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Affective Necropolitics, Procedural Necrorhetorics,
and the US–Mexico Border in the *Call of Duty* Series

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Abstract

This article examines how the *Call of Duty* videogames, specifically *Ghosts* (2013) and *Modern Warfare II* (2022), reproduce and aestheticize US state violence at the US–Mexico border. Through an analysis of gameplay mechanics, mission structure, and audiovisual design, the article argues that these videogames proceduralize US exceptionalism. Drawing on Achille Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics and Ian Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric, the article introduces procedural necrorhetorics to describe how games embed racialized death into their rule systems and rhythms of play. These mechanics make players intuitively identify and eliminate racialized enemies, rendering border violence both thinkable and pleasurable. In this context, whiteness functions as a kinesthetic and affective structure of dominance, guiding players to perceive threats and exercise force. By embedding necropolitical logics into the body’s sensorimotor responses, *Call of Duty* rehearses a digital fantasy of American sovereignty under siege – one that must be restored through preemptive, racialized violence.

Keywords: racial securitization, digital imperialism, digital sovereignty, techno-sovereignty, ludic ideology, settler militarism, American visual culture

Rendered in a deliberately crude 8-bit retro aesthetic that harks back to the arcade games of the 1980s, *Borders* (2017) puts players into the role of a Mexican migrant trying to cross the heavily militarized and surveilled border into the United States. Players navigate the pixelated desertscape

by hiding their stereotypically coded avatar (bronze-skinned and wearing an oversized sombrero) in bushes to avoid detection by La Migra. Along the way, they search for water to prevent dehydration (Fig. 1). When caught by Border Patrol agents or felled by thirst, the Mexican migrant dies and leaves behind a skeleton, which becomes an enduring visual reminder of past failures. These remains accumulate with each failed attempt (Fig. 2), transforming the virtual borderland into a haunting deathscapes that reflects the actual consequences of border enforcement in the Sonoran Desert and beyond. Since the skeletons are abstract and stereotypical, they become part of an undifferentiated, nameless mass. From the perspective of the US immigration system, these unnamed bodies are “meaningless corporealities” that exemplify “the tension between the petrification of the bones and their strange coolness,” on the one hand, and “their stubborn will to mean, to signify something,” on the other (Mbembe 35).



Fig. 1: Moving through the desert in *Borders*. The lighter area at the bottom of the screen represents a Border Patrol agent's line of sight. Screenshot from Windows version.



Fig. 2: *Borders* visualizes the player's past attempts at crossing the border in the form of skeletons spread across the desert. Screenshot from Windows version.

A playthrough of *Borders* takes about three minutes (Fig. 3). However, this brevity is deceptive, as players almost always fail several times before mastering the route, memorizing the positions and movements of Border Patrol agents, the sweeping arcs of helicopters, and the locations of water caches. Progress relies on trial and error, gradually attuning players to the game's logic and terrain in ways that echo the mechanics of arcade games. This dynamic underscores the centrality of failure to playing videogames, as they produce feelings of inadequacy and promise ways to overcome them (Juul 7). In this context, Justin Cosner has observed that *Borders* confronts players with "the absurd task of knowing how to navigate a punishing system that is only navigable in retrospect" (218). That is, in *Borders*, failure exposes the futility and cruelty of border enforcement, where survival is governed not by skill or fairness but by chance, attrition, and structural violence.

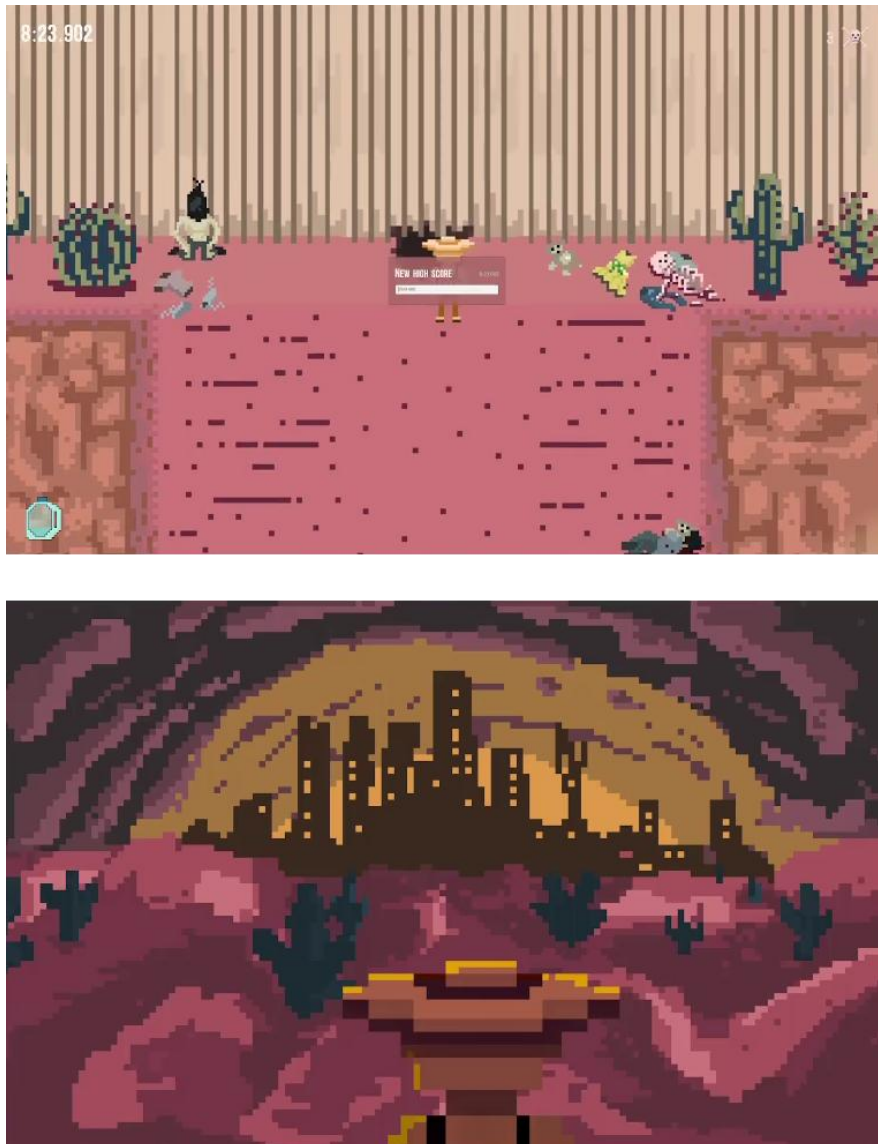


Fig. 3: Completing *Borders* in one go takes about three minutes. Notably, the timer displayed in the upper screenshot includes previous attempts, hence the more than eight minutes displayed here. Screenshots from Windows version.

Borders exemplifies what Melissa Kagen has referred to as a border game. This genre focuses on the experiences of migrants and refugees, using interactivity and spatial design to render the stakes of

border-crossing legible to players. Kagen has argued that such games “participate in ludic constructions of homeland and nationhood,” creating spaces where national borders are not only crossed but also both interrogated and reinscribed through play (23–24). Accordingly, these games explore what it means to move (or be forcibly immobilized) in a landscape defined by sovereignty and exclusion. Gary Kafer has added that border games “mobilize specific rule-based systems of activity, visual graphics, audio mixing, storytelling techniques, temporal sequencing, and controller design” to present “citizenship and nationhood as sites of play” (182). The border thus becomes a gamified apparatus that disciplines bodies and choices. For Jean Ketterling, playing such games constitutes an act of “border-scaping”; that is, the sensory and cognitive mapping of the border through the player’s embodied and emotional experience (141). In other words, the border is not merely represented or simulated; rather, it is performed, as players’ movements, decisions, hesitations, and reactions coalesce into a form of experiential knowledge.

Brendan Keogh has argued that players first encounter a game through their bodies (through tactile, material interaction) before interpreting its content: “The player’s embodied engagement with the material form of the videogame precedes any interpretative engagement with the videogame’s virtual ‘content,’ even (or, rather: especially) when that material engagement is not given the player’s conscious attention” (32). Carlos Gabriel Kelly González has expanded on this idea, suggesting that this entanglement of player and machine becomes a site of digital *mestizaje*, which is a concept that draws on Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of *mestiza* subjectivity as “two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” (78). According to Kelly González, videogames may simultaneously reinforce and destabilize dominant ideologies for Latinx players, producing a liminal epistemic position in which embodied experience and procedural systems collide. This perspective “acknowledges the borderland between video games and lived reality and posits that video game players experience a mixture between the knowledge they have (from within the hegemonic systems’ socialization) and the potential for knowledge/perspective acquired from playing” (Kelly 316).

As the interplay between perpetuating and subverting dominant ideologies suggests, this digital mestizaje does not unfold in an apolitical space. Kelly González has stressed that games are “bound by white supremacist logics” (7). In particular, military shooters such as *Call of Duty*, which have been overlooked in the scholarly discussion of border games, reaffirm US imperial narratives and racial hierarchies while “conspicuously elid[ing] some of the most challenging political issues of the day” (Payne 2). Whereas *Borders* foregrounds failure and vulnerability, these videogames depict the border as a site of militarized control and masculine triumph. When brown bodies do appear in these videogames, they (at best) figure as corrupt (or otherwise trespassing) officials, but, more often, they are reduced to dehumanized targets in a whitewashed war-zone fantasy. These videogames make “massacres and death as a *continuum* of colonial control and the extermination of racialized populations” entertaining and pleasurable (Valencia and Falcón 35).¹ The affective appeal of *Call of Duty* lies in its invitation to inhabit whiteness as power (heroic, rational, righteous) while offering players the embodied thrill of defending an imagined national order. In this way, whiteness operates as what Raymond Williams famously called a “structure of feeling” (48–50; 60–65), animating gameplay with sensations of control and moral certainty. These pleasures, however, are inextricably tied to the normalization of violence and death, which contributes to imagining the US–Mexico border as what Marina Gržinić has called a “neoliberal necrozone” in which “misery, exclusion and death [is] manufactured, administered, normalized and, ultimately, aestheticized” (17).

This article, accordingly, examines how the *Call of Duty* franchise, specifically *Ghosts* (2013) and *Modern Warfare II* (2022), reproduces and aestheticizes US state violence at the southern border. Amanda Phillips has suggested that “the simulation of death as both technological feat and gamic goal produces a playground of mortality in which new orientations toward death and dying might be invented, rehearsed, and even normalized” (138). Indeed, through gameplay mechanics, visual design, and mission structure, *Call of Duty* transforms geopolitical ideology into embodied routine, encoding state fantasies of racialized sovereignty into

the mechanics and rhythms of gameplay to “ludify a deeply affective sense of indifference toward who gets targeted by necropolitics” (Mayar). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower and Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, respectively, this article traces how the logics of life and death are distributed across digital terrains, as racialized bodies are rendered both (seemingly) hypervisible and eminently disposable. In this context, I introduce the concept of procedural necrorhetorics as a form of ludic argumentation in which racialized death is both a gameplay mechanic and an ideological directive. Unlike procedural rhetoric, which Ian Bogost has defined as “a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created” (3), procedural necrorhetorics describes how these systems allow players to engage in, and derive pleasure from, the seemingly intuitive performance of exclusion, domination, and elimination.

In the *Call of Duty* titles discussed in this article, the US–Mexico border is reduced to an infrastructural deathscape where sovereignty is exercised through expulsion and exterminability – the “thanatopolitics (killing and extermination)” through which videogames “mediate biopolitics” (Kłosiński 1035). These videogames rehearse a necropolitical imaginary in which brown bodies are viewed as existential threats whose elimination is necessary for national survival. In so doing, they stage the border as a kill zone in which whiteness is imagined as both embattled and righteous. In turn, whiteness functions as a kinesthetic and affective structure of dominance, granting players the illusion of control and moral clarity through the targeting of brown bodies. Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard have observed that videogames are “instruments of (in)justice” (3), which “teach white supremacist ideologies” by embedding them into interactive systems of play (6). Accordingly, *Call of Duty* offers embodied lessons in racialized domination. Its procedural and affective systems transform necropolitical violence into entertainment, staging a fantasy of perpetual threat and justified retaliation in which the US–Mexico border becomes the symbolic and operational site where US identity is secured through racialized death.

The US–Mexico Border as Necro-Imaginary

In his influential book *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009), Donald Pease considers US exceptionalism a “state fantasy.” Drawing on Jacqueline Rose’s idea that the “modern state . . . relies on fantasy for an authority it can ultimately neither secure nor justify” (10), Pease understands the term as “the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity” (1), established and maintained through a “regulative discourse through which the state is empowered to bring the chaos of political events into order” (4). While the US national mythology, with its iconic symbols and origin stories, plays a central role in this discursive formation, Russ Castronovo has highlighted how “[d]eath . . . structures political life” (1). Here, Castronovo does not ruminate on how the “foundational scenarios” that used to “define a distinctly *American* culture” (Hamscha 16) have become “a crumbling archive of dead signs and tired plots” (Berlant 2) or reflect on the death of national belonging in view of the transnational flows of the early twenty-first century and the attendant atomization of society in the neoliberal, globalized marketplace of identities; instead, Castronovo considers citizenship “a state technology that kills nonnational cravings for more complexly lived subjects,” as “[t]he death of nonnational possibilities satiates the state’s political longing for people dressed up in the unremarkable off-the-rack garb of generic personhood” (6). This framing underscores a paradox at the heart of biopolitical governance: the structuring of life depends on making decisions about who lives and who dies. In addition, whereas Pease’s framework highlights the symbolic architecture of national identity, Castronovo emphasizes the material and bodily cost of that coherence (which is, of course, entangled with symbolic systems).

While Castronovo explores how death structures political life, Foucault’s earlier reflections on biopolitics provide a broader framework for understanding how power operates through the regulation of life and death. Foucault contemplates the “paradox” at the heart of biopolitics:

The right to life and death is always exercised in an unbalanced way, and always in favor of death. Sovereign power over life is only exercised when the sovereign can kill. In the end, it is the right to kill that is the very essence of this right to life and death: it is at the moment when the sovereign can kill that it exercises its right over life. (*Il faut défendre la société* 214)²

Whereas until the nineteenth century, “[t]he right of sovereignty” was “the right to take life or let live,” over the course of the nineteenth century, this power developed into “the right to make live and to let die” (*Il faut défendre la société* 214). While “not at all meaning to say that racism was invented at this time,” Foucault suggests that “the emergence of this biopower . . . inscribes it [i.e., racism] into the mechanisms of the State” (227). In this context, racism, Foucault explains,

is a way of introducing a cutoff point into the sphere of life over which power has taken control: the cutoff point between what must live and what must die. In the biological *continuum* of the human species, the appearance of races, the distinction of races, the hierarchy of races, the valuation of certain races as good and others, by contrast, as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting this biological field This allows the power . . . to subdivide the species it has taken control over into subgroups that will be, precisely, races.

On the other hand,

[r]acism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my own life and the death of the other that is not a military and warlike relationship of confrontation, but a relationship of a biological type: “The more inferior species disappear, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there are in relation to the species as a whole, and the more I – not as an individual but as a species – can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate.” The death of the other does not simply mean that I live in the sense that it guarantees my personal safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal), is what will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer. (*Il faut défendre la société* 227–228)

The political economy of life and death thus naturalizes violence through the management of populations and the affective calibration of threat.

That is, violence is not an aberration but a hidden substrate of liberal governance.³

Mbembe has expanded this biopolitical logic into what he calls necropolitics, which is a mode of sovereignty that actively exposes (racialized) populations to death. Whereas Foucault focuses on the regulation of life, Mbembe spotlights the orchestration of death, as sovereignty is exercised through the strategic dehumanization, abandonment, and exterminability of entire populations, particularly those marked as racialized Others. In the context of necropolitics, the US–Mexico border is a space of suspension where death is normalized and even aestheticized.

The convergence of bio- and necropower intensified in the post-World War II United States. According to Giorgio Agamben, the state of exception, once a temporary suspension of law, has become a permanent feature of modern governance: “the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps technically not declared) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states” (176). The Cold War provided the scaffolding for this shift, allowing the US to engage in extralegal actions (abroad and at home) in the name of security. The “state of exception is not a special kind of law” but “the legal form of that which cannot have legal form” (178; 175), Agamben has observed, highlighting the state of exception as the juridical paradox by which sovereign power justifies unaccountable violence. Notably, the “sovereign power of making die along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class” occurs “not within states of exception but under the rule of law” (Estévez 19). The suspension of rights, which should rightfully be limited to the state of exception, has thus become the foundation of governance.

The events of 9/11 further cemented this logic. One of Pease’s central claims is that 9/11 “permitted the state to inaugurate an utterly different social configuration” (154), in which the Other was imagined as a diffuse and omnipresent menace to the Homeland and thus no longer confined to a specific nation-state. This fantasy did not replace older modes of racialized suspicion but amplified and redirected them. While Cold War discourse had relied on the figure of the communist to justify

US imperial expansion and interventionism abroad, post-9/11 state fantasies mobilized the specter of the terrorist, a category that could flexibly absorb Middle Eastern, South American, and Mexican bodies into its threat matrix. The US–Mexico border was reconfigured into a terrorist frontier and thus turned into a key site of Homeland defense. As Fernando Romero explains in *Hyperborder* (2008), “September 11, 2001 marked a major turning point for the US–Mexico border, because now in addition to illegal immigration, drug trafficking, organized crime, and the many other issues surrounding the border region, it has become an important element of the US war on terrorism” (73). Similarly, in the revised edition of *Operation Gatekeeper* (2001; 2010), Joseph Nevins notes how the Border Patrol rebranded its mission in the post-9/11 moment, prioritizing counterterrorism above all else. While the agency continued to target migrants and drugs, these traditional mandates were recast as “complementary” to a national security imperative (Nevins 5). In practice, the overlap was more than rhetorical, as the racial logics of biopower and necropolitics came to be embodied by the figure of the narco-terrorist. As a result, Mexican and other Latin American migrants were increasingly treated through a security lens calibrated by the War on Terror. Whether these migrants were terrorists in any factual sense was of little relevance, as their racialization and geographic proximity made them expedient stand-ins for a newly imagined (and constantly shape-shifting) enemy. The convergence of immigration policy and counterterrorism strategy ensured that brown bodies could be preemptively subjected to surveillance and extrajudicial force. This slippage has only become more entrenched over time, arguably culminating in February 2025, when the US government designated nine Latin American drug cartels (six of which mainly operate in, and out of, Mexico) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (“Designation”). While framed in national security terms, the designation formalized a long-standing fantasy of the southern border as a front in an endless war, reflecting the state’s capacity to translate fantasy into governance, as the logic of the War on Terror was repurposed and transposed geopolitically, no longer aimed at distant enemies but at the racialized poor within arm’s reach, illustrating that the US–Mexico border

is a space where death is infrastructural, and where sovereignty is enacted through expulsion and exterminability.

Biopolitical Screens and Ludifying State Power

Players rehearse ideological narratives through embodied interaction in military shooters such as *Call of Duty*. Pasi Väliaho has argued that contemporary screen-based media function as biopolitical apparatuses, as they actively condition perception and political subjectivity through immersive audiovisual cues. These “biopolitical screens” embed players into larger sociotechnological systems that connect kinetic gestures to geopolitical imaginaries, as bodies and minds internalize the logics of governance to “train the brains of their observers to anticipate indefinite future military threats” (9). In military videogames, gameplay loops of search, pursuit, and elimination simulate both threat and resolution within tightly controlled frameworks of action and response.

Although separated by nearly a decade (and the first Trump administration), both *Call of Duty: Ghosts* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* deploy the US–Mexico border as a theater of war. In both titles, racialized Others pose existential threats, and gameplay offers players the opportunity to defend whiteness through preemptive violence. In the near-future of *Ghosts*, the United States faces an attack from the Federation, a South American superpower. The narrative is a thinly veiled brown invasion fantasy, as the Federation is a multinational Latin American coalition, but it evokes Mexico (even if Mexico is technically not part of the Federation) through its focus on the southern border of the United States. The videogame simulates the defense of US territory from this racialized threat, and the border becomes a symbolic fault line between white sovereignty and brown chaos. By contrast, *MWII* merges the racial logics of Latin American immigration and Middle Eastern terrorism into a hybrid threat. The main antagonist, Hassan Zyani of the fictional Iranian Quds Force, partners with Las Almas, a Mexican drug cartel, to smuggle weapons and people across the US–Mexico border. One mission even puts players in the role of a Mexican special forces agent who illegally crosses into US territory while chasing Zyani. The evolution from *Ghosts*’ brown invasion fantasy to *MWII*’s narco-terrorist scenario reflects the increasing

flexibility of racialized threats in US security discourse; however, the logic of preemption remains consistent, as the racialized Other must be stopped before the state can be harmed, which authorizes (and justifies) virtual (and actual) violence.

Videogames such as *Call of Duty* produce an experience that may be described as virtual militarism, wherein players become extensions of the state, embodying its fantasies of control and omnipotence; they become what Roger Stahl has called “virtual citizen-soldiers,” as videogames play a key role in “a culture that progressively integrates the citizen into the momentum of the war machine” (110). These videogames allow players to experience tactical mechanics and affective rhythms: the dread of border permeability, the satisfaction of violent reassertion, and the catharsis of enemy elimination. As Stahl has noted, military shooters often frame their antagonists as “rogue states” or “irrational terrorists” who cannot be negotiated with – only eradicated (118). This design choice naturalizes the US military’s global posture as a force for stability and freedom, legitimizing surveillance and preemptive violence while rendering alternatives unthinkable. John Wills has likewise argued that post-9/11 military videogames tend to erase diplomacy as a viable mode of engagement: “There seemed no common ground or reconciliation possible with the enemy,” he observes in *Gamer Nation* (2019), continuing that “the player only had the options to shoot or be killed” (148). This binary logic reflects game mechanics and state fantasy: the Homeland is always under siege, and its defenders are perpetually justified in using violent force. Latino characters, whether allies or enemies, rarely possess narrative agency. Even when playable, they appear as tools of US interests that are stripped of complexity. The fantasy of righteous intervention, long central to US imperial imaginaries, is thus proceduralized.

Call of Duty titles invite players to rehearse the logic of state power, which operates within a “biopolitical visual economy” in which “images become shaped into abstracted images of information whose consumption and exchange shape the social body” (Väliaho 13–14): to search for signs of danger, to preemptively strike, to feel the thrill of domination. The border becomes playable as a fantasy playground where whiteness is secured through control of terrain and elimination of the racialized Other. This dynamic aligns with the notion that (bio)politics is

the management of death, and security is premised on the disavowal of legal and ethical limits. By transforming the necropolitics of the border into affective entertainment, *Call of Duty* channels fantasies of racial and national supremacy into the idiom of play. The videogames imagine the border not as a zone of life and encounter, but as a necropolitical arena in which threats are neutralized and sovereignty reasserted through violent force. Thus, these games help mediate the affective life of US imperialism, locating moral certainty in the crosshairs, as they give affective, performative, and symbolic shape to the state fantasy that power is most legitimate when it is unaccountable, most righteous when it is armed, and most secure when it shoots first.

Procedural Necrorhetorics and Affective Necropolitics

Both *Ghosts* and *MWII* transform the reality of warfare into embodied virtual experiences that players incorporate through movement and affect. When using a controller, the left thumb stick moves the player-character around, while the right thumb stick adjusts the camera's viewpoint. Virtual combat consists of rapid motor responses: a glimpse of an adversary triggers the reflexive gestures of aiming and shooting. Alexander Galloway has termed this kind of interactive design "fully rendered actionable space" (63), where player perception and action are continuously (re)engaged and (re)calibrated through changing stimuli. Like other first-person shooters, *Call of Duty* is a visuomotor experience, as vision fuses with gesture and reflex merges with representation. The kinetic and visual mechanics of *Call of Duty* are entangled with affective states such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and satisfaction, which precede conscious cognition (see, for example, Anable; Cremin; Massumi). The game's fluctuating rhythms (tense silence, sudden threat, rapid retaliation) structure players' emotional registers, rewarding acts of elimination with satisfaction and progress. The players do not pause to ask why they are killing or whom they are killing; the rhythm of play makes such reflection virtually impossible. "[T]he constant barrage of bullets," Phillip Penix-Tadsen has observed, "ensures that the player has little time to ponder the nuances of the cultural context" in this type of videogames (163).

Expanding on Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric, one might say that *Call of Duty* enacts a procedural necrorhetorics: a system of argumentation in which death is ludically performed, structured into narrative progression, and charged with affective and political consequence. The player's inputs (searching, aiming, firing) become ritualized performances of virtual sovereignty through habituated gestures as decisions about who dies are performed through repetitive actions. Within this logic, racialized death is justified and gamified, for "the 'races' take their seat at the American feast of difference," to draw on Sharon Patricia Holland (6). As Gray has rightly pointed out, "Game narratives, especially violent ones, are driven by the extent to which it [*sic*] can . . . destroy bodies, especially Black ones" ("Killing the Black Body" 185). While Gray focuses on antiblackness, her argument that gaming constitutes "a technological structure of white supremacy" ("Killing the Black Body" 182) applies to racialized bodies more broadly, sustaining an affective economy of racial control.

Indeed, procedural necrorhetorics is inseparable from affective necropolitics: the player's states of anxiety, vigilance, and pleasure are harnessed and modulated through the act of racialized killing. The pleasure of the kill, the relief of neutralizing a threat, and the satisfaction of mission completion are affective rewards linked to the necropolitical framing of brown bodies as threats whose elimination ensures safety and sovereignty, as the state of exception that defines US border governance is transposed into a state of personal exception for the player. In this zone of gameplay, legal and ethical limits are suspended in favor of intuitive, righteous violence. These affective circuits reinforce the gameplay's political message that racialized enemies must be feared, surveilled, and disposed of. The videogames embed these necropolitical logics into the body's habitual responses, making racialized violence feel necessary, natural, and gratifying.

In *Ghosts*, the enemies are first and foremost anonymous masses of Latinos trying to invade the United States (plus a former US military-turned-traitor). One mission takes place along the US–Mexico border wall, which cuts through Los Angeles (Fig. 4). Players are explicitly ordered to "shoot to kill" (Infinity Ward et al.), and the Federation soldiers, identified by their Spanish dialogue, become immediate targets. Less than five minutes into the mission, players witness Federation soldiers executing

hostages, which justifies further lethal engagement. Later, players find themselves in the (dry) LA River (Fig. 5), which becomes a corridor of necropolitical action: a space where brown bodies are marked for death on US soil and their eradication is framed as both morally right and procedurally necessary.



Fig. 4: The US–Mexico border wall in *Call of Duty: Ghosts*. Xbox Series X screenshot.



Fig. 5: The LA River as a site of necropolitical action in *Call of Duty: Ghosts*. Xbox Series X screenshot.

In *MWII*, players control a Mexican special forces agent in a covert border mission in which they chase Hassan Zyani across the border wall into US territory. Early in the mission, a female CIA agent states on the radio, “Narcos use the migrants as a distraction. They could be moving Hassan as we speak” (Infinity Ward), establishing an intimate connection between migrants, drug traffickers, and terrorists. Although the player-character acknowledges that “we have no jurisdiction in the US” (delivered in Spanish) and the female CIA agent effectively reiterates her earlier warning that crossing the border is illegal (“Colonel, that is not advisable. You have no authority or assets in the area”), the mission proceeds with the Mexican agents’ illegal incursion onto US soil (Infinity Ward). The linear design of the mission leaves the players with no other option: they must cross the border. As if to drive home the idea that Mexican bodies are predestined to illegally enter the United States, the players control the agent while climbing up a ladder, but the actual border-crossing unfolds as a cinematic, taking control away from the players (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Looking toward the United States from the top of the border wall in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*. Xbox Series X screenshot.

In the United States, the players make their way through a border town; they threaten civilians with their weapons and even kill some who

stand in their way, a procedural enactment of necropolitical disregard for civilian life when racialized bodies are marked as potentially complicit in criminal activities. Eventually, the players are stopped by the police. One of them, notably sporting a western hat, remarks, “It’s hard to tell you boys apart from the cartel” (Infinity Ward). Seconds later, an RPG shot hits a police car a few feet from the player-character. After having recovered from the impact, the players continue by clearing out a stash house, further cementing the connections between drug trafficking, terrorism, and brownness as threats to national security.

Notably, the game’s narrative only begins to unfold here. Zyani returns to cartel protection in Las Almas, Mexico. In response, a task force composed of Mexican and US operatives embarks on a mission to pursue him on Mexican soil. The cinematic sequence opening the mission echoes the iconic scene in the movie *Sicario* (2015), in which a US inter-agency strike force supported by Mexican federales travels from El Paso to Juárez, navigating an urban geography saturated with brown criminality (Fig. 7). In his erudite analysis of the scene in the movie, Carlos Gallego notes that

the manner in which the American caravan navigates “the Beast” is symbolic of exceptionalism’s need for exemption, which is conveniently provided by the reappearance of mutilated bodies that serve as abject signifiers for “Juarez, the Beast.” This is the moment when Alejandro sardonically states to Kate, “Welcome to Juarez,” as if the naked and decapitated bodies hanging from a bridge capture the essence of what Ciudad Juárez must represent within the American exceptionalist fantasy of the state. (64)

Likewise, in *MWII*, the journey into Mexican territory reinforces the notion of Mexico as a place where law is suspended, and where US forces must extend sovereignty through (more or less) covert, violent intervention. The crossing of international borders (which again occurs in a cinematic sequence) normalizes the idea that Mexican sovereignty is insufficient to control the cartel-terrorist nexus, thus legitimating extraterritorial action.

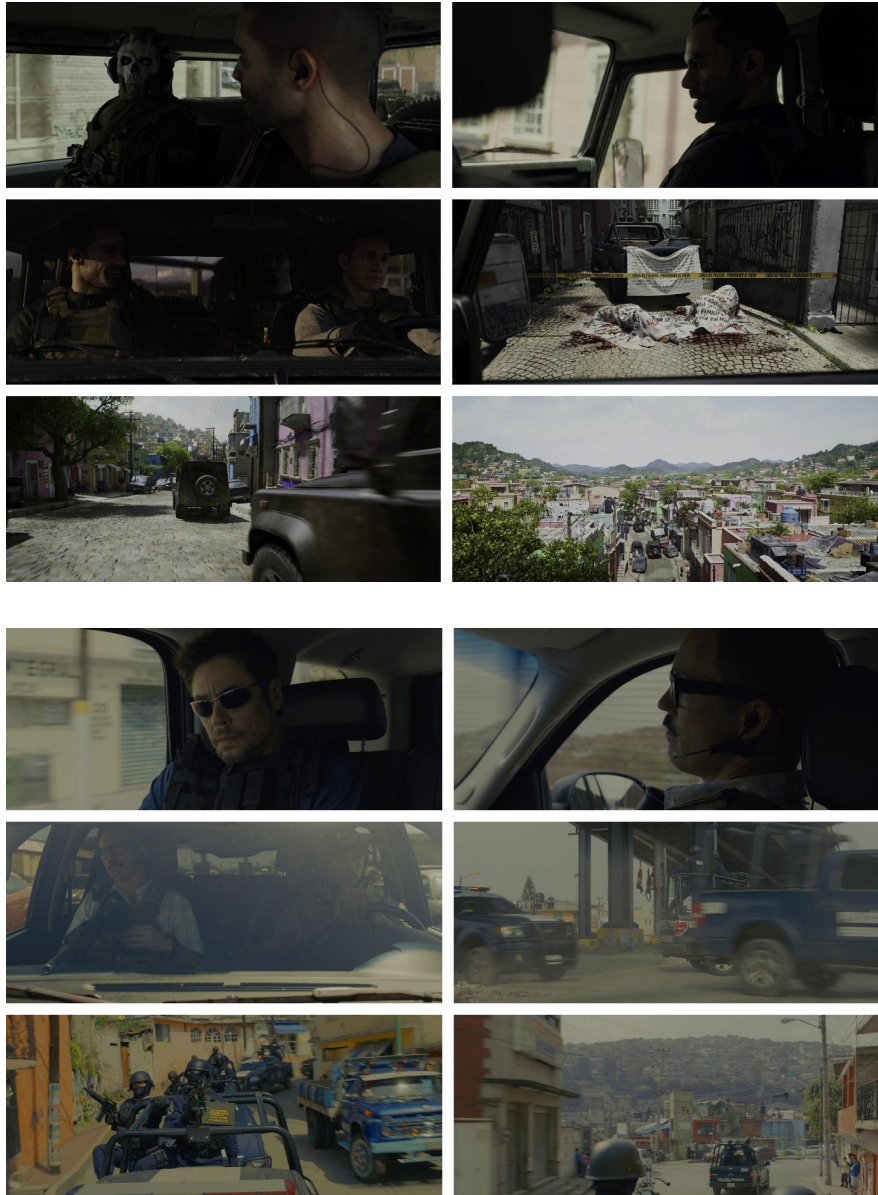


Fig. 7: Comparison of the convoy scenes in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (top) and *Sicario* (bottom). *MWII* screenshots from the Xbox Series X edition; *Sicario* frame grabs from the 4k Blu-ray.

To be sure, *Call of Duty*'s necropolitical logics combines multiple racialized Others into a universalized enemy whose Otherness naturalizes whiteness, which, in turn, perpetuates and celebrates "white identity as

American identity” (Bebout 2). The merging of threats (Middle Eastern terrorists collaborating with Russians and Mexicans) ignores distinct geopolitical contexts to mold a single, affectively charged signifier of outside threat. This collapse parallels Jasbir Puar’s notion of “homonationalism,” where certain populations are Othered through affective registers of fear and disgust to sustain national security discourses. In *Call of Duty*, the procedural killing of hybridized Others sustains a fantasy of white self-governance that manages racialized, lawless outside territories (that need managing).

The choice to reduce player-characters, even those nominally Mexican, to disembodied arms and weapons reinforces this affective necropolitics. Scholars such as Lisa Nakamura, André Brock, Gray (“Killing the Black Body”; *Intersectional Tech*), Earl Aguilera, and Shira Chess have highlighted that embodiment in digital environments privileges certain subjectivities while erasing others. The Mexican agent’s reduction to a tool of violence, visually indistinguishable from both enemies and white US forces during gameplay, reflects an ambivalent position: useful as an instrument of US security but still fundamentally suspect and contaminated. The white cop’s remark mentioned above (“It’s hard to tell you boys apart from the cartel”) functions as a reminder of the blurred line between friend and foe when brown bodies are in play. This ambiguity reinforces the broader justification for US interventionism: brown bodies cannot govern themselves and are interchangeable in their lawlessness.

Whiteness and the Necropolitics of the Border

In an interview with *Game Informer* conducted on the occasion of the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), its campaign gameplay director Jacob Minkoff noted, “I don’t think it’s a political game” before getting lost in contradictions: “Do we touch on topics that bear a resemblance to the geopolitics of the world that we live in today? Hell, yeah . . . Are we telling a story that has anything to do with the specific governments of any countries that we are portraying? No” (“Is Call of Duty”). As Adam Ruch concludes in an analysis of paratexts surrounding mainstream military titles, developers and publishers frame their

videogames as “apolitical” by claiming “that they do not have a specific, didactic political message in support of a particular, contemporary political viewpoint” (134).

While the present article did not discuss *Modern Warfare*, it turned to its sequel and *Ghosts* to demonstrate how these two videogames embed the necropolitical logics of the US–Mexico border in its narrative framing, as well as in its procedural mechanics and affective circuits. Indeed, in *Call of Duty*, necropolitics is enacted through kinesthetic gestures and haptic feedback: players scan the environment, aim their weapons, and kill racialized bodies (Mexican cartel members, Middle Eastern terrorists, and Latino invaders in the two videogames, specifically) through rhythmic and intuitive action, racializing the spectacle of death. In so doing, these games imagine how to be(come) white – not simply as a racial identity but as an orientation toward space, threat, and sovereignty that is characterized by the feeling of control, of righteous aggression, and of justified domination. In *Call of Duty*, players do not merely defend a national border; they defend an ontological system in which whiteness is both norm and arbiter of life and death.

The indistinct-yet-distinct enemies of the two *Call of Duty* titles (narco-terrorists, cartel-insurgents, racialized bodies as ever-morphing threats) are affectively primed to trigger fear and aggression. These affective calibrations justify the racialized bodies’ elimination, making violence seem intuitive and necessary. The gameplay mechanics and representational strategies collapse the enemies into an undifferentiated and indistinguishable mass, reducing populations to meaningless racialized bodies. The videogames’ procedural necrorhetorics enact this reduction through repetitive kill loops and the erasure of political complexity, while the kinesthetic immediacy of *Call of Duty* (reacting to threats, eliminating targets, securing zones, completing missions) bypasses reflective engagement. Players associate brownness with threat and whiteness with security at the level of muscle memory and embodied anticipation. This intersection of whiteness and necropolitics is constitutive of the procedural design, which is reflected in how the US–Mexico border becomes a site where sovereignty is reasserted through the management and elimination of racialized bodies. The players derive pleasure from purging threats, reaffirming borders, and restoring order. In

so doing, the videogames provide an interactive, emotionally charged necrozone: a spatial and affective regime where exclusion and death are aestheticized and normalized as conditions of governance.

Accordingly, the cultural work of these videogames is twofold. First, they encode whiteness as an affective and procedural disposition of control, security, and justified violence. Second, they render the necropolitics of the US–Mexico border playable, transforming state fantasies of preemption and racialized sovereignty into serialized, pleasurable interactive loops. In *Call of Duty*, procedural and affective logics help sustain the cultural imaginary in which whiteness is both embattled and triumphant, always under siege and thus always justified in its defense. As such, these videogames mediate the affective life of US imperialism, recruiting players into virtual rehearsals of sovereignty and exclusion. By embedding necropolitical violence into the rhythms of play, *Call of Duty* sustains the fantasy that (white) US dominance is maintained through the perpetual disposability of racialized Others.

Notes:

¹ Throughout the article, italics have been adopted from the original sources.

² All translations of sources in languages other than English by the author of this article.

³ Peter Christiansen has rightly pointed out that “[t]o Foucault, death itself can be thought of in terms of a game.” As Foucault has it, “Meditating on death means putting oneself in the mind of someone who is dying, or who is about to die, or who is living their last days. Meditation is therefore not a game the subject plays with their own thoughts, nor is it a game the subject plays with the object, or possible objects, of their thoughts It is . . . not a game played by the subject with his own thoughts, or his own thoughts, but a game played by thought on the subject himself. It is to become, through thought, the one who is dying, or the one who is about to die imminently” (*L’herméneutique* 340).

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