

Racialized Contagion and Defensive Biopolitics in *The Last of Us*

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In the opening moments of the video game *The Last of Us Part I*, players are introduced to an emerging pandemic via Austin's *Texas Herald* newspaper. Below a headline warning of mass hospitalizations from a 'mysterious infection', players read of a recall of imported crops 'potentially tainted with mold': 'Initial lists distributed to vendors nationwide warned against crops imported from South America. However now the scope has extended to include Central America and Mexico'. This scene immediately suggests the racialization of the franchise's *Cordyceps* brain infection (CBI), with the contagion germinating in the global South, invading the US via its southern border, and spreading fastest in the nation's diverse urban centres. By highlighting tainted crops as the vector of dispersal in the US, however, rather than infected humans, the franchise resists making this a simple invasion-scary narrative and instead suggests that the spread of the infection is in part a result of capitalist exploitation of cheap land and labour in the global South. Despite its inconsistent record on racial representation and the near-absence of discussion of race across the franchise, the structures reflecting the racialization of contagion and the perpetuation of racialized hierarchies through defensive biopolitics remain present. Drawing connections with the discourse around immigration and the southern border and contemporary pandemics and epidemics, this article makes the case for reading the franchise in terms of racialized contagion and defensive biopolitics, a reading that highlights how the games and their television adaptation reflect urgent contemporary issues around race in America.



Introduction

The games and TV show that make up the franchise *The Last of Us* (2013-) have been seen by many as prophetic of real-world infectious disease outbreaks such as Ebola and COVID-19, joining such similarly prescient-seeming texts as the boardgame *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2008), the film *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011), and Ling Ma's novel *Severance* (2018).¹ As well as plausibly dramatizing the effects of a global pandemic on the United States, the franchise can be read as reflective of how race would factor into the national and international responses to such a pandemic. Scholarship on race in *The Last of Us* has so far focussed primarily on characterization, whether in terms of the games' and series' records of representation and inclusion (Russworm, 2017; Callahan, 2019; James, 2021), the racist backlash among some fans to new characters of colour (Letizi and Norman, 2023), or the body count of non-White versus White characters (Cober, 2024). As this article argues, race also factors into the franchise in ways which align uncomfortably with epidemics and pandemics contemporary to the release of the games and TV show, intersecting with issues such as immigration, climate change, and the economic relationship between the global North and South. While 'global South' and 'global North' are contentious and debated terms, due to the oversimplification and hierarchy the dichotomy implies (Khan et al., 2022), this article uses the terms to indicate that very perceived dichotomy in prevalent narratives concerning global relations and health. The franchise's *Cordyceps* brain infection (CBI) pandemic, in its close association in in-game media with particular regions and peoples, reflects the historic and ongoing racialization of contagion, a phenomenon in which 'the politics of blame seeks to displace the pandemic-induced anger, anxiety, and rage' onto other countries seen as a disease's origin (Siu and Chun, 2020: 427–28). The US and international responses to CBI depicted in the franchise might be described, to borrow a term from social anthropology, as examples of 'defensive biopolitics': practices such as 'border closures, national lockdowns, international travel bans, big-data enabled testing and tracing, and policed quarantines' that are intended to arrest and combat contagion seen as coming from elsewhere in the world (Zhang, Lambert and Liu, 2023: 183). This term builds from Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics as 'a medical politics, drawing support from structures of power and concerning itself with the health of a collectivity', as distinct from 'a private, "liberal" medicine' focussed on the

¹ Following the example of other scholarship on the franchise, this article will use the name *Part I* to refer to the first main game and *Part II* to refer to second main game. This article will refer to the 2014 PS4 remastered version of *Part I* and the 2020 PS4 version of *Part II*, unless otherwise stated. The title *The Last of Us* will be used to refer to the franchise as a whole. While each of these are separate and distinct texts, in some cases experienced using different media technologies, this article will treat the franchise as a whole as part of a shared transmedia story and world, given the frequent helming of its various iterations by the same creators, especially current Naughty Dog studio head Neil Druckmann.

individual (1984: 273). In the pandemic's racialization and the defensive measures taken by governments, CBI in *The Last of Us* mirrors how real-world outbreaks have inspired narratives of fear of the racialized Other and have led to self-protective and isolationist responses from countries including the US. Yet despite recreating the racialized structures of pandemic responses, the franchise makes little direct mention of race, with *Part I* presenting its few non-White characters 'without a diegetic awareness of their racial and cultural backgrounds' (Russworm, 2017: 112) and with *Part II* including a more diverse cast of characters but 'tokeniz[ing] people of colour' through superficial cultural stereotypes (González, 2023: 8). With this minimal treatment of race in the franchise, connections between the political and social responses to the pandemic and race are left implicit, all the more notable for their being included but uninterrogated.

Disease, race, and dehumanization

Diseases have been racialized throughout history. In the 19th and early-20th centuries, social Darwinism, scientific racism, and eugenics used existing racial prejudices and fears to draw direct lines between disease and the racial, ethnic, and national origins of different peoples. Despite the subsequent disapproval and delegitimization of such theories, these connections continue to 'percolate through processes of socialization that have persisted, morphed and diffused these norms globally', entrenching 'explicit and implicit pseudo-scientific distinctions that dehumanize, devalue and denigrate the worth of Black, Indigenous and other people of colour' (Sirleaf, 2020). As a result, when disease outbreaks occur, '[c]ultural margins and national borders are often summoned, if not articulated, through the figure of specific contagious diseases' (Wald, Tomes and Lynch, 2002: 619). Responses to outbreaks frequently involve the use of a defensive biopolitics, where often racialized groups are policed, surveilled, segregated, excluded, or subjected to invasive medical procedures. Examples include the 'racialized medicalization' of Mexican immigrants to the US in the early-20th century, when immigrants at the US-Mexico border were assumed to be carriers of pests and infectious disease and were subjected to forced chemical bathing, vaccination, and delousing (Khanmalek, 2021: 337). Contemporary examples include the practice of patient deportations, continuing the philosophy that Mexican immigrants are 'disease carriers unworthy of publicly funded health care' (Molina, 2011: 1029). Such examples constitute what historian Alan M. Kraut (1994) calls 'medicalized nativism' (3), where the justification for such procedures 'includes charges that [particular groups] constitute a health menace and may endanger their hosts' (2). Through the establishment of physical and political barriers against the perceived threat of a racialized immigrant Other, defensive biopolitics implies and seems to legitimize

an 'almost superstitious belief that national borders can afford protection against communicable disease' (Wald, 2008: 8).

The fungal pandemic and its physiological effects on individuals in *The Last of Us* reflects the racialization of contagion in contemporary discourse. In its reduction of human beings to abject automatons which function only to spread the pathogen through violence, CBI draws clearly upon the tradition of the zombie in American culture. While the word 'zombies' is not used in the franchise and the games' co-director Neil Druckmann rejects its use to describe the infected (Druckmann, 2020a), the 'infected' of *The Last of Us* resemble zombies in many respects. The zombie as it appears in American and global cultures today might be variously conceptualized, 'as the walking dead; a vacant-eyed drone; a vicious, animated corpse; a rabid, dehumanized carrier of virus; or a toxic body that passes on its psychopathic behaviour with a bite' (Lauro, 2015: 8), all of which might be definitions applied to the infected of *The Last of Us*. The game and TV show also align closely with the plot conventions of zombie narratives established in film and literature, with the infection spreading throughout a majority of the world's population, the protagonists fighting to survive and avoid becoming part of the zombie horde, and with the only refuge for uninfected survivors being walled and heavily-defended sanctuaries. While the TV show follows the example of the games in refusing to use the word 'zombie' to describe the infected, its co-creator and co-showrunner alongside Druckmann, Craig Mazin, states that he 'call[s] them zombies all the time', signalling the appropriateness of the comparison (Romano, 2023). Likewise, while Druckmann has claimed that the infected are 'not zombies' (Druckmann, 2020a), he has also indicated that he sees this category distinction as insignificant, posting on the platform now called X an animated GIF overlaid with the text 'I don't care' (Druckmann, 2020b). Crucially, as zombie studies scholar Sarah Juliet Lauro (2017) writes, 'Our modern zombie is a palimpsest', written over repeatedly and with various meanings and consequently taking many forms. Beneath these inscriptions, however, the zombie is forever shaped by its early connections to colonialism, slavery, and race: 'The spectre of the African slave remains in the image of the zombie—and cannot be effaced' (xi). In its Haitian incarnation, as a body reanimated and cursed to perform endless labour, the zombie was a figure and a fate to be 'pitied' (Seabrook, 2016: 100), but following the US occupation of Haiti, the figure was translated to become a fearsome Hollywood monster, in ways that draw upon the racialized demonization of the supposedly barbaric post-slavery republic. Despite the visible racial and ethnic diversity of the infected in *The Last of Us*, therefore, the origins of the zombie and its evolution in America are deeply tied to racialized fears and xenophobia. The absence of the word

‘zombies’ in the franchise, in a world otherwise identical to our own prior to the CBI pandemic, is consequently one of several ways in which the franchise seems to attempt to avoid discussion of race.

The zombie’s connections to capitalism, both in its Caribbean origins as a reanimated and enslaved corpse and in its American adaptation into as part of a contagious horde of bloodthirsty consumers, is well covered in scholarship (for example, McNally, 2011; Lauro, 2015; Fojas, 2017; Oloff, 2023). As Sherryl Vint (2017) writes, the zombie reflects our fears both of physical suffering and a loss of the individual self through capitalism: much as capitalism ‘destroys the spirit or essence of the human, transforming creative energies and full being into interchangeable units of work via its equalizing logic’, so too is the zombie’s ‘interchangeability’ emblematic of its ‘inhumanity’, appearing frequently as an undifferentiated ‘mass’ (172). Such interchangeability is especially evident in the games of *The Last of Us*. In distinction to its non-infected characters, with their highly individualized appearances, a more limited set of character models for the infected are reused multiple times, meaning the player can encounter and kill identical-looking infected repeatedly in different locations, and even experience the bewildering and uncanny sensation of fighting multiple identical enemies simultaneously (**Figure 1**). This is of course a consequence of the limitations of the medium, as the demands of technology and human labour make the repetition of character models a necessity, but its effect is to emphasize the dehumanizing effects of CBI on the infected. The behaviour of the infected is also consistent, in contrast to the individualized behaviours, dialogue, and personalities of many of the non-infected characters, allowing for players to learn their movement and attack patterns and to master the process of evading or attacking



Figure 1: A horde led by three identical infected, showing their lack of individualized identities. *The Last of Us Part II* (2024), Naughty Dog / Sony. All screenshots taken by the author.

them. While this is also true of some of the non-infected antagonists of the games, who may share appearances and even names, it is particularly pronounced with the infected as they often appear in groups. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (2019) writes, the dehumanization of zombies through the ‘transformation of individuals into a population’ has characterized cultural depictions of zombies since at least the 1968 George A. Romero film *Night of the Living Dead* (644). The infected are thus emblematic of the loss of the individual self, brought about by the zombie-like pandemic, which reduces them from full humanity to undifferentiated and interchangeable antagonists.

The dehumanization of the infected is also emphasized through gameplay. In a flashback in *Part II*, for example, players are tasked with exterminating infected who have wandered into a ski resort nearby to the characters’ settlement. As Ellie, players are handed a sniper rifle by Tommy, who says he’s ‘feeling generous’. Players are told how to compensate for the bullet drop across the distance to the ski resort and encouraged to continue shooting until all infected are dead. The infected are at such a distance that their faces cannot be clearly seen, appearing as simplified shapes recognizable primarily through their movements (**Figure 2**). The gameplay in this scene represents a new challenge for players, who have not used firearms over this distance before, and will take some attempts to master. Once she has exterminated the infected, Ellie returns to rifle to Tommy, saying, ‘hey, thanks for that. It was just what I needed’ (Naughty Dog, 2020). The scene is seemingly unremarkable and in fact somewhat typical of how games teach gameplay mechanics through narrative, but the scene also serves to reinforce the biopolitics of its postapocalyptic world through its use of what Ian Bogost (2007) terms ‘procedural rhetoric’, ‘a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created’ (3). As Bogost describes, ‘rule-based representations and interactions’ (ix), like the shooting of enemies, can ‘make an argument about how systems work in the material world’ (Servitje, 2016: 90), in this case about the biopolitics of infection and the treatment of contagious bodies. By framing the routine task as a treat for Ellie, whose mood is improved by the act, the game argues for the necessity and inevitability of killing those infected by CBI, and even its enjoyability. The infected in this scene presumably pose no immediate threat to the player-character and are literally distanced from the player-character by a ravine, implying the figurative distance between them and the everyday inconsequentiality of Ellie killing the infected, who have become subhuman and must be euthanized.

The impersonality of this scene, in which the faces of the infected cannot be seen, stands in contrast to the repeated instances of characters shown struggling with the necessity of killing friends or family who become infected, and indeed of most other encounters with the infected throughout the games, which generally take place in



Figure 2: An infected (centre, hunched over) seen distantly through the scope of Tommy's sniper rifle. *The Last of Us Part II* (2024), Naughty Dog / Sony.



Figure 3: Joel stealthily kills a man in a character animation that may be duplicated hundreds of times during a single playthrough of the game. *The Last of Us Part I* (2022), Naughty Dog / Sony.

close quarters. Taking down infected using stealth, rather than firearms or explosives, involves Joel or Ellie grappling and killing enemies by hand or with a knife, with the game 'camera' able to move to show the face of the infected as it dies. This is a potentially far more troubling sight that is also effectively normalized by its routinized repetition in identical animations across many hours of gameplay (Figure 3). As a result, the killing of the infected produces a procedural rhetoric about the dehumanization and Othering of infected bodies and the acceptability of their destruction. These are beings made fundamentally different by their infection, the games argue, a message that is only further emphasized by the franchise's invoking of discourses of racialization.

Racialized contagion and the border

Players are introduced to the impacts of racialized discourses of contagion from the very beginning of the franchise. *Part I* opens immediately prior to the outbreak, with players controlling Sarah, the daughter of the game's main protagonist, Joel Miller. As Sarah, players first interact with the game world by moving around the home she shares with her father Joel in Austin, Texas, investigating objects and environmental clues which establish the unfolding fungal pandemic. Among the first of these is a newspaper, Austin's *Texas Herald*, placed prominently beside the bathroom sink. Invited by a button prompt to pick up the newspaper, the player sees a headline reporting on a 300% rise in local hospital admissions from a 'mysterious infection' (Figure 4). The article beneath reveals a Food and Drug Administration investigation and 'massive recalls' of imported crops 'potentially tainted with mold': 'Initial lists distributed to vendors nationwide warned against crops imported from South America. However now the scope has extended to include Central America and Mexico. Several companies have already voluntarily recalled their food products from the shelves'. An adjacent article reporting on 'crazed' killings in Austin's leafy West Lake Hills suburb suggests that, as players might anticipate from the game's generic conventions, this infection is already upon the city (Naughty Dog, 2014).

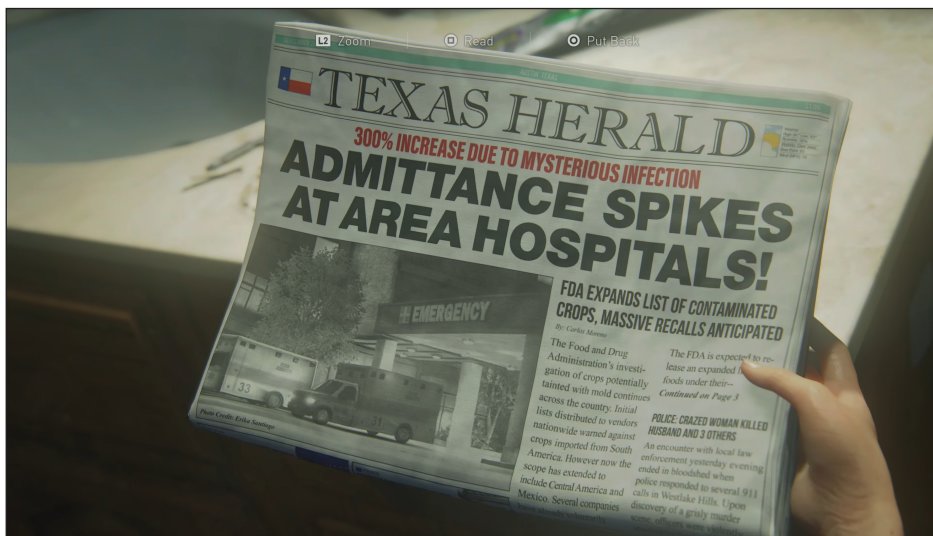


Figure 4: *Texas Herald* newspaper bearing the headline 'Admittance Spikes at Area Hospitals!' *The Last of Us Part I* (2022), Naughty Dog / Sony.

This context casts the fungal CBI pandemic as an invader from Mexico, Central America, and South America that has crossed the southern border and now represents a particular threat to America's major cities, including suburban enclaves like West

Lake Hills, a real-world location with an 82.2% White population (Census Reporter, 2023).² This mirrors contemporary discourse in the US around immigration, which often draws upon and exacerbates xenophobic fears about those entering the country via the border with Mexico and changing the proportion of the non-White population. Such fears typically centre on those from Mexico, Central America, and South America but politicians have also claimed the route to be an easy means of entry for criminals, gangsters, and terrorists from elsewhere in the global South, such as in President Donald Trump's claim that 'Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners' were entering the US via its border with Mexico in the so-called 'migrant caravan' (Qiu, 2018). While placing its origin south of the border does not itself explicitly racialize the pandemic, the parallels encourage players to make the connection themselves. By focussing on the southern border, rather than the country's numerous other borders, boundaries, and ports of entry, which may conceivably have also been the means of entry for CBI-tainted food, the *Texas Herald* article strongly encourages a reading that racializes the threat of the pandemic: the apocalypse has apparently germinated in the global South, infected the US via the border with Mexico, and is now spreading outwards from the nation's dense, racially-diverse urban centres. Such a framing aligns with the way contagion and race have long been linked in discourse around immigration in the US, from casting Latine immigrants 'in terms of what is endemic and epidemic to the polity—depending on political necessity' (Brendese, 2014: 181), to relying upon 'the figure of disease and contagion' to depict African diasporic culture as a threat to Western hegemony (Browning, 1998: 6), and propagating Yellow Peril anxieties by framing Asian immigration as an 'infectious ... flow rather than a movement of groups or individuals' (Mayer, 2013: 22). When viewed with this context in mind, CBI can be seen to highlight certain ways in which *The Last of Us* draws upon the racialization of contagion in a US context.

Of course, interactivity and player choice mean that players can miss seeing this newspaper or, having picked it up, can choose not to read it. Players who do not encounter and read the newspaper will play the rest of the game without this crucial detail about the pandemic's origins and its racialized implications. However, many players also proactively seek out this kind of context and background. The unofficial *The Last of Us Wiki*, for example, a site created and maintained by fans, includes numerous pages filled with transcriptions, imagery, paratextual information, and theories. One of these,

² The decision to have the fungus originate in South America may be due in part to the original inspiration for CBI. While species of *Cordyceps* appear around the world, *Part I*'s creators Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann recall watching an episode of the television documentary *Planet Earth* (2006) focussing on the Amazon rainforest, in which a bullet ant is infected with *Cordyceps* and enters a state of zombie-like 'disorientation' (Edge, 2012: 42).

titled 'State of the World', seeks 'to catalog every reference in the series to countries other than the USA', building up a comprehensive reference page about the pandemic's effects on the world beyond the locations visited in the primary texts. The page includes contributor descriptions and interpretations of the *Texas Herald* newspaper, along with other details from the franchise, from interviews, and promotional materials. More than simply a catalogue of information, the page's contributors extrapolate from small details to fill in gaps regarding the wider world outside the main narratives, such as by inferring from a ferry log found in-game that Canada 'did not implement travel restrictions on the west coast' (Jgmortim, 2020). At the time of writing, this page includes over 2000 words of information, including references. As Phillip Penix-Tadsen (2016) writes, wikis like this 'go into detail that far surpasses what is necessary for playing the game, informing the player about real-world events and cultural traditions that fall outside of the would-be magic circle of gameplay' (233). For many players, therefore, artifacts such as the *Texas Herald* newspaper are not superfluous but are a key part of the pleasure derived from playing these kinds of games, leading them to discuss and to build and share resources about them extensively outside of individual gameplay.

Beyond the implications of the *Texas Herald* newspaper, race and the southern border are further highlighted by the decision to set the first game's opening scene in the US state with the longest shared border with Mexico: Texas. The home of the Miller family is Austin, the Texas capital. While Austin is far from the closest Texan city to Mexico, the capital was built on land once part of Mexico and is located further south than much of the present-day US-Mexico border. According to the most recent census data, almost one-fifth of Austin's population were born abroad, and of these residents 59.4% do not have US citizenship (United States Census Bureau, undated). The choice of city thus evokes the uneasy relationship between the US and its southern neighbour, especially concerning immigration and migrant labour. Notably, the two games feature only one significant Latine character, Manny Alvarez in *Part II*, despite demographics in Austin, and in the country more broadly, in which Hispanic and Latine people represent the second largest racial or ethnic group (Funk and Lopez, 2022). This follows a trend in games more widely, for, as Carlos Gabriel Kelly González (2023) writes, 'we see very little of Latinxs [in games], period'. This is perhaps in part because less than three percent of the game industry's workforce are Latine, meaning that 'White men, like in most industries, dictate how the rest of us should see the world, creating a vacuum of representation, especially for Latinxs' (7).

This is a detail apparently noticed in casting for the TV show, which saw significant characters played by Latine actors. In the games, Joel and his brother Tommy are

White, are voiced by White actors (Troy Baker and Jeffrey Pierce, respectively), and are shown before the CBI outbreak working as carpenters. The TV show, in contrast, features Latine actors in the roles of Joel and Tommy (Pedro Pascal and Gabriel Luna, respectively) and changes the characters' pre-apocalypse professions to construction contractors.³ While the characters' ethnicities certainly do not mean that the TV show's Millers emigrated to the US themselves nor even that their family heritage can be traced specifically to Mexico, Central America, or South America, they could be read as at least suggestive of the large number of Hispanic people working in the construction industry in the US and the industry's demand for migrant labour, a key driver of immigration to the US from Latin America. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics, for instance, reports that 30% of construction workers were Hispanic in 2020, despite only accounting for 17.6% of the total employed (Gallagher, 2022).

The opening credits sequence of the TV adaptation further subtly implies the connection between CBI and the US relationship with its southern border. Visually reminiscent of *Part I*'s opening credits, the TV show credits sequence depicts fast-spreading mycelium, the branching, root-like structure that supports fungal colonies, as it grows across rugged and rocky terrain. Seemingly in time lapse, the camera follows as the mycelium grows and branches out, providing the foundations for tubular fungal protrusions suggestive of a city skyline. The camera then pulls back to reveal that the mycelium has grown to form a shape eerily similar to the contiguous US, with dense bioluminescent concentrations in the fungal network evoking satellite imagery of the country's urban centres at night (**Figure 5**). Though subtle, the similarity of this imagery to an aerial view of the US has been noted by audiences, for example, in multiple comments on a YouTube video of the titles uploaded by distributor HBO Max (2023), and by critics, such as the BBC's Clare Thorp (2023). According to the cardinal directions this shot implies, the camera begins by following the mycelium as it spreads from the southwest, crossing a landscape suggestive of southwest Texas, multiplying north to a city, and then growing out further north and east, much as CBI would cross the border from the south, reach the protagonists in Austin, and then spread to the region that serves as the main setting for both the TV show and the first game, the northeast.

Read as a map of CBI's spread, the opening sequence functions in a manner similar to how maps function in much contagion imagery in the real world. Maps are frequently

³ Luna has resisted the idea of the brothers' Latine ethnicities needing to be explained by tying their characters to countries outside the US, recalling that he rejected the idea of the brothers speaking to each other in Spanish: 'A lot of times I think Hollywood acts as if it doesn't make sense if we're onscreen if we don't speak Spanish, and I don't think that necessarily should be the case. Being a Latino is not a monolith. There are a lot of different ways one can be themselves and be both Latino and Mexican American, but also Texan and American' (Hadadi, 2023).



Figure 5: Opening credits sequence showing mycelium in a shape suggestive of the contiguous US. *The Last of Us* (2023), HBO.

used in the media and in public health reports to visualize the spread of disease, creating a narrative of contagion that implies an origin and a movement towards particular destinations. As Kirsten Ostherr (2020) writes, map imagery can result in ‘the depiction of a causal chain—the outbreak starts “there” and then spreads “here” ... emphasizing the source of blame (“there”) ... [and] reinforce[ing] the xenophobic logic of causality’ (713–14). The credits sequence suggests just such a causal chain in which blame is attributed to Mexico for CBI’s incursion across the southern border and its subsequent spread across the US.

CBI’s use of vast mycelium networks is a detail added to the world of *The Last of Us* in the TV show. As Tess (Anna Torv) tells Ellie (Bella Ramsey), a single fungus organism can span multiple city blocks, activating hordes of infected humans within its reach to descend upon survivors: ‘the fungus also grows underground, long fibres like wires, some of them stretching over a mile. You step on a patch of *Cordyceps* in one place and you can wake a dozen infected from somewhere else. Now they know where you are. Now they come’ (*The Last of Us: When You’re Lost in the Darkness*, 2023). If the mycelium of the opening credits is read as symbolizing the spread of the fungal invader across the southern border, Tess’s description brings to mind pervasive xenophobic narratives around immigration, such as the reframing of family-based immigration as the ‘imaginary unending horde’ of ‘chain migration’ (Hing, 2021: 66). At the time of the show’s broadcast, such narratives had recently been resuscitated by the Trump White House, which inaccurately claimed that chain migration is ‘a process that can continue without limit’ and that ‘one immigrant can bring their entire extended families’ [sic]

(Trump White House, 2017). In its seemingly endless mycelial spread, and the infinite replication of the faceless, undifferentiated, and parasitical contagion, the show's opening credits suggest a similar limitless growth of the fungal pandemic of CBI. Such a connection between Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and the spread of CBI has also been noted by fans, who have parodied the rhetoric online, as in the following examples: 'They're bringing spores, they're bringing bloaters, they're fungus, and some I assume are good people' (Trojansage, 2025) and 'They're eating the men, they're eating the women, they're eating the owners of the pets that live there' (SakuraTacos, 2025). As in the contemporary context of US border policy, the rhetorical connection of contagion and the border in *The Last of Us* set the stage for the enactment of a defensive biopolitics.

Defensive biopolitics

As Tommy, Joel, and Sarah drive out of Austin in *Part I*, the dialogue reveals how the pandemic has spread since its initial incursion into Texas. As Tommy remarks of the news reports the characters are hearing on the truck radio, 'At first they were saying it was just the South. Now they're going on about East Coast, West Coast' (Naughty Dog, 2014). A promotional image for the game provides further clues regarding this spread, depicting a newspaper dispenser showing a front page with the standfirst, 'Texas, New Mexico Quarantine Fails'. While Tommy's remarks about the radio news broadcasts show his perspective on the speed with which CBI has spread from the South across the country in each direction as far as the coasts, the promotional image indicates that this spread was gradual enough for print media to remain a viable means of tracking the pandemic for those living outside of the Mexico-bordering states of Texas and New Mexico. A physical copy of this newspaper was produced by the games' developer Naughty Dog in 2013 and reproduced as a prop for the Los Angeles premiere of the TV show in 2023, with the addition of the slogan of the *New York Times*, 'All the News that's Fit to Print' (Naughty Dog Info, 2023). The reuse of this newspaper suggests its content still aligns with the worlds of the games and TV show and the inclusion of the slogan adds the suggestion that New York has remained comparatively unscathed during the early spread of CBI, even while the quarantine measures in New Mexico and Texas collapsed.

As implied by the standfirst, the fortified and government-controlled quarantine zones (QZs), a key feature of the urban areas encountered in the games and TV show, fell first in those states which were impacted earliest by the effects of CBI's arrival across the border. A microcosm of geopolitics, these QZs are walled and guarded sanctuaries, presided over by the militaristic Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA). As Emanuel Maiberg (2020) points out, the architecture of the QZs is

especially reminiscent of one of the most contentious and highly militarized borders in the contemporary world, the Israel–Palestine border, with the Seattle QZ in *Part II* ‘visually and functionally defined by a series of checkpoints, security walls, and barriers ... almost exactly like the tall, precast concrete barriers and watch towers Israel started building through the West Bank in 2000’. Across the franchise, FEDRA is shown to be ruthless in determining the fates of those seeking asylum within the borders of the QZs, separating those deemed fit to live amongst the survivors from those to be summarily executed on the basis of whether they are suspected carriers of the fungal invader. Even those who may be uninfected find themselves the victims of the callousness of strictly-enforced immigration quotas. On a road in Pittsburgh in *Part I*, Ellie and Joel find a row of bullet-ridden cars, with skeletal remains strapped into the seats. ‘My money’s on the military’, Joel says, speculating on who was responsible. Shocked, Ellie asks, ‘Why would they mow down all these people?’ Joel responds, ‘Can’t let everyone in. ... And dead people don’t get infected. You sacrifice the few to save the many’ (Naughty Dog, 2014). The scene highlights how the militarization of immigration and public health measures together works towards inhumane ends, pre-emptively executing those asylum seekers who may carry illness or otherwise drain resources in order to protect those already within the walls, an equation of human life with the parasitical fungus itself.

Within the QZs, the player encounters numerous posters and signs warning citizens to carry identification at all times, proof of their legal immigration status within the QZs, which is scrutinized at checkpoints by armed federal agents. These checkpoints draw instant comparisons with US border checkpoints, from the steel fencing, barbed wire, and signage, to the blue-clad, body-armour-wearing agents. Joel and Tess pass through a border checkpoint in the Boston QZ at the beginning of the second chapter of *Part I*, handing their IDs to a border agent. In the PlayStation 3 original game the FEDRA agents in this area are racially diverse, with the agent at the checkpoint seemingly Hispanic, but in the 2022 remake almost all of these agents are White, a change that encourages reading the FEDRA agents as a racially hegemonic force oppressing a racially-diverse populace (Figures 6 and 7). In the 2014 remastered edition, Tess and Joel’s IDs clearly bear the words ‘Official Passport’ in gold lettering on their covers (Naughty Dog, 2014), making the link to contemporary border crossings unambiguous (this is changed to ‘FEDRA’ in the 2022 remake). Notably, these checkpoints appear within the QZs, between areas ostensibly deemed safe from CBI, showing how FEDRA has replicated the limitations on free movement of the old world and suggesting an even more high-security approach to those entering from outside the QZ. In textual artifacts discovered during the game, players can read about how displaced survivors

arriving at the QZ's gates from outside are referred to by FEDRA as 'refugees', that a policy of family separations was instituted, and that fake 'visas' were sold on the black market to navigate the border crossings. The clear links to contemporary national borders, the framing of immigrants as refugees, and the apparent change of FEDRA to a majority-White force, all invite readings of the QZs as places that enforce boundaries in ways that control, exclude, and Other certain racialized groups.

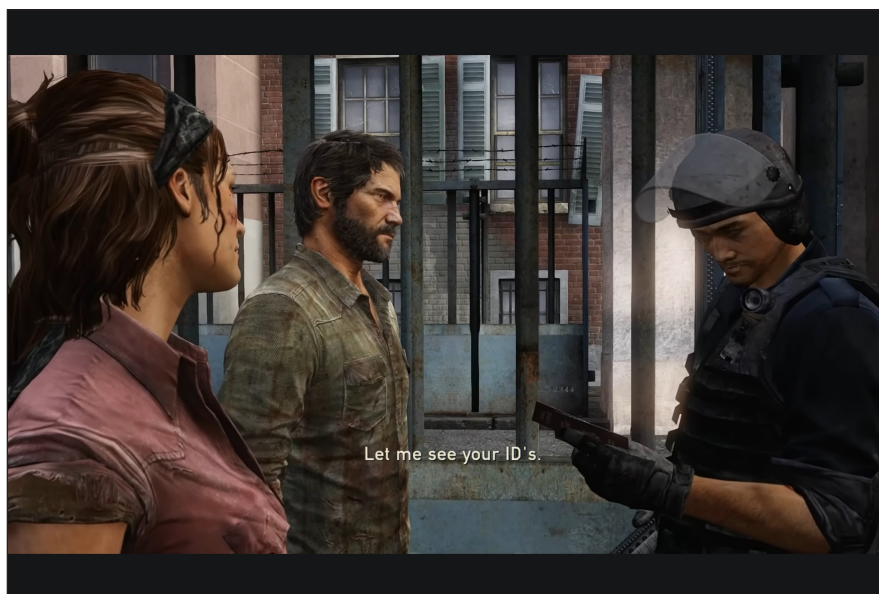


Figure 6: Tess and Joel present their passport-like IDs to a FEDRA agent, who questions them about the purpose of their visit. *The Last of Us* (2013), Naughty Dog / Sony.



Figure 7: The same scene in the 2022 remake, in which the agent and a nearby colleague have both been changed to become White. *The Last of Us Part I* (2022), Naughty Dog / Sony.

Essentially redrawing borders between areas considered safe and dangerous, between inside and outside, and between 'us' and 'them', the QZs represent an extreme, militarized response to the threat of contagion modelled after real-world methods of border enforcement that the franchise demonstrates are untenable. As they approach Salt Lake City in *Part I*, Joel notes the ubiquity with which the QZs have failed as a means of managing the pandemic's spread through strictly-controlled borders: 'Another city, another abandoned quarantine zone' (Naughty Dog, 2014). Abandoned by FEDRA or violently overthrown, whether by hordes of infected or by rebellions of those living within their walls, the QZs' militaristic enforcement of boundaries is shown as an ineffective means of combating the spread of infection in the franchise which only brings about more suffering.

The enforcement of borders and travel restrictions as a means of halting the spread of contagion calls to mind defensive biopolitics employed during real-world epidemics and pandemics. Scientific studies suggest travel restrictions and border controls frequently have limited impact upon the spread of epidemics and pandemics, at best slightly delaying the rate of spread without affecting overall transmission, yet frequently impeding travel for healthcare workers, damaging international trade, and stoking xenophobia through their targeting of specific geographic regions and peoples (for example, Germann et al, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2006, Bajardi et al., 2011). Such studies typically show that only highly effective implementation of border control measures will have any real impact, which seldom occurs in practice. These forms of defensive biopolitics are nonetheless common to international responses to infectious disease outbreaks. For example, responses to the 2002–04 SARS outbreak 'focused on ... travel advisories or restrictions' especially targeted at Asian countries (Gostin, Bayer and Fairchild, 2003: 3229); during the 2009 swine flu pandemic, dubbed by some in the US as 'Mexican flu', 'control measures included travel bans to/from Mexico ... and travel advisories against non-essential travel to Mexico' (Bajardi et al., 2011: 1); and during the 2014–16 Ebola epidemic, 'travel to and from the affected countries in West Africa was limited or suspended' (Vaidya et al., 2020: 1). Terms like Mexican flu or the use of travel bans targeted only at specific regions conflate viruses with their human hosts, as Ostherr (2020) writes, 'through metaphorical slippages that express racial and geopolitical views of pathology and contamination'. As a result, the 'pathogen is associated with racist imagery of primitive settings and primordial threats' (710), reinforcing 'racist and xenophobic discourses of containment and control' (708). Discourse around combating contagion also often draws upon the militarized language of war, a linguistic connection sometimes reflected in practice (Chapman and Miller, 2020; Blankshain, Glick and Lupton, 2023), resulting in 'panicked responses from

governments and citizens across borders' that normalizes and intensifies 'the defensive modality of biopolitics' (Zhang, Lambert and Liu, 2023: 183). Such war-like language can intensify the already xenophobic 'us' versus 'them', 'here' versus 'there' framings of pandemics, equating countries and racial or ethnic groups seen as responsible for the outbreak with the threat of the pandemic itself.

In *Part I*, the limitations of such war-like and defensive approaches are made clear in their failure to combat the spread of CBI. In a maintenance room adjoining a sewage tunnel traversed in chapter six, 'The Suburbs', players can find evidence of the character Ish's attempts to piece together the chronology of the pandemic. Pinned to a notice board are various front pages from a publication titled the *Pittsburgh Newspaper*, bearing headlines such as 'UK Freezes Immigration', 'All International Flights Grounded', 'Infection Spreading', '... Residents Go Hungry', and 'Food Supplies Run Low' (**Figure 8**). Another newspaper clipping bears a headline in which the only legible word is 'crop', and below is pinned a large image torn from a newspaper showing a field of what appears to be wheat, with a combine harvester in the background (Naughty Dog, 2014). These headlines and clippings suggest that early responses to CBI from countries in the global North, such as the UK, involved shutting their borders to travellers and immigrants as a means of preventing the arrival of the infection. As the headlines show, however, such measures failed to prevent the spread of infection and in fact created additional problems by hindering the global food trade networks upon which such countries depended. According to Druckmann, the game intentionally reflects realistic and historical responses such as these: 'We've spent a lot of time researching the world and the disease and how institutions react to a pandemic. But then a lot of that stuff is in the background and we're very conscious of keeping it there' (Dutton, 2013). Despite the

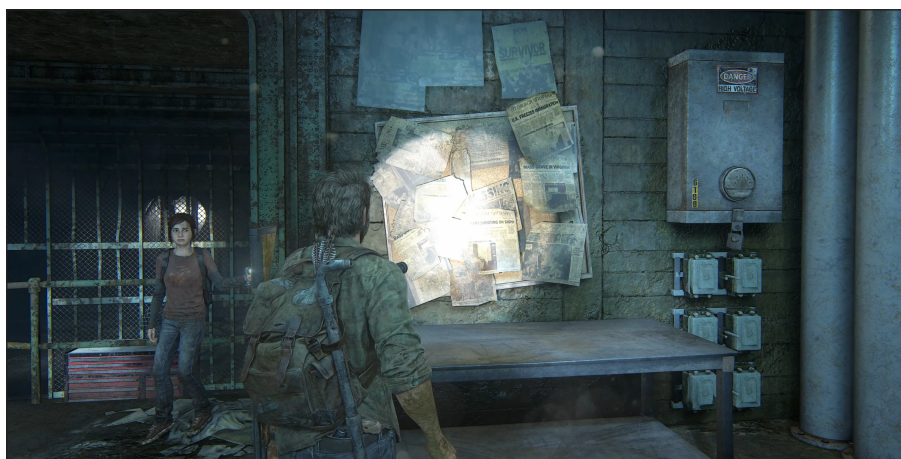


Figure 8: Newspaper clippings attached to a pin board in a sewer maintenance room. *The Last of Us Part I* (2022), Naughty Dog / Sony.

intention to keep such ideas merely ‘in the background’, however, the context of real-world infectious disease outbreaks around the release of both games (especially the 2014 Ebola outbreak and 2019’s COVID-19, given their dominance of the headlines soon after each game’s release) brings the games’ engagement with defensive biopolitics to the foreground and sets the stage for its importance in the TV show adaptation.

Contemporary contexts

The HBO TV adaptation of *The Last of Us* was announced in March 2020, less than a month into the public awareness of COVID-19’s presence in the US. The second game, *Part II*, was released three months later. As many have noted, the sense of failure of our seemingly ordered and ‘controlled world’ in *The Last of Us* ‘mirrors precisely’ that experienced by many during attempts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic through defensive biopolitics (Leggatt, 2024: 70). As with earlier outbreaks, discourse around COVID-19 frequently centred on its origins in China, with Trump attempting to popularize the name ‘China Virus’ to attribute blame for the disease to China and to deflect responsibility away from his administration for the spread of COVID-19 across the US. The Trump White House imposed various travel bans and border controls under the auspices of containing the outbreak, although these really built upon Trump’s already established record of making unsubstantiated and xenophobic links between immigration and contagious diseases.⁴ Such defensive measures were claimed by the administration to have been highly successful, with the website of the Trump White House (undated) praising Trump for ‘[suspending] all travel from China, saving thousands of lives’. Further tying public health measures to immigration, the website even claims that among the measures that delivered a ‘Life-Saving Response to the Coronavirus’ were agreements with Mexico to ‘expeditiously return illegal aliens’, a non-sequitur that is not elaborated upon. Attempts such as these to racialize the COVID-19 pandemic by associating contagion with immigration from countries in the global South contributed to a resurgence of xenophobic discourse and violence in the US and worldwide. In the US, this rise in xenophobia resulted in a particularly marked rise in ‘discrimination and scapegoating ... not just [against] Chinese immigrants, but

⁴ For example, during the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump claimed ‘tremendous infectious disease is pouring across the border’ from Mexico (Neate and Tuckman, 2015); in his first term in 2018, Trump claimed that immigration brings ‘large scale [sic] crime and disease’ (Trump, 2018) and that a wall along the US-Mexico border was necessary to prevent the ‘tremendous medical problem coming into our country’ (Rodrigo, 2018); and during the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump repeatedly claimed immigrants from Mexico, Central America, South America, Asia, and Africa were ‘poisoning the blood of our country’ (Layne, 2023) and ‘infecting our country’ (Gutierrez, 2024). These narratives also call to mind Trump’s travel bans targeting Muslim-majority countries, for the supposed purpose of combating the metaphorical contagion of Islamist terrorism.

any Asian American perceived as having connections to China' (Li and Nicholson, 2021: 2; emphasis removed), as well as hate crimes directed at anyone from 'marginalized groups, including religious, ethnic, or racial minorities and migrants' (Dionne and Turkmen, 2020: E213).

While *The Last of Us* exists within and reflects this context of anti-immigration rhetoric in traces such as the newspaper headlines, the franchise notably does not include any direct discussion of racial discrimination or scapegoating arising from the pandemic. Indeed, mention of race is conspicuously absent in the first game; the only reference to race among the several dozen artifacts (notes, letters, recordings, etc.), for instance, is an entry for the character Marlene's race on her wanted poster, which is listed evasively as 'mixed' (Naughty Dog, 2014). As Adilifu Nama (2008) writes, such 'structured absence' of race is common to science fiction texts, but even where such an absence exists race is typically implicit as 'narrative subtext' or 'allegorical subject' (2). The absence of non-White characters who represent more than tokenized inclusion or who survive long enough to develop as characters, the absence of any indication of racial discrimination or scapegoating during the initial outbreak, and the absence of any direct discussion of race all suggest a franchise which is at great pains not to engage with race, despite drawing upon real-world structures that reflect the racialization of contagion and disease.

One way the franchise sidesteps this is by making crops, rather than human beings, the primary means by which CBI crosses borders into the US. In both the games and the TV show, tainted crops and global food trade networks are responsible for this incursion, suggesting that the spread of the pandemic is in part systemic, a result of the capitalist exploitation by the global North of cheap land and labour in the global South, though this of course points back to race in the colonial justifications at the roots of this exploitation. As the *Texas Herald* newspaper makes clear in *Part I*, the fungal pandemic arrived in the US via imported crops and was distributed to Americans in food products produced from those crops, with companies then scrambling to recall 'their food products from the shelves' of grocery stores. In season one of the TV show, Joel tells Ellie that the 'best guess' of how CBI spread was through the 'food supply. Probably a basic ingredient like flour or sugar. There were certain brands of food that were sold everywhere, all across the country, across the world' (*The Last of Us: Long, Long Time*, 2023). Rather than spreading gradually from person to person, therefore, the fungus is imported and distributed widely before infecting human hosts, further showing the ineffectiveness of and needless suffering inflicted by immigration bans and tightened border controls. The show's invoking of how certain giant transnational companies monopolise the global food industry suggests that the ubiquitous and simultaneous explosion of CBI is rather a failing of the global capitalist system.

This is further elaborated upon in a flashback in the second episode depicting the early discovery of an outbreak amongst employees of a flour and grain factory in Jakarta, Indonesia, an apparently ill-considered shift of the pandemic's origin from the Americas to Asia at a time of high anti-Asian sentiment in the US. In this flashback, mycology professor Ratna Pertiwi (Christine Hakim) is summoned by the military to perform an autopsy on an infected employee. A military officer (Yayu A.W. Unru) describes how the employee had been a 'normal woman, then suddenly violent. Attacked four co-workers, bit three of them. ... The police came, she tried to attack them, and they shot her'. As is already clear to viewers at this point in the series, those attacked by the employee would themselves have become infected and may have already spread the infection to others. Pertiwi is then asked to advise on how to prevent the contagion spreading, to which she responds, 'I have spent my life studying these things, so please listen carefully. There is no medicine. There is no vaccine. ... Bomb. Start bombing. Bomb this city and everyone in it' (*The Last of Us: Infected*, 2023). By elaborating on the means of transmission suggested by *Part I*, the outsourcing of food production required by the food networks that supply the global North, this flashback dramatically suggests the devastating effects of the capitalist exploitation of workers and countries of the global South.

Cedric J. Robinson (2020), in his concept of 'racial capitalism', shows how the 'historical development of world capitalism was influenced in the most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism' (9), emerging from intra-European racism which comes to order 'the relations of European to non-European peoples' (2). Camilla Fojas (2017) builds upon this idea, arguing that capitalism's connection to the zombie is especially apt given how violence and racial inequality 'sustains ... the structures of capitalism ... evident in the geopolitical conditions in which the global North, as an outcome of legacies of colonial rule, retains privilege and power over the global South' (2). Fojas argues that the 'structural, even systemic' violence perpetrated by capitalism is reflected in many zombie narratives (2), which 'capture and contain audience outrage, fear, and anxiety about capitalism in crisis while they imagine the destructiveness of capitalism through debt, indebtedness, and forms of indentured servitude' (61). This idea might be extended to the CBI pandemic and its zombie-like infected in *The Last of Us*, in which racial capitalism has structured a world in which Indonesia, and by implication other countries in the global South, are first to bear the violence inherent in its system, both in the zombification of its citizens and then in the bombing of its own cities. As ground zero for the CBI outbreak, the decision to pre-emptively bomb civilians essentially sacrifices Jakarta in the hopes of saving other parts of the world, such as the US. Unfortunately, as the franchise demonstrates,

violence is so entrenched in the global system as to manifest everywhere, and the US, too, will eventually bomb its own cities in an attempt to slow CBI's spread.

The opening of the first episode of the TV show foregrounds the exploitation of the global South immediately, in its connection of the CBI pandemic and climate change. Co-written by Naughty Dog's Druckmann, the episode opens decades before the main story, with a clip from a fictional TV talk show. Among the guests on the talk show is scientist Neuman (John Hannah), who speculates about the possibilities of a global fungal pandemic, which he says is not currently possible: 'fungi cannot survive if its host's internal temperature is over 94 degrees ... but what if that were to change? What if, for instance, the world were to get slightly warmer?' (*The Last of Us: When You're Lost in Darkness*, 2023). The story then moves ahead to 2003, at the time of filming the second-hottest year on record (tied with 2022), when the initial outbreak of CBI is set (National Centers for Environmental Information, 2004). As scientific consensus demonstrates, environmental damage and disasters brought about by global warming and climate change disproportionately affect the global South, 'compounding' various and longstanding public health issues that exacerbate its already overwhelming 'disease burden' (Butler and Hanigan, 2019: 1243). It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that CBI would arise first in the global South, under conditions ideally suited for the fungus to flourish and make the transition to human hosts. As this introduction to the series implies, especially when paired with the later flashback set in Jakarta, it is not the natural world that is at fault for the pandemic, but rather the conditions that have made this pandemic inevitable. Those conditions include the abuses of the natural world that lead to global warming, but also the closely connected economic exploitation of the global South and the ravages of global racial capitalism, which together compound the risk of global collapse. CBI first makes the leap to humans because of climate change, but it is the global food trade that exploits cheap land and labour in the global South and the monopoly of food giants that is the cause of its spectacularly rapid spread around the globe. The xenophobic border closures and immigration crackdowns targeted towards the countries seen as to blame also do little or nothing to halt the spread of an infection that is not primarily spreading person-to-person, resulting in the misplacing of government resources and the stoking of fear and division.

Conclusion

While Druckmann claims *Part I* was developed with the idea of keeping real-world parallels in the background, the context surrounding each release in the franchise means these issues refuse to be merely backdrop but instead come rushing to the foreground. The depiction of the CBI pandemic across the franchise reflects the structures and

systems made visible in recent real-world examples, including highlighting the racialization of contagion and defensive biopolitics. As Mazin notes, such context is a necessary consideration in the development of the franchise and its connection with audiences: 'It was also important for us to acknowledge that the audience is smarter about pandemics than they were five years ago. We don't wanna pretend that they don't know things' (Radish, 2023). Despite this, the franchise as a whole is resistant to interrogating or even acknowledging its invoking of the racialized biopolitics, geographies, and structures of the real world. As seen in online responses such as the fan wiki, however, players and audiences are not simply passive participants in sustaining this kind of race-blind understanding of politics and public health but actively draw contemporary connections and fill in some of the gaps left by the franchise. Even as it sidesteps discussion of race, *The Last of Us* can be read as uniquely revealing, both through narrative and gameplay, of how race is inextricable from the social and political responses to real-world pandemics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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