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Hatred, free speech and one developer's connections with Poland's far right (correction)

By [Charlie Hall](#) | Dec 18, 2014, 3:52pm EST

Image [Piotr Drabik](#)



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When *Hatred* was revealed to the world in October the team behind it, Poland's [Destructive Creations](#), called it a "genocide crusade." In the announcement trailer a nameless man in a black trench coat murders every living person he can find, violently and indiscriminately. While the game itself was troubling to many, more concerning to some were the political affiliations of key members of the team including the CEO Jaroslaw Zielinski.

In an effort to learn more about the social landscape in Poland, and to properly understand the political leanings of several members of the [Hatred](#) development team, Polygon reached out to Never Again, an organization that monitors Polish hate groups. They describe the groups which members of the *Hatred* team "like" on Facebook as racist, neo-fascist and violent.

"Some things [Never Again] wrote you about these organizations might be even true," Zielinski told Polygon. "I don't know, I'm not a member of any of those and was never interested." He went on to call such portrayals of Poland's far-right "propaganda."

Our investigation aims to provide insight into several factors surrounding the game *Hatred*. While many games are inherently violent, what information about the context for that violence should be available to consumers? And how does the American right to free association and free speech run up against the artistic freedom of a game developer?

ON RECENT EVENTS

Polygon itself was [among the first](#) to criticize *Hatred*. Soon after, those critical of the game's super-violent premise took personal aim at the developers behind it, going to social media and [Tumblr](#) to denounce them individually as neo-fascists and anti-Islamic xenophobes. Their criticisms were based almost exclusively on the political groups that certain members of the team liked on Facebook.

Shortly thereafter [the CEO at Destructive Creations](#), as well as several of [his employees](#), issued personal responses to those accusations. They reaffirmed their right to free association, and decried accusations of neo-Nazism. At the same time

they thanked an eager, left-leaning press for falling into their carefully laid public relations trap.

"WE WISH TO THANK THE PRESS FOR THE GREAT MARKETING CAMPAIGN THEY'VE PROVIDED FOR US"

"We try to get world's attention to our product and as you can see — it worked perfectly," Zielinski wrote in the same post. "We wish to thank all of our haters and all upset press for a great marketing campaign they've done for us."

Monday, December 15 *Hatred* was entered into Steam's Greenlight program, a literal popularity contest where winners are invited to be sold on the world's largest online gaming marketplace. In just a few hours it moved to the number seven slot, with over 13,000 votes.

Shortly after it was included in the Greenlight listings, Valve made the decision to [pull it down](#) which, as a commercial entity, it has every right to do.



Later that same day, however, Valve reversed course. The result was a [personal apology](#) from the founder of Valve, Gabe Newell himself, and the restoration of the game to the Greenlight program.

"It turns out that it wasn't a good decision," Newell wrote. "We'll be putting Hatred back up. My apologies to you and your team. Steam is about creating tools for content creators and customers. Good luck with your game."

WHAT'S IN A "LIKE"?

Valve has been tight lipped about exactly why it initially pulled the game down from Greenlight. In an email to Polygon, Valve's Doug Lombardi stated that "based on what we've seen on Greenlight we would not publish *Hatred* on Steam. ... As such we'll be taking it down."

It's possible that one of the reasons Valve made the initial decision to remove the game from its service is because of the political affiliations of some of its members as defined by their [Facebook likes](#). Valve's decision to pull the game down, and to reinstate it, is an exercise of their freedom as a corporate entity under American law. It's emblematic of the United States' long history of protecting the rights of free speech and free association.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) does not often dabble in private business. Their mission is, and always has been, to defend the rights of U.S. citizens in the public space. As such, their work provides a good indicator of how the law of the land is interpreted.



"There's no question that a like on Facebook is a way of expressing one's self," ACLU-IL's Ed Yohnka told Polygon. "It's a way of indicating what one's beliefs are, what one's sense of belief is. And I think that's something that we see a lot of

people do. But the other thing is that a like is often a way of gathering information."

That right to information, Yohnka said, is worth protecting and therefore by extension so are Facebook likes.

In 2013 a federal appeals court in Virginia sided with [the ACLU](#), reversing the decision of [a lower court](#). The case, involving a Virginia sheriff's employees who were fired for, among other things, liking the Facebook page of the sheriff's political opponent.

"The Supreme Court has made clear that the First Amendment protects everyone's right to express their thoughts and opinions in whatever form they choose to do so," said ACLU staff attorney Aden Fine. "Facebook has become a means of communication for tens of millions of Americans, and if basic activity on Facebook such as 'liking' were denied First Amendment protection, the free expression of ideas that the First Amendment is meant to safeguard would be severely limited."

THE ACLU HAS ARGUED IN FEDERAL COURT THAT FACEBOOK LIKES ARE FREE SPEECH PROTECTED BY THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

"That a user may use a single mouse click to produce that message that he likes the page instead of typing the same message with several individual key strokes," said ACLU's Ben Wizner, "is of no constitutional significance. ... In this way, it is the Internet equivalent of displaying a political sign in one's front yard, which the Supreme Court has held is substantive speech."

But members of the *Hatred* team ascribe to not one, but several political groups that could be considered controversial. They even go so far as to mark their attendance at events which they sponsor.

If a like is protected free speech in the U.S., what does the social media footprint of the team behind *Hatred* potentially say about them?

NEVER AGAIN

Dr. Rafal Pankowski does not play video games. A trained sociologist and an associate professor at a Collegium Civitas university in Warsaw, he is the co-founder of Nigdy Wiecej, or the Never Again Association. Never Again is a non-governmental organization, comprised mostly of volunteers, formed in Poland in 1996. Its goal is to monitor and document evidence of racism and discrimination in the country and educate against it.

While there is no true corollary to Never Again in the United States, Pankowski says that his group regularly works with Alabama's Southern Poverty Law Center to support and inform their work. Heidi Beirich, the director of the SPLC's intelligence project, told Polygon that Pankowski and his team are "good friends" of her organization.

"We observe and watch events and analyze them," Pankowski told Polygon. "But we also put together a list of hate crimes and incidents of a racist and xenophobic nature that take place in Poland. It is called the *Brown Book*. It's used a lot by international organizations, by Polish organizations and by Polish media as a kind of collection of data on hate crime and discrimination in Poland."



Polygon provided Pankowski with a list of the *Hatred* team's known Facebook affiliations, and asked for his expertise in interpreting those groups through the lens of the *Brown Book*. In order to do so, he first had to educate us on what the social climate is like in Poland today.

Prior to World War II, Poland had a minority, non-Polish population that was somewhere around 33 percent. Today, Pankowski says, that number is closer to 2 percent. Much of that loss is the result of the Holocaust, where millions of Jews, Poles and various minority groups were put to death by Hitler's Reich.

"Modern Poland is a monoculture," Pankowski said. "The vast majority of people in Poland are ethnically Polish, and Catholic in terms of religion. This is not to say that minorities don't exist at all today. They do exist, but it is a very small percentage. ... One of the smallest percentages in Europe, as a matter of fact."

Since joining the European Union in the last decade Poland has had much more open borders. Just 25 years ago, while the country was under communist rule, the

ability to travel was hard to come by. But now Poles are largely free to emigrate throughout Europe at will.

"MODERN POLAND IS A MONOCULTURE"

Likewise, non-Poles are free to settle in Poland. Pankowski sees it as a rebalancing, a return to equilibrium.

"I think the situation is changing in a way for Poland to become multicultural again," Pankowski says. "That would mean a kind of return to normality, because if you look at all of Polish history we were very, very multicultural and very diverse. We lost it in the course of the 20th century, and we are slowly regaining this aspect of diversity and multiculturalism. But it's a process."

Part of that process, Pankowski says, is a rise in racist activity. As immigrants enter the country, it has the effect of panicking some sectors of the white, Catholic majority. Pankowski claims that panic has led to a rise in extreme-right groups, many of which could be seen as leaning heavily towards the fascist ideals that helped to fuel WWII.

NEW MEDIA

The fact that several members of the *Hatred* development team openly like multiple extreme right groups on Facebook shows, to Pankowski at least, that they are supportive of these groups' ideals.

For instance, the CEO of Destructive Creations Jaroslaw Zielinski defended his right to like an organization called Polska Liga Obrony, or the Polish Defense League, on Facebook. He has [previously stated to Polygon](#) that "it's source of an information [about] what is going on right now in the middle-east and Europe (and a lot of evil shit is going on) ... Some things media would not show, nor tell."

Zielinski went on to stress that his like was not a form of endorsement.

"That doesn't sound convincing at all," Pankowski said. He classifies the Polish Defense League as an "anti-muslim organization" with "Islamophobic, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant" tendencies. He emphasized the militant aspect of

the group, saying that they've gone out of their way to intimidate and physically harass non-whites in public spaces.

Facebook likes, Pankowski says, are more than just a way for big corporations to build their brand and create a following. Radical political organizations gather their support there as well, and liking the Polish Defense League fuels their particular brand of hatred in a direct way.

FACEBOOK LIKES ARE JUST ONE WAY FOR RADICAL POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS TO GATHER SUPPORT

"One of the books that I wrote," Pankowski says, "which was my [doctoral] dissertation a few years back, was about racism in pop culture. ... It's possible to have a philosophical discussion about what liking something on Facebook means, but I understand it and I think many people would understand it in this way; it's a form of endorsement. It's a form of association."

Aside from the Polish Defense League, much more troubling to Pankowski were the likes of Marcin Kazmiercz, the FX artist at Destructive Creations. His Facebook profile included even more radical, extreme-right organizations than Zielinski's.

One such example was the Oboz Narodowo-Radykalny, or the ONR. Pankowski says the ONR is a fascist organization banned by the Polish government in the 1934. The group was reformulated in just the past few years, in the south of Poland, by a group of skinheads.



"It became a national organization once again," Pankowski, "and is clearly linked with violence, anti-semitism and with racism. It's name itself translates to 'National Radical Camp.' For a time its Facebook profile was actually taken offline by Facebook... precisely for the promotion of hatred against minorities."

It was associations with groups like ONR that lead many to publicly denounce Kazmiercz and the team at Destructive Creations as neo-Nazis. But Kazmiercz lashed out at his attackers, saying [in a statement on his company's website](#) that he was adamantly against Nazism.

"Nazi Germany is responsible for killing 6 million people in Poland," he wrote on the company website. "Half of them were Jews, half of them Polish. My family suffered many losses during the World War II. Anybody accusing me for being a follower of said ideology should really think twice before doing so and consider reading some books on the topic."

But Never Again's Pankowski says the difference between calling groups like the ONR "neo-Nazi" versus "radical right" versus "neo-fascist" is merely a semantic debate.

NEVER AGAIN SAYS CALLING THESE GROUPS "NEO-NAZI" VS. "RADICAL RIGHT" VS. "NEO-FASCIST" IS A PURELY SEMANTIC DEBATE

"The defense that they make," Pankowski said, "is that 'we are Polish' and that 'Nazism is a German thing. Therefore, we cannot be Nazis. This doesn't make too much sense to me, but it is true in a way. Nazism was invented in Germany back in the day. But if you look at ONR's ideology, in some ways it's not so very different [from Nazism]. But it's Polish."

"Certainly they don't believe in the superiority of the German race. But they are very much hostile to different minorities living in Poland, and they don't believe in a democratic system. So, in some ways, this ideology is similar to Nazism — or fascism, or extreme nationalism. There are different ways you could call it, but I think there is something in common. But they wouldn't want to call themselves neo-Nazis, but I think in some ways they are not so different from the other versions of what you could call fascist or neo-fascist or extreme right ideology in other countries."

AND THE BAND PLAYED ON

From one perspective, the things people like on Facebook do not define them. We are more than a collected series of brand affiliations. Moreover, Facebook likes have multiple uses, and those who employ them have multiple reasons for liking the things they do. But Pankowski stressed again and again that Facebook provides tacit support to these types of radical organizations.

Facebook, of course, has other functions and features. One of them is a calendar, and the ability to schedule yourself for events.

One event that Kazmiercz has said, via Facebook, he would be attending was the Marsz Niepodleglosci, or the Polish Independence Day March.

Pankowski says that the event, which sounds benign to Western ears, is in actuality organized by Młodzież Wszechpolska, or the All-Polish Youth — another anti-semitic, racist youth organization.



A group of marchers identifying with Młodzież Wszechpolska in Warsaw, Independence Day 2013.

As Pankowski tells it, the march, scheduled for Nov. 11 each year, has been co-opted by far-right political groups. It serves as little more than a flash point for violent extremist organizations to intimidate the Polish people. It's become so successful that it has begun to attract groups from outside Poland.

"It's an annual event for the last four or five years which actually gets bigger and bigger each year," Pankowski said. "By now, it's a kind of international gathering of extreme-right and fascist groups. It's not just a Polish event now — it also draws fascists from other countries such as Hungary.

Last month the [International Business Times](#) reported that there were two independence day marches in Warsaw on November 11th. A smaller march, attended by Poland's president, took place without incident while a second march attended by far-right groups erupted in violence.

Poland's capital "was plunged into chaos" by the event IBT wrote. Rubber bullets and water cannons were used to push back "masked nationalist groups" who "launched red flares and hurled stones at police." More than 200 people were arrested.

"Each year it turns violent," Pankowski told Polygon. "Each year some participants attack people they consider their opponents. Last year they actually tried to burn down the Russian embassy. They succeeded only in burning the fence. But they also attacked the Polish police. They also burned a rainbow in Warsaw, a gay rights symbol that sat in the center of Warsaw.

"They just burned it down. It was a spectacular act of violence."

DESTRUCTIVE CREATIONS RESPONDS

Polygon shared Never Again's analysis with the CEO of Destructive Creations, Jaroslaw Zielinski, and offered him the opportunity to respond. He asked that his email response be included in full.

Really Polygon? If you try to get some unprejudiced information, NEVER ask any kind of fanatics. "Nigdy Wiecej" are the far-left activists and are simply just as untrustworthy as far-right activists. Some things they wrote you about these organizations might be even true, I don't know, I'm not a member of any of those and was never interested, especially with my anti-religious philosophy (while all of those organizations are very pro-catholics AFAIK). But their bias can be easily seen by calling patriotic Independence Day March on 11th November "kind of international gathering of extreme-right and fascist groups". This is their false propaganda, it's like you would call american 4th July celebration a fascist tradition. Anyway, how could you believe an organisation who gave a "man of the year" award to the guy who was

consciously infecting women with HIV? (info [here](#)). Again: Really, Polygon? You're so hungry for a sensation to reach this kind of crass source of information? It's trying to be "progressive" or what?

If you want to use any part of this e-mail in your article, you should use the whole thing. I know that press like you really like to put some things out of context.

IT'S JUST A GAME

Without a background in gaming, the founder of Never Again Rafal Pankowski ultimately was unable to comment on the societal impact of the super-violent game *Hatred*. But what did trouble Pankowski, far more than any of the violent images of death and brutality he was showed by Polygon in the game's trailer, was the type of radical associations that the development team at Destructive Creations publicly aligned themselves with through their Facebook profiles.

Critics in the games industry have been so far unable to comment on the quality of the game, as it's still in development and so little is known about it. But Pankowski said that, when it is released, the community has a responsibility to look at it critically and take into account the associations of its creators when they do.

"I THINK THE PROMOTION OF HATRED THROUGH A VIDEO GAME CAN BE TAKEN VERY SERIOUSLY"

"The promotion of hatred through a video game can be taken very seriously," Pankowski said. "Gaming is part of our culture, it's part of our socialization. I wouldn't take *Hatred* lightly at all. And, in a way, I think I would be concerned. I would be worried about such products."

"Our expertise lies in regards to government," ACLU-IL's Ed Yohnka told Polygon. "What you wouldn't want is the government shutting down [Steam] because it was connected to somebody, or it was hosting material from people that were outside of the political mainstream. I think a private entity has every right to decide whether or not they want to host such material, and then certainly once it's hosted I think individuals have every capacity and every right to decide whether or not they want to look at that material."

"YOU WOULDN'T WANT THE GOVERNMENT SHUTTING DOWN [STEAM] BECAUSE OF [THIS GAME]"

Today the *Hatred* says that their title sits atop the Steam Greenlight charts, reinstated by the stroke of a pen made not by a sitting U.S. judge but by Gabe Newell. Barring any other unforeseen actions by Valve, a corporate entity operating in the private sector, the game will be published. Then it will be up to consumers, and critics, to participate as they see fit.

Correction: Polygon's intent by referencing past ACLU litigation was not to imply that they would in any way intervene on Valve's decision to host a game on Greenlight. Quite the contrary, it was merely an assertion of a point of reference. The private sector is not required to be bound by the First Amendment, and can sell or refuse to sell any game they like.