

# **The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay**

**Edited by Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackriasson**

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The ability of the zombie to demolish boundaries, as evinced in this journal, has rendered the shuffling, sometimes sprinting, but always ravenous undead to become fertile ground for horror, film, and literary studies. In Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson's collection, *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay* (2020, *The Playful Undead* hereafter), the zombie has inspired a new consideration in game studies regarding its role as the 'video game character par excellence' (Webley 2020:3). Whilst the zombie has never truly gone away from the forefront of cultural trends, it does, occasionally, recede to the fringes before roaring back hungrier than ever. However, in video games, since *Resident Evil's* (Capcom 1996) re-spawning of undead swarms, the zombie is now 'gathering in a vast horde that besieges the video game industry' at a never-ending rate (3). This collection seeks to examine the zombies enduring fascination with video game developers and the public alike, attempting to 'trace the origins of zombies in play' and establish why, and what it means, to immerse oneself into a zombie apocalypse (5).

The collection comprises eighteen interdisciplinary essays, bookended by co-editor Stephen J. Webley's introduction and essay considering 'The Romeroesque' and the ethics and ideology surrounding it. The introduction is a stellar piece of work, studiously

researched, well-written, and with a flowing style that holds the reader's attention. The observation that zombies are so prevalent in video games due to being 'a less controversial victim to dispatch in the most violent fashion', is an astute one and raises a multitude of questions, and realms for consideration, regarding zombie literature across the board, and indeed ethical ones also (3). Webley's considered tracing of the zombie's origins, and the socio-political factors that influence it, is concise but effective, and sets the stage nicely for discussing its transition to video game nemesis, underscoring his point of the zombie being 'inscribed in our archaic consciousness' (9).

The other contributions consider the zombie and video games form a variety of perspectives. Matthew Barr examines the zombie's appeal as a protagonist, ultimately deciding it comes down to three areas: storytelling, gameplay, and utility. The inference being that zombies level the playing field by being universally repulsive and allow focus on a few specific human characters, they're convenient due to being cheaper and easier to make (summoning images of its original incarnation as the oppressed proletariat), and they are 'primarily a melee enemy' (Barr:20). The latter invites questions as to why players enjoy bludgeoning or shooting zombies, but unfortunately does not touch much more upon it.

Adam Chapman focuses upon Nazi zombies, a frequent and somewhat overused representation in video games, which, as discussed in two articles in this journal, offer an undead villain that takes the monstrous to an elevated level that inspires collective hatred and revulsion, such is the deserved animosity the image of the Nazi conjures. Chapman considers the historical anxiety attached to the figure, concluding that, in video games, 'the virtual flesh of the historical zombie can be seen as sufficiently ambiguous ... for us to play conceptually ... with the monstrous aspects of the past and present' (Chapman:55). A well argued and entertaining piece, Chapman adds to a growing area of scholarship regarding Nazi zombies and serves as one of the collection highlights.

Vanessa L. Haddad takes a different approach, offering a psychoanalytical interpretation of zombie aggression, focusing on Thanatos and Eros by suggesting players in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale 2012) game can experience both within the confines of the zombie narrative. Christina Fawcett and Alan McGreevy discuss *Resident Evil* and its medicalising of the zombie figure, a feature that soon became an integral part of contemporary versions on screen, in literature, and subsequent successors in video games. Penny De Byl supplies an interesting consideration of the draugr of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011). Although not strictly a zombie, De Byl is persuasive in situating the draugr as an undead cousin of the zombie, suggesting they have both ‘been shaped by their rich literary culture’ and increasingly ‘these undead are shaped through play and the player[s] desires’ (69).

Esther MacCallum-Stewart’s chapter analysing female representation and relationships in *Resident Evil* and *The Walking Dead* game series’ is a particular highlight. For MacCallum-Stewart, these series’ erase the ‘reductive, sexualised female characters, reliant on male guidance’ and replaces them with ‘self-sufficient heroines’ who exercise emotional and physical autonomy throughout their journey in the game narratives, thus allowing the player to experience a rejection of hyper-masculine values and tired cliches (165). Effectively argued and engrossing in equal measure, MacCallum-Stewart’s piece stands as a fine examination of gender in video games and positions zombie narratives as possessing the potential to ‘move beyond the perennial bugbear of gender representation in gaming’ (176).

There are some issues with the collection. The biggest issue is, ironically, borne out of the major question raised by the collection, what does it mean for a society that desires to immerse itself in an apocalyptic nightmare to unashamedly butcher undead hordes? It is a question that is often answered but frequently has a similar result. As such, occasionally,

some of the essays can seem repetitive. That said, it's a valid discussion and one that underpins the collection and from which it gains much of its attraction. Additionally, the variety of critical approaches does temper any repetition. Secondly, in parts, the reliance on block quotes can become draining. In interviews, it can be tough to avoid, but it does interrupt the reader's flow and can become tiring. One final issue is the attempted scale of the piece. Eighteen essays in less than a few hundred pages inevitably means some feel a little brief, however, as mentioned, the variety of approaches means this is a small grievance.

In sum, *The Playful Undead*, whilst impossible to cover all the essays in this review, achieves what it sets out to do: provide an original examination of zombies and its function in video games. The interdisciplinary nature of the book is testament to the zombie's capacity to evolve, to devour, and to conquer all mediums and forms of popular culture. Furthermore, Webley and Zackariasson's collection, much like Dawn Stobbart's reviewed elsewhere here, establishes an important framework for which to base the extension of an emerging aspect of study, video games. That video games have become a cultural and commercial phenomenon is nothing new, however, what this book illustrates, is that video games are becoming more than just something played by children in their bedrooms. With ever-expanding worlds, storytelling, and budgets, video games are becoming an academic field rife with potential from a literary perspective. The ethic and moral questions, the use of Gothic tropes to beguile, bewitch, and horrify, and vast immersive storylines that can impact on the player emotionally and mentally, all invite further consideration from literary scholars as to what these stories tell us. In short, *The Playful Undead*, despite some minor issues, is a successful and important new addition to the field.

## Works Cited

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