

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

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## ABSTRACT

The paper studies the sexual nature of the remediation, reappropriation, and remixing of the character Simon “Ghost” Riley from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* on TikTok.

## Keywords

Gender, representation, Call of Duty, Ghost, fandom, sex, memes, TikTok

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The first-person shooter series *Call of Duty* is one of the most successful game franchises of all time. *Call of Duty* has also long been understood as a vestige of traditional masculinity in games and symbolic of male dominance in game culture. 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) in November 2022, when one of the game’s main characters became the centerpiece of women- and queer-driven fandom on TikTok. Kotaku reported that the space had “been invaded by thirsty TikTokers who are going absolutely feral for Simon ‘Ghost’ Riley”, and that this had caused a backlash from longtime, presumably male, fans (Mercante, 2022).

In this paper, we explore how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*, and specifically the character Ghost, are remediated through the creation and sharing of sexualized content by fans on TikTok. The aim of the analysis is to understand how and why the character of Ghost is being repurposed and reappropriated to elicit arousal from other fans, and to examine this reappropriation in the context of persistent male gendering of games and game communities. The women-led fandom surrounding Ghost is explicitly addressing a broader discourse about games and gender. Given women’s marginalized position in the *Call of Duty* community, it is interesting to see these fans 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.

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This makes the reappropriation of Ghost a highly suited case to make sense of new expressions about games, gender, and desire. Or, in the vernacular of TikTok, to understand why people are *so horny for Ghost*.

Ghost and its following on TikTok is a somewhat anomalous phenomenon in game culture. Even games that are considered transgressive tend 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 sexual identities (Shaw, 2015). Through fan creations like fanfiction, fanart, machinima, and cosplay, fans have expanded on the limited representations that have been available through games. The sexualization 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. Understanding how Ghost is remediated and reappropriated for this audience thus requires an understanding of TikTok as a creative context, particularly through its platform affordances for remaking and remixing content (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) and the relationship it perpetuates between its users and algorithms (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

This work-in-progress paper is based on a ethnographic study of the Ghost fandom on TikTok between November 2022 and January 2023. During this period, Author 1 (Kristine Ask) collected Ghost-related content from her For You Page, making up a total of 782 TikTok videos of various modalities and discourses which will be the basis of the analysis. The analysis will rely on three key theoretical concepts, with which we make sense of the data: remediation, reappropriation, and remix. 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. Reappropriation and remix, on the other hand, help us explore fanart and fan creation as collective processes of poaching (Jenkins, 2012) and transformation (Milner, 2016) of both the original game content and fans’ creative reinterpretations of it.

The analysis will explore three topics: 1) *Sexualization as opposition*, based on the observation that fans frame the sexualization (of Ghost) as an act of opposition to, and even revenge for, the sexualization of women characters in games in the past; 2) *Remediation for arousal*, which builds on the exploration of how elements of the game text (like dialogue, actions, and cutscenes), are remediated for the purpose of arousal, with a special focus on how sound is used to key content in a sexual tone and for making fan-based lore (fanon); and finally, 3) *Construction of “spicy” memetics*, which focuses on how the affordances of TikTok and its memetic culture shape the content created, with an emphasis on Ghost’s mask and size, as well as the reappropriation of game characters’ in-game interaction as memetic markers.

In line with the conference theme, this paper studies a phenomenon that is both at the limits and margins of games. It is at the limit of games as it is studying game culture on a non-gaming platform, where many users freely admit to engaging with game texts without playing games themselves. We are also at the margins of games, as the sexualization of Simon “Ghost” Riley takes place at the intersection of game-, fan- and TikTok cultures where new game-related practices are emerging. It seems that a large part of these practices not only take place on surprising platforms, such as TikTok, but take game content to unexpected directions that are bound to influence how we eventually come to think about the original game and its characters in the long run.

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