

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 15, 2022

Mr. Gabe Newell
Chief Executive Officer
Valve Corporation
10400 NE 4th St.
Floor 14
Bellevue, WA 98004

Dear Mr. Newell:

I write today regarding extremist content on the Steam video game digital distribution service. As the most popular and largest digital distribution platform for computer video games, including online community and communication features, Steam has tremendous domestic and global reach and is used by computer video game players of all ages.¹ Disturbingly, Steam has a significant presence of users displaying and espousing neo-Nazi, extremist, racial supremacist, misogynistic, and other hateful sentiments. Valve should be taking steps to prevent harmful content, especially given the relationship between online comments and violence in the offline world.

Extremist content on Steam, found after cursory keyword searches using terms and images commonly associated with neo-Nazi, extremist, and racial supremacist ideologies, is pervasive.² A non-exhaustive list of content found in user account names and online community groups includes:

- Plain and unambiguous references to the neo-Nazi term “88,” referring to the letters HH, short for “Heil Hitler”;
- The use of symbols associated with the Third Reich, such as:
 - Photographs of, and references to, members of the Wehrmacht or Waffen-SS organization;
 - Emblems of Waffen-SS divisions involved in war crimes, including the infamous 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler;

¹ At 4 PM on December 12, 2022, there were 24 million users online and 6.1 million users actively playing video games.

² See Attachment 1

- Images of Nazi-era Reichadlers, Sig runes associated with the Nazi Party Schutzstaffel, Nazi Party or Nazi-inspired or -derived flags, emblems, and devices; and
- The use of terms like “Blut and Ehre,” a popular Nazi and neo-Nazi slogan, “Waffen-SS,” “White Power,” a white supremacist slogan, “Zyklon,” an apparent reference to the pesticide gas used in Nazi extermination camps to carry out mass murder, and the use in combination of the numbers “14” and “88,” a reference to the white supremacist slogan “1488.”

The prevalence and ease of finding this content is extremely concerning, especially given the popularity that Valve currently enjoys over its competitors in the video game digital distribution ecosystem. Valve’s Steam Subscriber Agreement includes the Steam Online Conduct Rules,³ which include two rules under which users are required to agree to not “[d]efame, abuse, harass, stalk, threaten or otherwise violate the legal rights (such as rights of privacy and publicity) of others,” and to not “[r]estrict or inhibit any other user from using and enjoying Steam services, software or other content.”⁴

The exposure to explicit, unambiguous, and pervasive symbols, visuals, and words and phrases associated with racial supremacy, neo-Nazism, antisemitism, gender-based violence or harassment, homophobia, and other hateful and harmful ideologies restricts and inhibits many Steam users from participating in communities free of harassing, abusive, and threatening behavior. Furthermore, allowing racist, extremist, antisemitic, and other hateful ideologies an unimpeded space in which they can flourish online allows for the very real threat of violence in offline, physical spaces.

A recent report by the Anti-Defamation League found that “nearly one in ten gamers between ages 13 and 17 had been exposed to white-supremacist ideology and themes in online multiplayer games.”⁵ With extremist ideologies and antisemitic violence on the rise around the world, it is incumbent upon companies to monitor the content that users introduce into their products.

The rise in violence against faith-based institutions and houses of worship is why I introduced the bipartisan *Pray Safe Act* to ensure that faith-based organizations and houses of worship have the resources and support that they need to ensure that all can gather safely and in peace.

Given that Valve derives a financial benefit from every user who purchases a product through its Steam storefront, it is important that Valve act proactively and decisively to make the platform

³ Steam Subscriber Agreement https://store.steampowered.com/subscriber_agreement/ (12 December, 2022).

⁴ Steam Online Conduct, https://store.steampowered.com/online_conduct/ (12 December, 2022).

⁵ ADL Center for Technology & Society, *Hate Is No Game: Hate and Harassment in Online Games 2022*, (7 December 2022), <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022-12/Hate-and-Harassment-in-Online-Games-120622-v2.pdf>

safe for all users. To help me understand what Valve is doing to achieve that goal, please respond to the following questions by January 15, 2023:

1. Do the types and categories of content referenced in this letter and provided as examples in attachment 1 violate the Steam Subscriber Agreement, the Steam Online Conduct Rules, or any other platform or company policy that applies to its customers or users?
 - a. If yes, what action, if any, has been taken against accounts and groups displaying content similar to the non-exhaustive examples provided in this letter?
2. Please describe the process, if any, that Valve employs to identify and assess extremist, racist, antisemitic, gender-based harassment, homophobic or threatening content used in and by Steam communities, usernames, or the Steam Workshop?
 - a. If standards to identify and assess extremist, racist, antisemitic, gender-based harassment, homophobic or threatening content are used or developed by Valve, did any individuals who developed, determined, or approved said standards have expertise, qualifications, or a professional background in identifying, assessing, or understanding extremist content?
 - b. Does Valve collect and maintain any data or statistics on content removed for those reasons, or any other reasons?
 - c. Does Valve proactively seek out such content for removal?
3. Please describe the process that Valve employs to respond to user-generated complaints of extremist, racist, antisemitic, gender-based, or homophobic threats or harassment? How does Valve assess user-generated complaints made on those grounds in order to determine if they violate company policy?
 - a. How many of those assessed complaints did Valve find to violate any of its policies? How many were found to not be in violation, or were determined not to be conclusive?
4. Does Valve have a moderation or safety team or activity that proactively identifies and assesses user-generated accounts, groups, communities, and any other content to determine if violations of any company policy occur related to abuse, harassment, threats, or any other activity that could harm Steam users?
 - a. If no, will Valve commit to implementing a moderation or safety team or activity to actively identify and assess user-generated accounts, groups, communities, and any other content to determine if violations of any company policy related to abuse, harassment, threats, or any other activity occur that could harm Steam users?

Thank you for your prompt attention to my concerns. Opposing the spread of extremist and racist activities online should be something that all can agree is important and ensuring that online recreational spaces are safe and welcoming for everyone should be a top priority of video game makers and distributors.

With every good wish,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Maggie Hassan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator