaming nostalgia, with his stream often featuring saccharine music coupled with wistful commentary about the joys of game development which have been taken away by companies and game engines, and of the contemporary deskilling of game designers.

Łukasz Ściga and *The Wookash Podcast*: Ściga is an amateur and self-described dilettante game and graphics programmer, who hosts *The Wookash Podcast*, a long form podcast interviewing games and graphics programmers that is highly popular within the online game development community. Like Muratori, while Ściga's overt politics are muted, he will often lead his guests into conversations critiquing the Cathedral, including computer science higher education, "elite" programming languages such as C++, and woke corporate culture.

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