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# Horny for Ghost: The Sexualized Remediation of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* on TikTok

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**Abstract**

After the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* in November 2022, a new, and rather unexpected, following of women and queer fans on TikTok emerged. Centering on the character Simon "Ghost" Riley, they latched onto the tall, muscular, and masked soldier with soulful eyes. Through fannish creations on TikTok, the game's characters and world was de- and re-constructed as a playful space for romantic and sexual imaginings that challenge the cis-het military masculinity of the series. Based on a 6-month netnography, the article explores the fan remediation of *Call of Duty* in negotiation with TikTok's affordances. We analyze how new fans positioned themselves against traditional fans through weaponization of fangirl practices, how game mechanics were used in unusual ways to generate audiovisual material, and how some of the complex fan-industry relationships manifested as a response to this unexpected fandom.

**Keywords**

fandom, remediation, TikTok, gender, games, video, fan art

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## Introduction: Reinterpreting Ghost

The American first-person shooter (FPS) series *Call of Duty* (*CoD*) is one of the most successful game franchises of all time. It has also long been understood as a vestige of traditional masculinity in game culture and symbolic of male dominance in games. With its military context and antagonistic design, it is a "perfect 'proving ground' for hegemonizing performances of masculinity" (Healey, 2016). However, this interpretation has been challenged following the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2022) in November 2022, when one of the game's main characters became the centerpiece of women and queer-driven fandom on TikTok. In a matter of days, a new fandom had been established and the game website Kotaku reported that the space had "been invaded by thirsty TikTokers who [were] going absolutely feral for Simon 'Ghost' Riley" (Mercante, 2022). Lieutenant Simon "Ghost" Riley was no longer only a British special forces operator and a member of Task Force 141 in *CoD*, known for the skull-patterned balaclava he never took off, but also a special favorite among fans on TikTok.

This new fandom approached the game with other purposes in mind than mastery, skill, and competition, focusing instead on the game's characters and narrative. In contrast to many previous clashes between male and female gamers, where equality and fairness of representation and participation had been key topics (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015), this fandom showed unabashed enjoyment in romantic and sexual reimagining of the game characters and their relationships. The empowered stance was what initially drew us to this fandom. As sexual narratives, esthetics, and communities online—especially in relation to digital games—are often dominated by cisgender, straight men, it is important to study alternative and oppositional ways in which sexual desire is expressed and mediated with and around games. The *Witcher* series (Kowert, 2023), the *Mass Effect* franchise (Sihvonen, 2020) and the recent success of *Baldur's Gate 3* (Brierley-Beare, 2024) are other contemporary examples of how popular games are appropriated by women and queer-led fandoms, both building upon and subverting the original text to gain new delights and pleasures. By researching such fandoms, we gain insight into the new ways games are used to express emotions, build communities, and tell stories about fictional game worlds—as well as people's own lived environments.

In this article, we explore how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*, and specifically the character of Ghost, are remediated through the creation and sharing of sexualized fan content on TikTok. The aim of this analysis is to understand how Ghost is being reappropriated for the purpose of eliciting romantic feelings and sexual arousal among the less likely fans of the game. We examine Ghost's reappropriation in the context of persistent male gendering of games and game communities, as well as how TikTok's affordances shape engagements with the game, and which kinds of shifts in fannish expression can be observed. This sociotechnical approach, moving between the affordances of the technology and the meanings and practices of the users (Berker et al., 2006),

allows us to explain the specific ways the fandom has emerged, how it relates to the original game(s), and how it shapes the *CoD* legacy.

Ghost's thirsty following on TikTok is a somewhat anomalous phenomenon in game culture, as games themselves have been observed to avoid explicitly sexual content (Krzywinska, 2012). However, gamer fans have a long and proud history of doing oppositional readings to make room for excluded genders and identities as well as sexual interactions (Coppa, 2008; Lothian et al., 2007; Shaw, 2015). Creative fan practices are often transformative in that they reorient the focus of the original media text or key characters to include marginal identities and queer interactions, often repurposing various media technologies in the process. Through fan fiction, fan art, machinima, and cosplay fans have expanded on the limited representations that have been available through games (e.g., Bury, 2005; Cherry, 2016; Crawford & Hancock, 2019; Hodges & Richmond, 2011; Petersen, 2022). The remediation of Ghost includes many of the above-mentioned established fan practices, but also contains several new forms and expressions due to the affordances, infrastructure, and platform politics of TikTok that emphasize audiovisual content creation, algorithmic curation, and heavy moderation on sexual content.

This study is based on a netnographic analysis of fan practices on TikTok between November 2022 and June 2023 exploring how *Call of Duty* is reappropriated by "new fans," and how a quintessential FPS gets translated into short-form videos for TikTok. To elucidate this process, the paper employs the theoretical lense of remediation. Introduced by media theorists Bolter and Grusin (2000), remediation addresses the double logic of "new media" (such as TikTok here) simultaneously striving for immediacy and hypermediacy, promising a live, unmediated experience and representation of a multitude of media as media at the same time. Central in our exploration is the user-oriented bottom-up perspective, where the remediation happens through collective processes of poaching (Jenkins, 2012) of the original game content, and how new and unintended forms of use and meaning emerge.

The analysis will center on three topics: (a) *Weaponization of fangirl practices*, based on how fans frame the sexualization (of Ghost) as an act of opposition to, and even revenge for, the sexualization of female game characters in the past; (b) *Remediation for arousal*, which explores how elements of the game text (such as dialogue, actions, and cutscenes) are used in fan videos for the purpose of titillation; and finally, (c) *Complexities of fan-industry relations*, which looks at how even the smallest examples of juicy official content are met with enthusiasm, while fangirls also need to settle for invisibility in the eyes of the game's PR machinery. Together, the analysis will provide insights into how game fandom is changing and evolving in tandem with new platforms and communities. As such, the findings should be of relevance to both game and fandom scholars as well as game industry professionals who want to understand how fans negotiate, deconstruct, and reconstruct game-related content on new platforms such as TikTok.

## *Call of Duty* as a Vestige of Masculinity in Games

Through its evolution in the past twenty years, *CoD* has been a key contributor in the development of the FPS genre, shaped the landscape of multiplayer gaming, and become a verifiable cultural phenomenon in its own right. Originally developed in the US by Infinity Ward and published by Activision, the first game in the series debuted for the PC in 2003. With over 400 million copies sold, the franchise is a notable, worldwide success and new games in the series are developed by multiple studios for annual releases on most major gaming platforms. The franchise's success depends on several factors. However, it can be explained in part by managing to simultaneously appeal to the general public and the niche market of hard-core gamers. This is achieved by packing the games' narratives and characters full of ambiguity, and by focusing on gameplay that is easy to pick up but hard to master (see Lenoir & Caldwell, 2018, pp. 105–106). Overall, the cultural significance of *CoD* cannot be understated as it extends to other media as well, with film adaptations, comic books, toys, and merchandise contributing to its presence in popular culture (Garrelts & Kapell, 2018).

Like most commercial war games, *CoD* aims to produce and commodify the affect of engaging in "epically real" game experiences. This is achieved primarily through detailed representations of military technologies and weaponry instead of depicting the realistic process of being a soldier (Lenoir & Caldwell, 2018, p. 91). Although the narrative framings of *CoD* games are fictional, there are important ideological links drawn from real world politics and events (Cayatte, 2018). Initially set in World War II, the franchise has since expanded to cover various historical periods, modern warfare scenarios, and even futuristic settings. The release of *Modern Warfare II* (2022) is the 19$^{th}$ installation in the series, and continues the franchise's trend away from depictions of ordinary soldiers in historical battles, and instead portrays elite soldiers in a near future fictional wars that draw on contemporary conflicts. In the Modern Warfare series, emphasis is put on military might through technology and depictions of "all-but-invulnerable, technology-enabled, hypermasculine, soldiers" (Maclean, 2018, p. 143).

This shift can also be seen in the character of Ghost. He was first introduced in the sixth main *CoD* game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) as the major protagonist, and he figures in several consecutive releases. His popularity and importance to the series is reflected in him being the protagonist also in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* graphic novel *Modern Warfare 2: Ghost*. For the release of the 2022 version, Ghost was given new looks: he appeared taller, more muscular, and with more equipment. The character is still portrayed as a highly capable soldier with a mask, but even the mask was redesigned from a simple black balaclava with a skull pattern to a face covering that looks like a human skull. His redesign makes him less realistic, and his appearance less human and more monstrous—with the exception of soulful and emotional eyes. He has never been unmasked in the *CoD* legacy, leaving it up to the audience to imagine what he looks like. This flexibility in canon, combined

with his monstrous physical features and pretty eyes, were characteristics that his new fans on TikTok seemed to specifically latch onto.

The *CoD* series promotes a particular interpretation of masculinity in a military context and is undeniably popular with male gamers. *CoD* also features a multiplayer component that emphasizes teamwork between characters, allowing its male players to bond and reaffirm their friendships in online spaces (see Bos, 2018). The male following of the series has been the topic of some academic studies (Blackburn, 2018; Garrelts & Kapell, 2018; Healey, 2016), but there are also studies of fan practices and communities related to the game that challenge the series' male dominance (MacCallum-Stewart, 2018; Meades, 2013; Tompkins, 2018; Tompkins & Guajardo, 2024). However, as both the franchise and media used by fans evolve, new research efforts are required to map out these new kinds of fandoms. In this article, we want to highlight how TikTok is becoming a key site for fandom, with different affordances for the remediation, reappropriation, and remix of cultural artifacts than before. A focus on how a game's meaning is created rather than inherent (Malaby, 2007), also entails paying special attention to signifying practices that emerge against the carefully crafted plans of game developers and production teams.

## Fandom and Game Cultures as Transformative

Fan communities have a long and noteworthy history of using digital technologies in innovative ways (Bury, 2016; Geraghty et al., 2022; Lanier & Fowler, 2013). This makes fandom a well-suited site of research to understand emergent user communities, creativity, and engagements with media content, including games. As the world's leading short-form video platform with well over 1 billion users, TikTok is also becoming a hub for fan communities and creators. The platform's material affordances include algorithmically generated feeds, memetic organization, and multimodal communication that diverge from logics that structure other popular platforms. As TikTok is a highly affect-driven and emotion-oriented platform (Abidin, 2020; Schellewald, 2023) that allows for 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2016) to emerge, it is also an opportunity to study how emotions are mediated and materialized among its userbase, and what kind of work is involved in eliciting and sharing affective responses within communities.

Ghost fandom draws heavily from established fan practices such as *shipping* (imagining and fabricating relationships between) fictional characters, and expressing these imaginary relationships through fan art, fan fiction, and fan edits (fanmade videos based on remixing published content). In the world of *CoD*, the overtly masculine stories and representations require fans to either insert female characters to challenge the patriarchal values on display, or to pair male characters together in romantic relationships. The remediation of *CoD* in much of the TikTok fandom is thus inherently *queer* (as is *CoD*-inspired fan fiction in general, see Tompkins, 2018). We refer to this new fandom as women and queer-driven, and treat it as separate to the traditional (primarily) male fandom of *CoD*. This view is supported by Tompkins & Guajardo's

study (2024) on how the algorithmic curation on TikTok allows different fandoms to exist side by side. While the women and queer-driven fandom is currently rather large and popular, and has received some coverage in game media venues like Kotaku (Mercante, 2022) and PCGamer (Mellor, 2022), it still remains a subcultural phenomenon that lives in the shadows—reflecting also the fact that TikTok is currently vilified and dismissed in public discourse (e.g., Miao et al., 2023; Patnaik & Litan, 2023). As these kinds of marginal cultures transform and migrate easily, research is urgently needed to map and document the counter publics we are witnessing at the moment.

A key concept through which we study *CoD* fans' creative practices is *remediation*. Remediation in fan studies refers to the processes by which fans engage with and reinterpret existing media content within their own inventive frameworks (Jenkins, 1992). These include the creation and sharing of fan fiction, fan art, videos, and music. Drawing upon Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept (2000), which originally referred to the ways new media forms incorporate and refashion older media, remediation in fan studies refers to the appropriation, reworking, and repurposing of existing media texts to cater to fannish motivations (e.g., Lanier & Fowler, 2013). For example, fan fiction writers may reinterpret existing storylines and reimagine the relationships between characters from friendship to lovers, while fan artists may create alternative visual representations of their favorite characters for more inclusive representation.

In the context of digital games, remediation emphasizes fans' agency in deciphering what is meaningful and important in the media text. For instance, fans can play a game solely to obtain footage of game characters or interactions to be used in fan creations afterwards. In this sense, fans' own media uses and experiences are shaped by the alternative motivations of remediation. Furthermore, since we are interested in audiovisual fan-produced content in this article, it is vital we consider the *affordances* of online platforms for sharing and interacting with, as well as preparing and editing video-based material. Overall, remediation in fan studies offers insights into the dynamic relationship between media texts and their audiences or users, highlighting the ways fans actively contribute to the ongoing circulation and reinterpretation of popular culture in unexpected ways.

## Data Collection and Methodology: Following the Trace of Ghost on the FYP

The primary method for this project is digital ethnography (Boellstorff, 2008) or "netnography" (Kozinets et al., 2014) on TikTok. In order to discuss the distinctive features of data collected from online communities, (n)etnography provides techniques for the cultural analysis and rich, thick descriptions through researcher's grounded interpretations (Kozinets et al., 2014). By archiving (using the TikTok favorite function) all TikToks about Ghost the algorithm served up on the researcher's FYP (or *for you page*, the algorithmically curated personalized feed) on a 6-month period (1 November 2022 to 1 June 2023), a "trace" was created of the ethnographer's journey which was then used to revisit and analytically re-engage with the observed content.

Using the researcher's FYP in this way has both advantages and drawbacks. The main drawback is the extremely personalized nature of the FYP, and the principle of the feed being closely linked to how TikTok understands the researcher's interests and preferences based on their previous use of the platform and their network within. However, since the FYP will always be personalized and tailored to the interests of the user, the problem of assessing the relationship between content on an individual FYP and the "whole" TikTok persists regardless of whether data collection is done with a dedicated research account or not. In this sense, any ethnography on TikTok will largely be an autoethnographic study where the researcher's experiences are subject to analysis, as each FYP will be unique. On the other hand, an advantage is a more organic form of TikTok use that provides insight into both how the algorithm attempts to link "Ghost content" to existing interests, as well as important experiences, like feeling embarrassed when using TikTok in public as the FYP has been filled with images of oiled up, shirtless military men.

The project is registered with SIKT Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (ref. nr. 387413) to ensure ethical and safe storage of personal data compliant with GDPR. Participants who are cited in the paper have either consented to have their work used or appear through examples that are lifted from creators with more than 100,000 followers and thus considered highly visible. As consent from all observed creators was not possible to obtain, to minimize harm we removed any content whose creator we suspected to be under 18 or under influence, or that had been unpublished at a later point.

The analytical categories we build upon here were derived using an abductive approach (Reichertz, 2007), where we moved between literature (game studies), theory (remediation), and data (ethnography and archived TikToks). The categories evolved from discussions between the authors about the meanings and practices that were created and circulated on the platform, and after deciding on the categories, relevant TikToks were selected from the data for closer analysis. In this sense, the categories were selected specifically to highlight the interrelationship between the game (*CoD*), the users (fans), and the platform (TikTok), and therefore do not necessarily reflect the main types of content posted in the Ghost fandom. There are, for example, a considerable amount of TikToks from the nethnography that are Ghost cosplayers making silly sketches and thirst traps (videos specifically designed to elicit lust) that are only briefly mentioned in this study.

We have approached our data through three categories. Our first analytical category on *gendered discourses* reflects the initial research interest of how a hypermasculine game is appropriated and challenged by a large group of female and queer fans. The first category reflects a discourse present in the early days of Ghost fandom (October–December 2022) that set a tone and precedent but disappeared quickly. The second category on *remediation* of game content was selected to specifically explore how the game was being played to obtain audiovisual content from, and how various game elements were being used to create TikTok videos. The remediated content from the second category is present throughout the observation period, but

grows smaller during the ethnography in favor of the above-mentioned cosplayers. The third and final category, *fan-industry relations*, addresses how the production of *CoD* has reacted to the new fandom through promotional material and voice actors. These categories have emerged from close encounters with the collected TikTok data and have been chosen to elucidate shifts in fannish engagement with games, with special attention to how new game fandoms are reshaping game cultures while being afforded by the platforms they inhabit.

## Sexualization as Opposition: Weaponization of Fangirl Practices

Our first category of analysis deals with the "re-gendering" of *Call of Duty* through fan practices, and asks specifically how the Ghost fandom positions itself against earlier *CoD* fans and a wider discourse about games and gender. The point of interest is how fans frame the sexualization (of Ghost) as an act of opposition to, and even revenge for, the sexualization of female game characters in the past, and how this establishes a collective identity for the fandom of unapologetic fun where fangirl practices are "weaponized."

The gendering of games and game communities as masculine has been a topic of interest at least since the 1990s, and while much progress has been made in recognizing female gamers, both as designers and players, the masculine gendering of games and gaming culture persists (Kafai et al., 2016; Paaßen et al., 2017). More recently, the harassment of women gamers has been highlighted (Cote, 2017; Wong & Ratan, 2024), also in game-adjacent spaces like streaming on Twitch where female streamers are derogatorily referred to as "titty streamers" to delegitimize their role and contribution (Ruberg et al., 2019). Lack of sexual agency for female characters and players remains an issue in game culture, and in order to unravel that, we need to pay attention to the ways avatars are interpreted to understand the multiple ways game players make sense of gender (Perry, 2022).

While the initial media reports on this new fandom indicated there was a clash between longtime and new fans of the game, Tompkins and Guajardo (2024) showed that due to the algorithmic curation of content, new and old fandoms could exist simultaneously in separate spaces on TikTok. Furthermore, they concluded that popular videos were marked by positive and celebratory comments rather than gatekeeping (ibid.). Nonetheless, the fact that *CoD* is perceived as a bastion of military masculinity is an important context in the inception of the fandom we are studying here, and indeed, in our data there were some examples of pushback from longtime fans. The response from the new fans was to compare the sexualization of Ghost with how female game characters had been sexualized in the past. In these kinds of TikTok videos, there was an appeal to justice and fairness where creators highlighted double standards and pointed to poor treatment of female characters and players. Their plea mirrors much of academic discourse on games and gender, where unequal outcomes are identified and a call for fairer representation and participation is presented as a solution.

However, a far bolder way of addressing criticism from longtime, male-presenting fans also emerged where fangirl practices were *weaponized* to reject and deter criticism. In these videos, there was no appeal to a greater good, or a call for equal representation or participation. Instead, content creators responded to criticism by *further* sexualizing and feminizing Ghost. Following a video showing a drawing of Ghost and John "Soap" MacTavish, another key *CoD* character, in a loving embrace, someone commented that it was "disrespectful" to portray Ghost in this manner. The original creator then responded by making a new video where they filmed themself adding more eyelashes to Ghost's character and asking, "is this better please let me know" (see Figure 1).

Similarly, @omarsbigsister received displeased comments from male fans and responded by threatening to draw Ghost "lactating and tag you" (see Figure 1). In this comment, she invoked the 'mpreg trope' (male pregnancy) common in homoerotic fan fiction. In both examples, the creators were using transgressive aspects of shipping fandom and fangirl practices as a counterattack. Instead of arguing for the right to be recognized as legitimate *CoD* and Ghost fans, these creators responded to such aggression by feminizing, sexualizing, and queering Ghost further and threatening to amplify it if the criticism wouldn't stop. These cases exemplify how Ghost fans mobilize the toxic geek masculinity ideals that are desperately heteronormative and overly dismissive of anything feminine (see Salter & Blodgett, 2017), to respond to attacks and deter further comments.

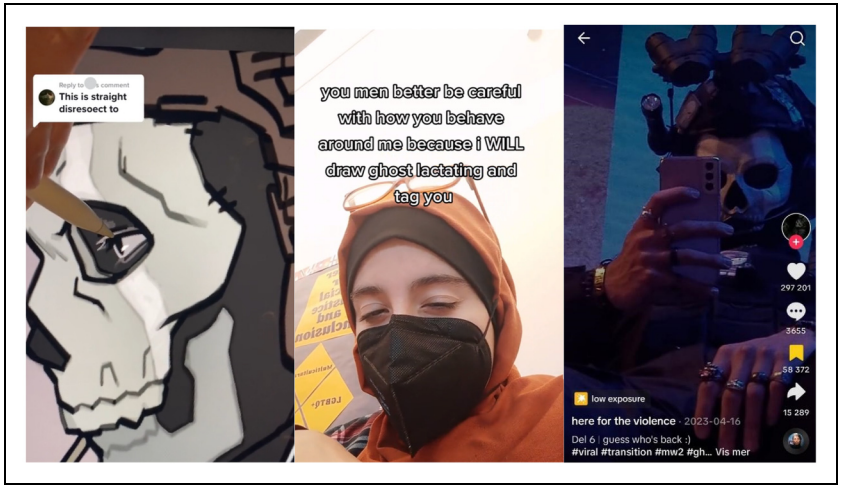


**Figure 1.** Examples of Ghost reimagined. Left: A creator responds to a comment about how their Ghost/Soap fan art is disrespectful by adding more eyelashes. Middle: @omarsbigsister threatens to draw Ghost lactating and tag commenter in the reimagining of Ghost as romantically involved with Soap. Right: A Ghost cosplayer staring into the camera to entice the audience in the reimagining of Ghost as an object of sexual desire.

As is common in fandom, the characters in *CoD* are seen as malleable and flexible, available to be treated in any way the fans want. Many renderings of Ghost feature him being "babygirlified", where he is drawn with cat ears, in French maid outfits, or as a cute cheebi with a small body and a large head with childlike features. This reimagining of Ghost can be seen as a power move where the large, muscular, and imposing figure of Ghost is rendered small, feminine, and soft. In contrast, Ghost is also often portrayed as strong and masculine, and in these cases fans highlight physical aspects they find sexually appealing: the mask, his eyes, his hands, and his backside. Through careful choice of camera angles, editing, and added music (see Figure 1; more about this in next section), Ghost is clearly positioned as an object of sexual and romantic desire rather than a masculine ideal to identify with. Across content, regardless of their genre or source material, TikToks are clearly framed from the perspective of women and queer fans, for the enjoyment of other women and queer fans.

The fannish remediation of Ghost the game character reconfigures him from a trained Task Force 141 killer into a desirable partner by giving the women and queer audience sexual agency within the game universe. For example, our data contains several examples of TikToks of a creator dancing with glee after their boyfriend agrees to dress up as Ghost, seen as "winning" as they get to fulfill their (sexual) fantasies. The way Ghost is sexualized through the fangirl gaze is particularly visible in the considerable number of (mostly male) cosplayers dressing up as Ghost, for the express purpose of eliciting sexual interest from the women and queer fans on TikTok. These cosplayers make videos where they, for example, sit broad-legged on a bed saying lines like "That's a good girl" in a deep voice (dominant), or alternately tied up and on their knees, whimpering up at the camera (submissive). Across these TikToks, Ghost is not only remediated, but also reimagined as a pastiche of different ideals—both masculine and feminine, both submissive and dominant, both caring and violent, often at the same time.

In fannish remediations, Ghost is portrayed as a stoic and dangerous man with a beautiful (hidden) face and a sensitive soul. This is similar to how militarized masculinity in fiction directed at female audiences is constructed through "steely exterior but gentle internally," producing desirable romantic partners (Yu Xian Tan, 2024). Tompkins' (2018) study of *Call of Duty* fan fiction demonstrates how fans couple military masculinity "with emotional displays and vulnerabilities not depicted in the games" (p. 191) in order to tell stories about romantic and sexual relationships. How Ghost is portrayed in canon (officially produced material) is, however, not completely disregarded. He is fairly consistently portrayed wearing his iconic skull mask, as a highly skilled and respected soldier, and as being severely traumatized from a horrible upbringing and/or due to his work in the military. However, the fandom is accepting of different, and often conflicting, portrayals of the character, as staying true to the source material is less important than the creations it inspires.

The fandom, through its unapologetic reimaginings of Ghost, provides an alternative identity for CoD gamers and fans that is not based on adhering to hypermasculine ideals, but rather on the attachment they feel to individual characters, the remediations,

and the fandom itself. This is well exemplified in a TikTok video by @funkyfrogbait about choosing characters in CoD, where she explains how it is not about selecting the character that best fits her skills or play style, but rather which character makes her "the most horny." The interest in Ghost and the CoD universe is primarily relational, with an emphasis on both romantic and sexual aspects of relationships between characters, and between characters and audiences. Together, these TikToks establish the Ghost fandom as a valid, yet entirely separate from the traditional CoD fandom. In this sense, we see fangirl logic replacing gaming logic by shifting interest from actual gameplay into the fictional world, and repurposing esthetics and characters from the game to represent fans' own motivations. The fangirl logic represents a different discourse regarding games and gender, where unapologetic fun and counteraggression take precedence over calls for fairness or justice. We are witnessing a TikTok fan culture that turns traditional ways of gendering of games sideways and upside down.

## Remediation for Arousal: Gameplay as Audiovisual Building Blocks for the Fangirl Gaze

The second category of analysis concerns the way audiovisual content from a war-themed action game is remediated into short videos meant to elicit arousal, and how this process relies on unusual engagement patterns with the *CoD* game mechanics. In this oppositional form of play and creation, *CoD* fans are drawing on practices established in both game culture (machinima) and fan culture (vidding) in order to create emotionally engaging content that presents Ghost and the other characters of *CoD* as desirable romantic and sexual partners.

Making videos using game mechanics is not new. Machinima are videos made by manipulating video game graphics, primarily by using the game environment as a setting and making a recording of the events playing on the screen. Staple genres of machinima consist of videos that depict skill (like speedruns), give gameplay tips or explain strategies, and videos where the gameworld is used as a stage on which avatars play out storylines (Lowood, 2006; Wenz, 2021). Machinima was hailed as the new, exciting user-generated format in the early 2000s, but it did not live up to the hype, and instead livestreaming on platforms like Twitch became the main format for user-created video content based on gameplay. In the *CoD* fandom, we see a return to machinima as a format, as fans play the game, not for the gameplay itself, but to make screen recordings during gameplay that can be remixed into videos. The renewed relevance of machinima should be understood as a response to the increased importance of the short video format that comes with the popularity of TikTok. Another important factor is the increased accessibility and ease of use of video editing tools offered by the TikTok app and CapCut editing software (both owned by ByteDance).

Given that the fandom's interest is primarily in the fictional world and characters, not necessarily in the gameplay itself, it is not surprising that much of the audiovisual material being remixed for TikToks is lifted from the story-based part of the game

instead of the online PvP parts, either focusing on individual characters like Ghost or on pairings like Ghost/Soap. When focusing on individual characters, TikToks are put together from several scenes (sometimes in combination with fan art or other fan-made content such as cosplay) where the character looks desirable (according to the creator). As is common in shipping, fans of *CoD* also reinterpret certain scenes of affection and connection—or of just existing side by side—as characters' expressions of sexual and/or romantic desire. For example, Ghost's line to Soap, "We're teammates. Friendship's not in the field manual, Johnny", is interpreted by the fans as Ghost repressing his feelings toward Soap and brushing away his advances. Such transformative practices where the original text is reinterpreted and reimagined to bring forward queer love stories are common in fandom and a staple of fan fiction (Lothian et al., 2007; Tosenberger, 2008). In this sense, the remediation of Ghost is a continuation of well-established ways of engaging with media content for fannish purposes, while at the same time the audiovisual nature of content, the speed it is produced, and the ways it is distributed are new due to how TikTok affords the creation, curation, and sharing of fan content.

In the remediations of *CoD* we have studied, there are very few instances of discourse about actual gameplay, such as how it feels to play, how to solve in-game challenges, or whether the creator is winning or losing the game. Instead, the game is treated as a resource that can be harvested for building blocks of video, image, sound, and narrative to be remixed for new meanings and purposes. In our dataset, there are examples of creators who establish themselves as longtime players of *Call of Duty*, but also creators who state that they couldn't care less about the game as they are only there for the fandom. Both are accepted and validated as legitimate forms of participation within the community, and thus do not adhere to the norms of gaming fandom where playing the game, and being good at it, are seen as necessary precursors for participating in the game discourse (Paul, 2018).

To generate audiovisual content that can be turned into short videos, specific cutscenes, interactions, and dialogue exchanges are recorded while playing and remixed later for new purposes. In this process, fans and players reinterpret key game mechanics. For example, they use the rifle scope to get a close-up view of Ghost's eyes or thick thighs (generally seen as some of his most attractive attributes) or make the avatar crouch, so the camera can be panned up to get a close-up of Ghost's crotch (see Figure 2). Many edits use the character selection screen where avatars pose and look directly at the camera/audience, which suits the sexualized esthetic and conventions of TikTok where eye contact with the spectator is greatly appreciated. In both cases, fans take advantage of how games allow for control over camera angles and zoom to generate sexualized audiovisual content of the *CoD* characters, by materializing an alternative to the male gaze through which these characters have been created by their designers and the game's developers.

In addition to focusing on specific body parts and poses of characters, content creators use sexually suggestive and explicit music in order to remediate scenes and dialogue from *CoD* as erotic. Gameplay footage is edited to match the beats of popular hit


**Figure 2.** Two examples of the fangirl gaze, where camera angle and rifle scope are used to focus on Ghost's crotch and behind to generate sexualized audiovisual building blocks from gameplay to be edited into TikToks later.

songs or specific phrases in their lyrics to give new meanings to the visual content. This is a continuation of a long and established practice of fannish vidding, where fans remix source material with their own selected music to give it new meanings. As Coppa (2008, para 1.1) explains, vidding is a form of "grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music" where "fannish vidders use music in order to comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories." This is also the case with the *CoD* machinima, where TikToks are often set to songs with explicit sexual affects and lyrics. Some examples of these on-the-nose lyrics are; "Simon says, spread open yo' legs" (a reference to Ghost's name, Simon Riley), and "I wanna see some ass shakin', dick slingin'…" being used in a video edit of scenes of Ghost stepping in and out of cars and crouching for cover to make a collage of videos showing his behind.

Communicating these kinds of new meanings through music and lyrics is also a consequence of the platform's ban on sexual content that is far stricter about speech and text than song lyrics accompanying videos. As content is grouped on the platform, in part, through sound (Zulli & Zulli, 2022), these soundbites are not just resignifying it, they are also communicating to both the algorithm and the intended audience what kind of content it is—thus ensuring that *CoD* fangirl content is separated from other *CoD*-related content.

To conclude, the fans of Ghost and *CoD* are combining machinima and vidding practices to create short-form videos that remediate and resignify both *CoD*

gameplay and the game characters in new and inventive ways. The goal of these TikTokers is not to complete a campaign or win a match, but to use the game as source material for audiovisual building blocks for their remixes. This return to machinima should be understood as a reflection of TikTok as a native video platform, where audiovisual content is needed in order to make videos, and where the platform makes the creation and distribution of fan videos a simple feat through dedicated editing apps and algorithmic curation. The use of music and sound is equally important, as the innovative remixing of audio and video allows for titillating TikToks that escape the moderation and ultimate banning of sexual content on the platform.

## Complexities of Fan-Industry Relations: Fandom Working For and Against the Production

In this third and final category, we address how the new *CoD* fandom fits in the framing of the fan-industry relationship that is often thought of as the sore point in fan studies (e.g., Busse, 2015; Stanfill, 2019). We are particularly interested in how the sexualized remediation of Ghost and other characters from *CoD* have caught the attention of the game franchise's producers, with some promotional material seemingly catering to this new audience. However, the response from producers appears ambiguous, too, as the new fans are not addressed directly through official accounts, but primarily through the private account of voice actor Neil Ellice (@Neil_Ellice on TikTok) who is voicing John "Soap" MacTavish in *CoD MWII*.

As we showed in the earlier sections, obtaining in-game footage to be used for titillating fan videos from *CoD* requires some effort and creativity on the part of the fans and players of the game. Therefore, it is no surprise that any officially released material that seems to cater to these fannish purposes is met with exuberant enthusiasm. An example of such a release was the Christmas ad for the *CoD* mobile game titled *Call of Duty®: Mobile—Happy Holidays 2022*. In the ad, we see different game characters getting ready for holiday celebrations in a house decked out in Christmas decorations, cut with action scenes from the game. The characters do Christmas-themed things such as putting on cosy socks or drinking hot chocolate. Ghost, however, is portrayed sitting on the floor wearing a Santa hat, grinding on a thigh roller. Unsurprisingly, Ghost grinding back and forth on the floor quickly became a clip that was used in horny fan edits and was understood by the fandom as a response to them specifically, as it portrayed Ghost in an atypically sexual and playful manner. At the time of its release, on the basis of fan response, it felt like an acceptance of the new fandom for many. However, no other examples of such displays of Ghost can be found in later promotional material—nor do official *CoD* accounts on social media appear to engage with and promote the remediated versions of Ghost made by the new fandom.

Nevertheless, the new women and queer-led fandom acquired an unlikely ally in the production team, voice actor Neil Ellice, who through his private account began

interacting with them directly. On his TikTok account, Ellice has 13 videos (per May 2024), the first one featuring him joining TikTok to see "what the fuss is about" and staring wide-eyed into the camera as a response to the many sexualized edits about *CoD* he is witnessing. The actor's visible reaction on screen, combined with him liking and responding to fan edits, were interpreted by the fandom as some kind of recognition from the producers. Of the 13 videos he has posted, 10 are clearly made by Ellice himself, showing behind-the-scenes material, clips of him in other shows, and him joking about Soap being Scottish. However, the last three videos are notably different. In these videos, "Soap's Sleepy Story Time", "Soap's Naughty and Nice Quiz," and "Soap's Battle Royale Checklist", the actor is in character (as Soap), in full costume, and working off a script. These three videos are professionally produced and edited, including sets and lighting. Consequently, they appear—and were interpreted by fans—as official Activision PR material, even if they were not posted on the official *CoD* account.

In all three videos, Soap is portrayed as playful, silly, flirtatious, and sexually suggestive—in brief, he appears to be doing 'fanservice' (intentionally added material to please the audience). This is best exemplified in "Battle Royale Checklist", which shows Neil Ellice/Soap sitting in full uniform in a bubble bath discussing topics like fraternizing with battle buddies, and how dehydration means you can't cry at your favorite romantic comedy. The video is clearly catering to a female and/or queer audience, as joking about being attracted to your fellow soldiers and watching romantic movies are at odds with the cis-het military masculinity that is usually on display in *CoD* material. A notable scene in the video is towards the end, where Soap stands up, but the camera lingers on his crotch and only moves up when he gestures to the camera to "look up." In that shot, the sexualizing fangirl gaze, of which there are many examples in various re-edits of the game, is astonishingly mirrored and reproduced. The fangirl perspective on *CoD* is thus not only acknowledged through content, but also via esthetic choices.

The "Battle Royale Checklist" video, in particular, is used in many fan edits and reaction videos typical to TikTok. As mentioned before, fans eagerly "poach" on any kind of audiovisual material featuring their favorite characters to play around with that affords sexual and romantic readings. In Figure 3, we see creator Keegan Riley (@commanderstressed) stitching @Neil_ellice's video and adding a scene where he screams into the pillow while wearing the iconic Ghost headpiece. Such reaction videos are a way to promote the original content and to add to it by showing the strong emotions the audience experiences at the release of such a video. After its release, our FYP was filled with videos showing similar reactions and edits. Given the popular status of Neil Ellice as a voice actor within the fandom, it came as a great shock and disappointment when his character, Soap, was killed in *Modern Warfare III* released in 2023. And while the other voice actors of *CoD* also do regular media appearances and fan interactions that get remediated onto TikTok, no other voice actor has taken on a similar role or made similar content.

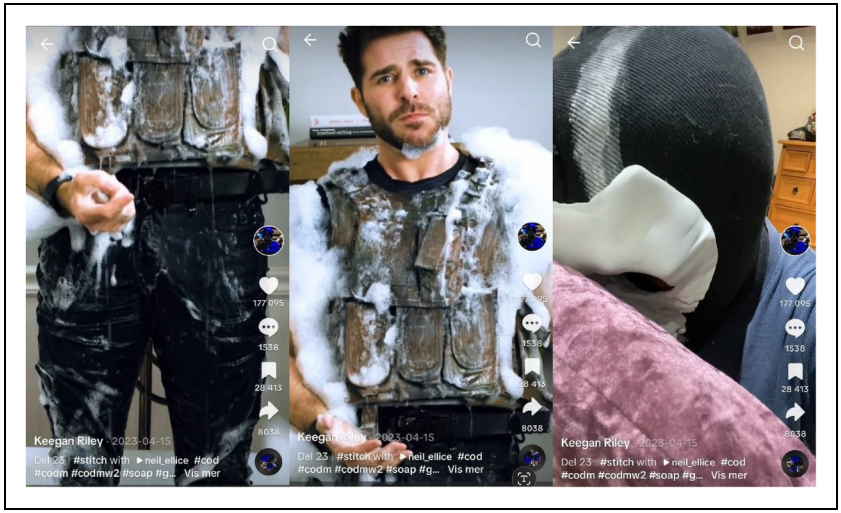


**Figure 3.** Creator @commanderstressed (Keegan Riley) responds to @neil_ellice's TikTok by stitching the original video and adding a scene where he is screaming into a pillow, conveying overwhelming emotions.

Overall, the response from the *CoD* production to the new fandom appears ambivalent. Initially, the Christmas ad and the unofficial promotion materials with Neil Ellice gave the impression that the production was welcoming toward the new fans and subversive readings of the game. However, there is clear indication that female and queer fans have not been considered a priority after all. For instance, Activision's official social media accounts have only boosted fan content that has been reproducing the idealized military masculinity the game is famous for. After witnessing the continuing legitimization of fans adhering to the hegemonic masculinity ideals of *CoD* and promoting the games through traditional viewpoints, we have to conclude that the female and queer fandom of *CoD* still remains oppositional and 'unruly' in relation to the source material and the official PR machinery that gladly highlights some aspects of the game, while obscuring others.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article has been focused on analyzing how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II,* and specifically the character of Ghost have been remediated through the creation and sharing of fan videos on TikTok. We have described this new fandom as women and queer-driven and shown how *CoD* and Ghost have been reappropriated for the purpose of eliciting romantic feelings and sexual arousal among these unexpected fans of the game. On TikTok, there doesn't seem to be large-scale community gatekeeping going on, but in other media old demarcations still seem to hold

stronger. Given that content on the FYP on TikTok is shown based on the user's interest (calculated by viewing times and engagement rates, for instance) and the engagement patterns of other users, the algorithm will "know" whether you are a fan of playing the game or just want to lust after its characters. As a practical example, there are many TikToks about *CoD* that depict gameplay, for example shortened edits of streams, but they were rarely served on our FYP as they feature different tags, sounds, and are targeted to a different audience. It looks like different fan communities may co-exist peacefully side by side on TikTok, without necessarily causing conflicts or so-called fan wars (Tompkins & Guajardo, 2024).

In the fannish remediations of *CoD*, and of Ghost in particular, the hypermasculine wargame is de- and re-constructed by rendering the game into audiovisual building blocks that can be remixed with sexually suggestive music and lyrics, fan art, and audiovisual content derived from other sources. Since the fandom has a tenuous relationship with the actual game, with many stating they are not players of the game and have little interest in actually playing it, we describe this as a study of fans rather than gamers. Our research shows how TikTok users and creators may have meaningful engagements with games, without actually playing themselves, similarly to how gameplay streaming can also be an indirect way of engaging with games and game culture. The new women and queer-driven fandom of *CoD* and Ghost on TikTok can also be understood as a precursor for how future fandoms may choose to engage with games—circumventing the need for game literacy, gaming capital, and in-game skill to be considered "real fans."

Given the white cis-het-men's hegemonic position in the *Call of Duty* community, it has been both interesting and empowering to observe these female and queer fans on TikTok speak from a position of power and unapologetic fun. Accusations about "not being real fans" are met jokingly with "threats" about further sexualizing Ghost for the fangirl audience. The unapologetically desiring and horny vibe found in the *CoD* fandom is still not common in today's game culture. However, from the perspective of the franchise's production, it is the constantly growing sales figures that are being followed, and new fandoms are only interesting as long as they result in diversifying revenue streams. Our study has shown that researchers' and media's focus on sexualized fan videos or titillating music choices remains marginal—despite the fact that the new algorithmic logics of TikTok are clearly restructuring fandoms in new ways. TikTok serves as a fascinating new platform for incubating and maintaining fan communities that are flexible, tolerant, and welcoming for many kinds of orientations and viewpoints, and further studies on these are urgently needed if we want to understand how game cultures are changing.

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