# Infectious pleasures: ethnographic perspectives on the production and use of illicit videogame modifications on the Call of Duty franchise

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**Abstract**

This article explores the phenomenon of illicit modifications known as ‘infection lobbies’ that are created for the *Call of Duty* franchise and deployed on the Xbox 360’s Xbox Live (XBL) gaming network. These modifications have the unique ability to ‘infect’ unmodified systems, altering the settings that control the *Call of Duty* game space following contact within a multiplayer match, spreading the modification far beyond the reach and control of its instigators. Infection lobbies necessitate the use of hardware hacked Xbox 360 consoles, such as a ‘JTAG’ or ‘Reset Glitch Hack’ (RGH) console, the creation and utilisation of which are in violation of access control technology circumvention clauses within the European Directive 2001/29/EC (2001) and the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998) (DMCA). Infection lobbies therefore violate the legal and contractual contexts of play, the rules of the game, and the emergent social contexts of play. As a result infection lobbies constitute *illicit modifications*, forbidden by law, rules, or custom, yet despite this configuration a significant body of players are willing to engage with and utilise them, whether orchestrating and deploying them or by opportunistically utilising the infected alterations that they contain. Through the conduct of interviews with and participant observation of both those that play within and those that deploy infection lobbies in Activision’s *Call of Duty* franchise, this article explores not only the process of deployment but what it means to play against the infected, to play alongside the infected and to infect others. In doing so the illicit modification is seen to be interpreted by players in various ways: as egalitarian game-extension, as temporary inversion, as a method of antagonistic dominance, and as a tool for protecting the very core of the game through targeted vigilantism. Through these explorations, this article contributes to contemporary research in the contested space between producer and consumer, and the discourses of legitimization and victimisation that surround play.

**Keywords:** modding, hacking, social structures, videogames, ethnography, copyright.

**Introduction**

In late 2009, a few short weeks after the release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (MW2) (Activision, 2003-current), players on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation3 began experiencing jarring corruptions of its multiplayer game space.Players joining public multiplayer matches found that they suddenly had unlimited ammunition and no need to reload, which encouraged unconventional ways of playing the game. Instead of deliberate use of cover, an emphasis on well-aimed shots and a conservative approach to ammunition, multiplayer games became spaces riddled with bullets, rockets and grenades in which survival was determined largely by luck rather than judgement.

The alterations represented a radical subversion of the expected experience of the *Call of Duty* (*CoD*) franchise that, while many found enjoyable or novel, also presented a troubling issue. Not all players experienced the altered settings, but those that did found that they travelled with them into each subsequent match they entered. The modifications were the equivalent of a conventional software virus that used contact in multiplayer game lobbies and matches as the method of transmission. They quickly became known as ‘infection lobbies’. It soon became apparent that infection lobbies were not caused by a latent game bug or glitch, but were the result of player modifications that had been introduced into the closed system between the game consoles and the online game services that they used, such as Xbox Live (XBL) and the PlayStation Network (PSN).

**Background**

Following their first appearance on MW2 in late 2009 infection lobbies became increasingly common, used to alter a wide range of game settings including those related to rewards and experience, weapon behaviour, movement and match setup. Infection lobbies were then replicated in older iterations of the *CoD* franchise, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (MW) and *Call of Duty:* *World at War* (W@W), which shared the same game engine and infrastructure as MW2. Due to their increased visibility and the widespread perception that infection lobbies undermined the fundamental processes of the game, Activision instigated a series of mandatory *title updates* that attempted to remove exploitable vulnerabilities and immunise the system against infection lobbies entirely. While these title updates were generally successful, modders responded with alternate ways of deploying infection lobbies, and in turn this led to additional updates and patching.

Infection lobbies represent unwarranted subversions of the operation and experience of the game environment and have the capacity to make games unfair and unappealing to those wishing to play conventionally. Left unchecked they may significantly damage the commercial viability of a game. In addition to the perceived damage to the institutional videogame text, the unsanctioned alteration of videogame code through the use of hacked console hardware constitutes a violation of the ‘European Directive 2001/29/EC’ and the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), which forbid the circumvention of an ‘effective technological measure’, where the ‘…subject-matter is controlled by the rightholders through application of an access control or protection process’ (1998). In the case of the *Call of Duty* software the game code is protected by a series of access countermeasures built into the Xbox 360 console, which the JTAG or RGH hardware hacks negate. Such modifications are therefore framed by institutional stakeholders – the developers, publishers, and games press - as unsolicited, malicious, and criminal subversions of carefully designed and balanced game spaces. This in turn creates a discourse that subjects play to a binary ‘normalizing gaze’ (Foucault 1977: 25), which separates it into distinct models of *good play* and *bad play*, and as a corollary informs the identity of good and bad *players* (Myers 2005). Bad play deviates from the expectations, rules, contracts, and laws that surround play, and is framed as noob play, destructive play, illegal play, exploitation of game rules and codes, pirating and hacking (Myers 2005: 15). Yet while the legitimizing discourses that frame good and bad play constitute a prevailing context, there are many who dispute, or ignore this binarism. These players, who may align with existing player-type model griefer and explorer tropes, do not recognize the boundaries that determine illicit play, and often view their violations as legitimate. Despite the comprehensive social, contractual, and legal barriers they see a gulf between legitimizing discourses and *their play*. Greg Lastowka argues that this is ‘…due to the fact that games constitute a rival regime of social ordering. The rules of games are inherently in tension with the rules of law’ (2010: 106).

**Article aims and scope**

This article aims to explore infection lobbies and the ways in which illicit modifications are deployed, utilized, consumed and experienced by those who play within them. Through the use of participant observation and interview this article will not only offer a broad overview of the deployment of infection lobbies and detail how they differ from existing modifications found on the Xbox 360 and XBL system, but will also present the following perspectives of interaction and consumption: playing against those who have become infected, playing under the influence of an infection, the undiscriminating deployment of infections as game extension, and the selective deployment of infections as tool of retribution. By doing so, we may learn more about the motivations and experiences that drive illicit modifications and are better placed to understand their social and ludic significance, and to plan for their appropriate management.

**Research on illicit modification**

Given its highly specific nature, there is understandably scant literature that directly explores illicit modification on the Xbox 360 and XBL system[[1]](#footnote-1). There is, however, some work that explores videogame modding more generally, and particularly its manifestation on the PC platform (e.g. Sotamaa 2004, 2010; Kücklich 2005; Postigo 2007, 2008). Within this literature, videogame modding has been established as a respected cultural practice, and many PC games are released with modding toolkits at launch. These toolkits enable players to produce new content for games inspired by a range of motivations, including: playing, hacking, researching, artistic expression, and cooperation (Sotamaa 2010). These tools are seen as a way of fostering community around a release, extending its lifespan, and even facilitating new commercial releases. While many mods add value through the extension of a game’s lifespan or by establishing new intellectual property for the developers, there are many mods that undermine or are seen as incompatible with the spirit or terms of service of the original game. These may include, for example, ‘nude mods’ that reskin game characters unclad, those that introduce external intellectual property into the game space, or those that undermine the core game mechanisms by automating or simplify aspects of player interaction. These types of mods are often removed from centralized mod websites and are subject to censure and challenge. However, when they are developed for a single-player game, their damage is often negligible. Some players may well choose to have nude characters, but this has little bearing on the experience of others, or indeed the security of the canonical text. In contrast, modifications that are introduced into multiplayer spaces, particularly those which offer little player control over what matches they connect to (such as is the case with XBL and PSN) the modifications can be regarded as a hi-jacking of conventional play and can have a wide detrimental effect.

In contrast to the PC, console gaming does not have an established modding culture and console games are rarely shipped with modding / content creation tools built in. The closed systems that interface directly with an online service such as XBL or PSN include multiple security countermeasures to prevent players from altering the game code and relevant hardware. On these platforms, modification must be done in spite of these restrictions, overcoming access control restrictions through the development of hardware and software exploits. Some scholars have explored these kind of interactions. These include: the hacking of the original Xbox and deployment of the Xbox Media Centre homebrew application (see Huang 2003; Schafer 2011); the creation of art-installations through NES cartridge modification (Jordan 2007), and the creation of PC based software ‘bots’ (Consalvo 2007). These tend to focus on the processes involved or the intent of the originators as opposed to those that subsequently use the modifications that have been created. In this regard, much of the scholarly activity within this field continues to prioritise the creator in the same way that much game studies literature does to the designer and their intent. Few scholars seem to have considered these modifications as tools or utilities that, once shared, are used to facilitate playful experiences.

Julian Kücklich’s work on ‘deludology’ goes some way to address this, considering the use of cheats and other forms of illicit interaction as a way to alter the experience of videogame spaces. These alterations allow ‘[…] us to gain a more profound insight into games and how they are put together’ (2007: 359), and ‘[…] offer numerous ways of changing players’ perceptions of gamespace’ (2007: 118). Kücklich’s deludology acknowledges that illicit behaviour is not simply a detrimental or problematic act conducted by its originator, but a method of altering the experience of play – it becomes a playful strategy.

Within videogame studies literature, there is a tendency for illicit activity within games to be viewed from one of two perspectives: a sociological approach that frames the phenomenon as a situated cultural practice (e.g. Taylor 2003; Consalvo 2007; Pierce 2009; Wirman 2009), and a structural approach that seeks to categorize illicit activity in relation to rules (e.g. Yan & Choi 2002; Yan & Randell 2005; Parker 2007). The sociological approach tends to read illicit, or rather ‘emergent behaviour’, as culturally significant, and a product of gameplay as a social inhabitation of a controlled space, for example Julian Kücklich argues that games are ‘…entities in which the impulse to play is inextricably linked to the desire to cheat’ (2007: 355). Structural approaches contrastingly view illicit play as not the product of an interaction with the space, but a flaw in design, such as being ‘…largely due to various security failures’ (Yan & Randell 2005: 8). From this perspective, where those engaging in illicit play ‘…ruin good games, and result in (new) users giving up’ (2002: 2), it is possible to design remove the exploit through design, constituting a ‘…systematic framework for generic cheating prevention and management’ (:12),.

In addition there has been the development of a number of ‘player type’ models that link in-game behaviour with predilection towards certain kinds of pleasure (e.g. Apter 1991; Bartle 1996; Bateman 2004; Lazzaro 2004; and LeBlanc 2001). These models often present illicit behaviour as potentially detrimental to the viability of the games themselves, for example ‘A MUD with no players. [Where] The killers have killed/frightened off everyone else, and left to find some other MUD in which to ply their trade’ (Bartle 1996), or Yan and Choi’s observation of new players giving up (2002: 2)..

There has also been a move towards the recognition of an alternate oppositional form of play that would contain illicit modifications, which has variously been called ‘transgressive play’ (Aarseth 2007), ‘counterplay’ (Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005), or simply ‘bad play’ (Myers 2005, 2010). Each of these models is defined as play that actively works against the expectations, rules and regulations that frame play, seeing it ‘[…] as play that, without regard to any specific cultural or normative context, plays with -- and often against -- the *rul*es (Myers 2005: 133)’.

In his later work Myers argues that game studies literature largely fails to acknowledge the implicitly transgressive nature of play, which he sees as ‘most frequently non-serious and therein bad, ignorant, destructive, and/or illegal’ (Myers 2010: 20). Such treatment of aggressive, inappropriate or antisocial forms of play is both commonplace and understandable – it is universally discouraged and socially censured, yet it still appears attractive to a significant number of players. In addition to this cultural resonance and value, Myers suggests that the pleasures unlocked by bad play ‘[…] seem as direct, immediate, and engaging as those of good play’ (Myers 2010: 16). If ‘bad play’ is both culturally and biologically indistinct from ‘good play’ it becomes difficult to differentiate it formally and thus, one is forced to rely on external normative contexts to define it. Therefore bad play is a reflection, and indeed production, of rules rather than an intrinsically ignorant or destructive activity. The observation and framing of bad play can be seen as a manifestation of the prevailing legitimizing discourses that inform play, as opposed to articulating the nature of play. The legitimizing discourses may simply highlight the commercially sustainable forms of play compatible with the development and publication of games. While this appears a rather obvious statement it implies that the legitimising discourses are not necessarily about play, but about models of consumption.

**Method**

This article is based upon participant observation and interaction with videogame modding and glitching communities conducted from November 2010 – May 2012 as part of a larger project exploring the rhetorics of counterplay. The research focused on modding related forums, including TheTechGame (2008-2013) and Se7ensins (2007-2013). These listed information about newly devised mods and served as a space to meet and interact with modders and those who utilized them. While the websites were frequented by thousands of individuals over the period of study, relatively few were willing to engage with the research, and were often suspicious of researcher intentions, or too busy to participate. This article condenses some of the findings from the period of immersion, but also utilizes excerpts from interviews with forum members and players met within modified games. This process of selection meant that these individuals were likely to be familiar with and positively biased towards illicit modification. It is therefore not implied that this self-selecting sample is representative of all gamers. Instead, it is used as a method of exploring the attitudes and motivations that centre around illicit modification, and as a conduit to experience the modified games directly.

Each of the players interviewed could be categorised as dedicated gamers who invested significant time into the core game and cared about skill and progression. Most said that they played *CoD* games for more than four hours per day, and many saw this and player productivity (see Wirman 2009) focussed on the franchise, such as the engagement with clans, the production of machinima videos, or socialising on related forms as a major leisure activity. Modding, or the use of illicit mods, constituted an extension of this activity. In addition to the time spent directly experiencing infection lobbies and the day-to-day interaction with members of forums necessary to understand their operation and production, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on experiences with infection lobbies via email, Skype, and within multiplayer game spaces. This approach was adopted in recognition of the highly technical nature of game modification, which meant that modders were likely to be engaging with newly developed processes and technologies that I was unfamiliar with. Semi-structured interviews enabled a flexible and responsive interpretive approach, allowing opportunities and new lines of research to be adopted, informed by the object under study (Flick 2009: 5). The narrations included in this article were selected for their demonstration of different perspectives on infection lobbies. All participants have been anonymized, and in order to preserve consistency, responses have not been concatenated or edited.

**Infection lobbies in context**

Infection lobbies can be considered the second generation of illicit modified lobbies seen on the console based *CoD* franchise, and are the product of the incremental development of understanding of the operation of the *CoD* game infrastructure within modding circles. The first generation of illicit modification, known as ‘JTAG lobbies’, the nomenclature derived from the nature of the hardware hack required to conduct the modification – the JTAG console, which utilises the IEEE 1149.1 Joint Test Action Group protocol to circumvent access-control routines, and the name for a CoD multiplayer match – a lobby. JTAG consoles would run modified software which was deployed by creating counterfeit software patches that appear to originate from the developer, which when applied overwrite the conventional settings of the game. Once online this console is used to host a multiplayer game, the modifications are synchronized to all other players in the match and they become subject to its rules – but only while they remain connected to the JTAG lobby. In contrast, an infection lobby overwrites a cache of memory on the console that enables the modifications to persist even after it has been disconnected from the JTAG – allowing them to be taken onto new matches and distributed if the infected becomes host.

While JTAG lobbies enabled modders to alter settings such as the experience points accrued per kill, they were automatically detected as counterfeit on connection to XBL and invalidated in around three hours, permanently banning the console and associated player account from the service. As a result, a JTAG lobby had to generate income to offset this cost and were primarily developed in response to commercial demands – notably offering players radically accelerated access to end-game status known as ‘prestige’ or ‘tenth prestige’ (Meades 2012), and were rarely experienced by conventional players on public games. This meant that while conventional players might play with others who had *made* *use* of JTAG lobbies they were unlikely to encounter them directly unless they specifically sought one out – and were willing to pay the admission fee.

While the infection lobby is capable of much of the same functionality as the JTAG lobby, its method of deployment reduces the costs of operation. The infection lobby is characterized by its ability to transmit its modified settings from one console to another, and this process is utilized to infect an unmodified retail console directly by physical Ethernet link before joining XBL. By doing so, an unmodified console is used as the undetectable vector to introduce the modification into the closed game system, and the JTAG used to instigate the modification is never connected to any services that would result in its invalidation.

By using the infection method, modified lobbies could be deployed in public servers and infect hundreds if not thousands of players as the settings spread throughout the system. In addition, no longer bound by the necessity for income generation, the infection lobby could be used in more esoteric or creative ways than its previous counterpart.

The purpose of JTAG and infection lobbies remain largely the same: they generally offer competitive advantage within the game, introduce new and interesting game modes, or make locked game content available for use – such as weapons, insignia or trophies that may hold cachet or ‘gamer capital’ within the player community (Consalvo 2007). However since the infection lobby costs next to nothing to deploy, it allowed illicit modifications to be used in situated and individualistic ways. The infection lobby took the control and operation of illicit modifications from the hands of a relatively small number of entrepreneurs and gave it a wider group of modders who used infection lobbies for a range of purposes. We will now explore the experiences and motivations associated with some of these deployments.

**Playing against the infected**

In September 2011 I was made aware by a number of modders that W@W had of becoming the site of an outbreak infection lobbies following their gradual immunisation on more recent iterations of the *CoD* franchise. On joining my first public multiplayer game I was placed into a game where I was playing against the infected. The conventional user interface had been conspicuously altered and the play experience was radically different to the game I had last played two years previously.

In the middle of the screen a wall of multicoloured text cascaded down each time a game message – such as the death of a teammate – was announced, inviting me to sign up to a forum in order to access the modifications that other players in the match were using:

**Sign Up To {URL} For Free Infections HexxR Runz XBL Bitches** … I**Got**Infection’s•10th**From**Youtube.Com/**{URL}**

It appears that all of the opposing team were using a modification that made them invincible and there was nothing that I, nor my teammates, could do to kill them. When the match ended we had not obtained any points or kills – and, had I been interested in maintaining the persistent statistical record that documents my skill, this match would have represented a significant disappointment. Within the *CoD* franchise, player statistics and the ratio of player kills to deaths (K/D) in particular are used as ways of ascertaining expertise and status and ‘gamer capital’. A good statistical profile betrays a skilled player, as opposed to somebody who has little skill but plays often, and those that have good K/D ratios are often invited into games, clans and treated with greater respect.

Despite its detrimental impact on my player profile, the visual obstruction that the cascading text presented and the subjectively ‘unfair’ nature of the game I was compelled to continue playing. In the following match a number of my opponents and teammates had oddly unconventional animated gamertags that indicated that they had become infected, but in this many of them appear to play in an entirely different way. Instead of killing their weak opponents many of the modders flew above the map exploring its periphery. They landed on rooftops, clipped through solid walls, hovered in the air, and even balanced on telegraph poles in the centre of the map. These modders appeared to be doing something else in the game space, playing an entirely different game in the map that we shared. Yet, while many were content to explore there were enough that persisted in the one-sided battle, and I was repeatedly killed from afar, picked off even before I was able to locate my quarry.

Out of frustration, I found myself intentionally obstructing the modders that ignored me and explored, I got in their way, threw smoke grenades and signal flares in an attempt to break their concentration and provoke a response, even if it meant being killed. I felt frustrated and impotent, yet found pleasure in provoking a response, it felt like a small victory – like I was having some influence in the game that their actions excluded me from. After playing against the infected for around an hour I powered off the system.

**Becoming infected**

Unlike the W@W public match example above this infection lobby occurred in a private match on MW that the player (who we will call Soap) was invited into by an unknown recent player. Private matches are pertinent as they do not contribute to a players’ statistical profile due to concerns over exploitation and manipulation. Nothing was said to indicate that the private match had been modified, yet, once it began it was evident that it was a ‘speed lobby’ variant where every action - aiming, reloading and movement - occurs at an accelerated pace. It was evident that the other players were already familiar with its operation, as betrayed by the strategies that they immediately deployed, equipping grenade launchers and firing projectiles into the open swamp area where most players were spawned.

Soap appeared frustrated by being duped into joining an infection lobby, and for the way that it broke his concentration and represented a deviation from what he had originally been doing – producing videos documenting his expertise:

I was a bit annoyed at first as my previous few games had boasted some pretty high K/D whilst quickscoping and now I was being bombarded by constant noob tubes and RPGs. But once I knew what was going on I did join in for a little while as it is fun just firing under barrel grenades like bullets… (personal communication)

While in the speed lobby he began to alter his strategies and embrace the divergent play style. Instead of the staccato pace of a typical *CoD* game, where a player moves from cover to cover, checking corners and known vantage points, he became focused upon ‘[…] finding a good camping spot where I could bombard the map without being reached easily myself’. Yet ‘as fun as it was it got boring very quickly’ and Soap left the lobby through ‘dashboarding’, a process where the Xbox is forced to its operating system front screen, or dashboard. Dashboarding immediately terminates any game processes in memory and disconnects the system from XBL and if done during a multiplayer game any statistics relating to the current match are never synchronized with the servers (this could also be done by powering off the machine but the system restart would take longer than dashboarding). While Soap was within a private match that would not impact upon his statistics, he still used the only defence that a player has to protect against the negative repercussions of infection – by quickly instigating a system disconnect before data is synchronized. He stated that this was a cautious tactic in case the lobby contained some new function that allowed it to overwrite his profile, and that he did this every time he encountered a game that he thought might contain modifications.

**Infection as extension**

Zakhaev is a twenty-year-old British man who considered himself part of a group of active modders that tended to play multiplayer games together. In addition to playing *CoD* in a conventional manner, carefully developing his statistical profile and attaining desirable unlocks, he also deployed and played infection lobbies upon using alternate dummy accounts.

Zakhaev suggested that he and his friends had run 40-50 infection lobbies across MW and MW2, motivated by what he saw as frustration with the predictability of the multiplayer component:

Sometimes we just play standard games, but once you’ve got top rank there’s pretty much no point playing standard games, you don’t get xp, you’re not levelling up, you’ve got all the titles and emblems. The only reason to play is to boost up your stats (personal communication).

Instead of editing the game patch code required to deploy an infection lobby the group downloaded and used others that had been created made available on websites such as Se7ensins.com (2007-2013). They saw the appearance of a new patch or exploit in a similar way to an official game release.

When a new glitch or mod is released we normally text one another saying that this has just come out. […] Everyone is like ‘get online’. […] as soon as someone finds something new that shouldn’t be there the word spreads in like ten minutes and then we’re on.

The group used the infection lobby as a way of overcoming the fact that while not all of the group members had access to the requisite hardware and technical expertise required to deploy them, they still wished to play together and share the experience of modified game types. Once one member of the group had deployed the infection lobby using their JTAG and retail console they then invited their friends and passed the infection to them, enabling them all to play together. Once Zakhaev and his friends had become infected they then invited other players to join their matches, stressing that there was extensive demand for lobbies.

[…] if we send out a message saying we’re hosting a lobby people are like ‘yeah fine’ and then they play with us instead of just leaving straight away. When people just leave it gets annoying. Our modded game types will fill up in seconds, quite a lot of people like playing something different that’s not meant to be there.

In order to avoid the damage to their statistics, Zakhaev and his friends each held multiple XBL accounts that they used for different purposes. They collected promotional XBL short-term access scratch-cards that are frequently bundled with new retail releases and also took advantage of seasonal reductions and special offers to build a stock of multiple accounts. These inexpensive, or often free, accounts allowed them to host and play in infection lobbies for with relative anonymity and little personal risk. Yet it transpired that they were not fearful of retribution from Microsoft, which Zakhaev ‘didn’t see as much of a threat at all’, but were concerned of the damage that associating their modding persona with their dedicated gamer profile would have on their reputation within the player community.

Zakhaev described the experience of infection lobbies, such as a ‘slow lobby’ in which everything runs at a fraction of its normal speed:

You’d see a rocket launcher coming at you from like 100 metres, but you’d just find it funny – maybe try and jump out of the way – nobody takes it very seriously and in a game mode like that it’s purely just for fun. […] you can’t take it seriously, there’s no way you can get good stats on that.

For them, infection lobbies offered a refreshing way of extending the game offering, but one that held an additional ambiguous, unserious and anarchic tone. In subsequent correspondence the ambiguous and antagonistic aspects of this anonymity became increasingly apparent. Alongside running matches that were filled with willing (and one assumes anonymous) participants Zakhaev admitted to also running the games on public matches into which unwitting conventional players would be randomly placed. Unless these players dashboarded or disconnected in time their statistical profiles would have been corrupted and subsequent attempts to leave may have resulted in the modification travelling with them as an infection – exacerbating and extending the damage. Zakhaev believed that ‘…about 60 per cent of people enjoy joining a different lobby and stick around’.

Yet, for the remaining 40 per cent who were unwilling participants the experience may have been significantly problematic, and the cases where players were unable or unaware of how to become freed from infection became a point of amusement for Zakhaev:

[…] it keeps annoying them […] Sometimes they end up back in the same game anyway and then that’s when all the funny messages start – and they’re like What are you doing, Leave me alone! […] they send you hate mail and rubbish. And I like that, I think it’s very enjoyable.

This use of infection lobbies is one that most clearly aligns with antisocial or asocial notions of griefing or bullying and is the type of activity at the root of the widespread victim discourse that emphasises the damaging and negative impacts of illicit play. Players who have inadvertently become exposed to the infected are now subject to the settings that have been applied, they are forced to play as others wish, and as such the infection lobby becomes a discourse of power, dominance, and victimisation. When the infection lobby also impacted upon the accumulated statistical profile the sense of victimisation – through the digital equivalent of a scar, marking the transgression – becomes even more profound.

**Infection as retribution**

Both Soap and Zakhaev articulated the importance of developing and maintaining an impressive statistical record and expressed concerns over game modes that impact negatively upon them. In addition, however, Zakhaev expressed annoyance that modding had been used to illegitimately inflate statistical profiles, and that this distortion undermined the public recognition that skilled *CoD* players deserved.

You spend a lot of time […] nurturing your account and then it’s your pride. […] and then on the leader board you’re just wiped out by someone who’s gone onto a lobby and they’ve got some stupid K/D with a minus on it and it’s obviously not real […] You look at their stats and it’s clear that they’ve hacked.

In response to this perceived injustice Zakhaev and his friends used infection lobbies as a direct retribution, damaging and undermining the statistical profiles (and removing the associated unlocks) of those they decided had illegitimately distorted profiles. Players that Zakhaev had encountered and were deemed to have used prestige lobbies were invited into public game lobbies under the pretence that they would receive any unlocks that they had yet to accrue. However, the infection lobbies that were deployed were ‘derank’ variants that stripped a player of experience points and other key profile information when the match data was synchronized with the central servers. This was enabled by simply adding a minus figure to the code from a ‘prestige lobby’ patch, or using one of the many derank lobby patches available online under the auspices of enabling players to enjoy the experience of staring the game afresh while retaining their contacts and reputation within the community.

Zakhaev said that he had run five derank lobbies over a two-week period, using new player accounts and an elaborate process where highly decorated accounts were used to convince participants of the legitimacy of lobby. This translated into an estimated sixty players that were ‘punished’ in this way, although there was no way of ascertaining what proportion had been able to dashboard before the effects became permanent. Each of the accounts (aside from the highly decorated account) were abandoned after the derank lobby had taken place, although Zakhaev and his friends ensured that they had firstly read and listened to any communication from those who had been targetted. This was seen not only as entertainment, but moral imperative that aimed to re-establish the importance and significance of the conventional core game:

We did the right thing, but it was a lot of fun too, the messages were just so full on. […] people were just screaming, you couldn’t make out what they were saying because they were so angry […] We wouldn’t say anything back most of the time, but sometimes we said we were Microsoft employees that had had enough, saying “this is payback, you’ve brought this on yourself”. While other times we’d just say “you didn’t get it properly and you can just start again and do it properly”.

**Analysis**

These four examples detailing different perspectives of infection lobbies highlight not just their varied uses, but a range of apparently contradictory or paradoxical intent – especially seen within Zakhaev’s reasoning of extension and protection of the core game. Yet each of these perspectives: playing against the infected, becoming infected, infection as extension, and infection as retribution has a different meaning and resonance.

The experience of playing against the infected was profoundly frustrating – it was nearly impossible to orientate myself within the map, and as a result deaths were frequent and random often without me even seeing my opponent. I still shot at other conventional players when I could and occasionally got kills, but this was the product of luck rather than strategy – these kills felt like hollow victories as it was clear that the infected represented the real opponents. Instead I played in a skulking subordinate manner, conscious of the power imbalance and my inability to rectify it; I ran, I hid, I threw smoke grenades, I swore.

The experience of playing against modders illustrated that the game was unplayable in its conventional manner. Aside from the experience of being constantly and unfairly defeated there was a sense that the modders were playing an alternate metagame that the conventional players were excluded from. Not understanding what they were doing or how it was being done was as frustrating as being defeated. I felt both harassed and ignored.

The issue is that irrespective of the intentions of the individual modders, whether they wanted to demonstrate their power, or were simply playing with the space in their own way, the cumulative impact was an experience of victimisation, isolation, and harassment by an inscrutable and what seemed like a coordinated group. Yet I found the experience of being in radically subverted space exciting and novel. Had I been concerned with my statistical profile, however, the experience may have had a much more negative meaning.

 The speed lobby deployed on the private match had no impact upon player statistics and all players were subject to its (mis) rule. As a result Soap did not articulate any intrinsic opposition to this kind of illicit modifications, but was concerned over their potential to undermine statistics and therefore player reputation when deployed in public matches.

In a private game environment I don’t have a problem with them, but when the host player is roaming the public lobbies it gets annoying when all of a sudden the opposite team is invincible, leaping 30ft into the air.

For Soap the problems of infection lobbies centred primarily around the ways in which they had the capacity to undermine achievement, and secondarily around issues of openness and fairness. Providing there was an informed choice, and that the lobbies were confined to invite-only matches, he saw little reason for objection.

Despite the negative implications of Zakhaev’s public lobbies, and the estimated 40 per cent of players who were opposed to them, he saw them as improving and adding value to a product that he was deeply seduced by. This is illustrated when challenged about the oppositional or hostile nature of his actions in relation to the canonical text and authority of the designers: ‘No, it’s not like that at all! Everyone who plays *CoD* would love the people who created it – without them we’d have no game to play. These games are to extend, like an extra DLC that’s free for everyone, and it’s just different’ (personal communication).

There was even scepticism over the intent of the designers and platform holders, suggesting that on some level that there was tacit approval and that game was meant to be modded, as if the game had been design to accommodate their actions even if the commercial contexts made this untenable: ‘They haven’t made it any harder for us. The fact that we can actually do this means they’ve left it there for us to do. We’ll find it and we’ll change it’. While this smacks of all-to-familiar efforts to rationalize and justify illicit acts, if the sentiment is genuine (and I believe it is) it nevertheless illustrates significant differences in attitude and perception amongst player communities.

Zakhaev’s use of infection lobby as retribution exposes the antagonistic and protean nature of the infection lobby and ‘bad play’ more generally. It may simultaneously be an articulation of domination and motivation of discourses of victimisation, a grass roots play extension, and even a tool of retribution. The modification becomes reused as a method of repairing the perceived damage caused by other modifications, and this exposes either a dangerous vigilantism or fitting sense of homeostasis.

What translates out of each of these readings of infection lobbies is the importance placed upon ‘gamer capital’ as manifested in *CoD* in a comprehensive understanding of the processes associated with the game and a presentation of skill through statistics or unlocks. Being a good player – by the conventional markers of the game - is highly important, so much so to motivate the very black market in illegitimate reputation development, the extensive steps taken to create alternate accounts with which to dabble in modding, and the frustrations felt around those who manipulate and unfairly display the markers of skill. Each of these also contribute towards the destabilisation of the game itself. As a corollary, what also becomes apparent is that for many players (or at least those encountered within this study), modifications represent an expanded part of the game environment and understanding how to navigate through them with impunity becomes yet another expression of expertise and skill alongside knowing how to navigate the maps and dominate opponents. The message is clear: learn to deal with infections - use alternate accounts to experience them or dashboard when they are encountered in the wild.

**Conclusion**

These varying approaches present the many faces and interpretations of the infection lobby from the player perspective – as unfair and unwanted interruption, as valuable and desirable commodity, as anarchic recreation, and as tool of vigilante justice. Yet while it may mean different things to different groups, what it unquestionably constitutes is a violation of the terms of service and copyright law that protects commercial products. Their deployment subverts and undermines the clarity and operation of the intended institutional product – and as such may impact negatively on the games economic viability.

For the victim or casual observer, the modded lobby appears to be a manifestation of harassment, power imposition and greed play. It is as if a fair game has been hijacked and distorted into one of absolute domination. It is inevitable that the experience seems irrational and savage, and the motivations of the perpetrators are regarded as grief and cheap self-aggrandizement. Yet from the perspectives of modders and some who play within them infection lobbies are framed as expanding and complimenting the text instead of opposing or undermining them.

These varied perspectives on infection lobbies perhaps best illustrate the ambiguous nature of play – presenting it as an irrepressible rules-breaking process and that our notions of ‘good play’, ‘transgressive play’, cheating, or griefing are simply reflections of the player-typology discourse that prioritises play as consumption and fails to account for the complexity of the activities taking place. Play itself has an anti-ness (anti-form, anti-aesthetics, anti-philosophy, and anti-play) that is obscured or at least dismissed when discourses of legitimisation prioritise some kinds of play other others. The perspectives explored above lessen some of the infection lobby’s transgressive charge – instead of being co-ordinated attacks against the game and player base they may constitute an expression of the multifaceted nature of play itself. These forms of play are understood by many (including players who strongly identify with the franchise and represent some of its most ardent supporters), as legitimate, enjoyable and playful modalities of play to be enjoyed as supplementary diversions upon the game. Even the most enamoured players are occasionally willing to take on the mask of anonymity and cross the line into the liminal space of illicit modification.

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1. barring earlier work by the author (Meades 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)