

Appalachian Necropolitics within *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* and *Fallout 76*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Two titles portray West Virginia as zombified: *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* (Treyarch and Raven Software 2024) and *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios 2018). Although the region's association with the paranormal in media is not new, through the lens of the opioid epidemic in which the state leads overdose deaths (Wood et al. 2023, 38), a commentary appears on necropolitics: "subjugation of life to the power of death . . . conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 2003, 39–40).

"Since 2013, West Virginia has led the nation in the rate of drug overdose deaths" (Wood et al. 2023, 38). Despite a billion-dollar settlement with pharmaceutical companies who flooded the region with highly addictive prescription opioids for profit, "the majority of the money [has gone] to law enforcement" rather than harm reduction and rehabilitation (Ray 2025). This only scratches the surface of a "positioning of Appalachia [of which West Virginia is part] as a peripheral space" (Stump 2018, 157). As the site of mass resource extraction for the industrial development of Western "metropolises" (Gaventa 1982, 80), the land bears scars. The retreat of these industries also left exploited workers in despair.

Here, I find useful Mbembe's (2003, 11) concept of *necropolitics*: "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die." He further describes "the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to [such] conditions" (40). While Mbembe employed his concept in the (post)colonial context, he leaves open its use in other contexts (39–40). The field of Appalachian studies has also integrated similar perspectives prior. Namely, there is the much-debated internal colony model that analyzes Appalachia within a complex and messy "entanglement" as opposed to a simpler "binary" relationship (Stump 2018, 163, 160). Necropolitics therefore offers a helpful framework for understanding Appalachia's history of economic and political abuse. A contemporary case is that of the ongoing opioid epidemic. It demonstrates continued abandonment of Appalachians on the back of corporate interests yet again. Worse, the state invested legal restitution into violence against those affected as opposed to aid.

Enter two recent popular digital games featuring West Virginia: *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* and *Fallout 76*. Both titles associate the state with zombie outbreaks. *Black Ops 6*

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limits itself to its Zombies mode, set in the fictional town of Liberty Falls, West Virginia. Its real-world counterpart, Harpers Ferry, is part of Jefferson County, the fifteenth (out of 55) most vulnerable to overdose death (West Virginia Office of Epidemiology and Prevention Services 2019). *Black Ops 6*'s outbreak occurs due to a dimensional breach tied to a clandestine CIA research lab. Exposure to supernatural energies from this dimension transforms living beings into these zombies. The game tasks the player-character with eliminating zombies long enough to seal the breach. The town was already destroyed and its inhabitants lost, however, before the player's arrival.

The zombies I focus on in *Fallout 76* are different from the franchise's earlier irradiated "ghouls." This game is set wholly in West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, and southeastern Ohio. Another governmental organization (a continuity-of-government) experimented on irradiated bats six years after a nuclear apocalypse. The project's head ordered the study of these bats as weapons before unleashing them on the region two years later in an unsuccessful coup. Exposure to the bats transforms organic life into a skinless, zombie-like state with green mineral protrusions across the body. The resulting "plague" eradicated nearly all survivors of the apocalypse in Appalachia. Those remaining still face the threat.

I return to necropolitics, specifically the "conferring [of] the status of the *living dead*" (40; italics for emphasis). The zombies of both games are a literal representation of this Othered status. I will not speculate over *intentional* developer commentary. Nonetheless, I am interested in the use of zombies, just as public concern surrounding the opioid epidemic grew in the mid-2010s (Merino et al. 2019, 187–188; the years immediately preceding *Fallout 76*'s 2018 release) and as overdose deaths began declining in 2024 ("West Virginia Reports" 2024; the year of *Black Ops 6*'s release). Additionally consider the often-derisive reference to opioid users as "zombies" due to a staggering gait and aimless behavior while under the influence (Santos 2024).

I propose the "zombie" metaphor can be read to portray the suffering of the opioid epidemic in West Virginia. It thus provides an example of representation for Appalachian game studies (Whittington 2025). Acknowledging associated "power dynamics" (2), the metaphor may also dehumanize Appalachia or normalize its dehumanization. *Fallout 76*'s narrative justifies the region's resettlement by an external elite ("the nation's best and brightest" [Bethesda Softworks UK 2018]) without regard for prior inhabitants. Although Morrissette (2019) suggests the game's "thoughtful narrative about [extractive industry] 'does right' by West Virginia," the player is implicated in violence via resettlement. *Fallout 76* portrays Appalachia as less impacted by nuclear apocalypse because of the region's underdevelopment, making it ripe for earlier resettlement. Through the zombie metaphor, one may conclude at least some Appalachians are obstacles to progress that require eradication.

Both games further feature government betrayal of West Virginians as well as state violence against "zombies." This brings the metaphor close to the state's investment of its opioid settlement into law enforcement, whose operations target the suffering populace. Hilliard (2022, 187) also highlights a "subplot" in *Fallout 76* "allud[ing] to the twining of corporate and governmental interests through . . . economic development grants, and a perpetual scarcity that leaves impoverished rural communities with little power." Unfortunately, a "fatalism . . . has been instilled historically through repeated experiences of defeat" (Gaventa 1982, 254). While the opioid epidemic forces some Appalachians to inhabit the position of already-dead,

portrayals like *Fallout 76* and *Black Ops 6* threaten to reinforce this position's sense of inevitability.

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