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

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## **Abstract**

Review of the edited volume *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*.

**Keywords:** Zombies, Video Games, Play, Discourse, Book Review, gameenvironments

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Although debatable, the major publisher of academic books and journals, Routledge, does not have to remind us that “Games studies is now firmly established as a popular, important and significant area of study in the academic world” (Routledge 2020). Every year a plethora of new series are released, each of which caters to both broad and niche readerships and scholarly circles. However, until very recently, and according to Stephen J. Webley, “there remains a gap in the current zombie literature – a book dedicated solely to the phenomenon of zombie-themed video games” (2020, 2). To address this gap, in collaboration with contributors from a wide range of disciplines, editors Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson compiled and unleashed *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*. Complete with eighteen unique articles specifically dedicated to the undead and gameplay, one would think this series caters exclusively to zombie game enthusiasts and scholars alike. While this may be partly true, the diverse range of themes and theoretical frameworks adopted to critically analyze zombie games as a phenomenon

provides readers from all walks of life (or death) fresh insight into not only zombie games but representations and manifestations of zombies in other media, as well. This review will consider both the merits and the shortcomings of the book as a resource not only for scholars in game studies, but also for readers who are dead curious, per se, about zombie literature.

**Outline of the Volume**

To begin with, Webley traces the etymological and folkloric history of zombie culture and asks how the modern zombie entered our popular consciousness. This, he argues, evolved from the birth of the popularity of the Haitian zombie in Western stories through to George Romero’s reinvention of the zombie as a “perfect ideological vessel” (2020, 262) in the cult classic *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The point of his introduction, however, is to encourage readers to ponder what underpins our intrigue in zombie video games. Chapter 1 thus begins with Matthew Barr examining the appeal of zombie antagonists in game design based on three major aspects – storytelling, gameplay and utility. Barr (2020, 18) essentially suggests that utilizing zombies is convenient and cost-effective for designers and the idea of zombies as a narratively convenient foe is largely due to the notion that their slaughter is morally justified. To follow, in Matthew Barton’s analyses of *Resident Evil* (1996) and *Alone in the Dark* (1992), he argues that the resurrection of “supposedly obsolete software and hardware can provide deeper immersion and affective interaction than is found in many modern games” (2020, 30), adding that this stems from the use of cinematic techniques (derived from comic books and classic Hollywood cinema).

In a dramatic shift, Adam Chapman (2020, 54) then explores the Nazi Zombie trope which has grown in popularity in recent years and the way in which it “soothes our

fears and [...] expresses our anxieties.” Similarly, Penny de Byl also discusses the zombie trope and how it may have influenced the loss of mythology through the process of game design. Michael Epp follows by examining the idea of violent labor in zombie video games produced in a late capitalist context. Returning to *Resident Evil* and rather timely in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak of 2020, Christina Fawcett and Alan McGreevy (2020, 85) demonstrate how “the medicalised zombie” in *Resident Evil* triggers both personal and social fears, and is “not itself the menace; the infection is.” In the next chapter, Vanessa L. Haddad (2020, 110) borrows from Freud’s notions of Eros (the life drive) and Thanatos (the death drive) to analyze *The Walking Dead* (2012) games and how players can “playfully explore and channel the energy of their life and death drives, in a healthy, socially acceptable manner.”

Remaining on the topic of gameplay and gratifications, Madelon Hoedt (2020, 119) examines how *Siren: Blood Curse* (2008) shows players the game world “through different human and monstrous viewpoints”, and uniquely blurs the boundaries between the player-character and the corpse people enemies. Released around the same time as *Siren: Blood Curse*, the open-world game *Dead Rising* (2006) – and particularly its game world interface and the way its zombies can be interacted with in a non-violent and a violent way – is thereafter analyzed by Kristine Jørgensen. In a similar vein to Hoedt and Jørgensen, Olkusz, Dwulecki, and Maj’s (2020, 182) co-written chapter concerns interactivity in *The Walking Dead* and the way in which players shape relationships with characters and try to improve their likelihood of survival by communicating personal opinions, ideological beliefs, and emotions. Perron’s (2020, 197) chapter on gameplay involving “video game zombies” focuses on the predictability of player-character and zombie interactions based on game algorithms, spatial factors, and the pace and numbers of zombies. Interestingly, the trend of fast zombies is also discussed.

Chapter 10 once again features *Resident Evil* as well as *Call of Duty* (2008, 2016) as Brandon Kempner (2020, 148) argues that zombie games chart new paths of resistance “by empowering players through gameplay mechanics to encounter both zombies and capitalism in a new fashion.” To follow, Mitchell C. Lilly (2020, 161) returns to the subject of zombie tropes and demonstrates that while zombies in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) follow familiar conventions of modern zombie fiction and gaming, they also subvert “the rational flow of story and play and beget the decay of ludonarrative coherence” insofar they create a sense of uncertainty for players. Still on the subject of tropes and in one of the few chapters that covers identity, Esther MacCallum-Stewart explores both typical and atypical representations of female protagonists (and *final girls*) in zombie games. Another chapter that covers identity is Sihvonen’s “Queering the Zombie” in which she argues that the “playable zombie can be regarded as a ‘hybrid,’ queer figure that transgresses several boundaries in addition to negotiating the line between life and death” and offers us the possibility of “transcending the human condition” (2020, 242). The remaining few chapters include Timothy A. Wiseman’s discussion on how the lack of copyright protection for *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) fostered the boom in zombie video games; and Eugen Pfister’s (2020, 217) piece on zombie games as a source for a contemporary history of political ideas and our “rising disenchantment” with our democratic governments. Finally, to close the volume, Webley resumes his discussion on Romero and suggests that the truly subversive (and therefore meaningful) zombie narratives in video games are, like Romero’s films, only found in games with relatively smaller commercial budgets and lower production values.

## Comments and Conclusion

On the whole, the very existence of this book reflects not only the cultural significance of zombies in popular culture, but particularly of zombie games. With the phenomenal success of AAA games such as *Resident Evil* and *The Walking Dead*, zombie games have not only become household names, but also subjects of academic discourse. For scholars in cultural studies and/or game studies whose interests lie in zombie narratives, this is an invaluable resource. That said, game enthusiasts can also enjoy it since it seems to have been written and edited to ensure its readability is accessible for not only scholars, but a wider demographic of readers who live for the undead. The diverse range of subjects – such as copyright issues, game design, gameplay, mythology, gender representation and identity, and zombies as a site of social or political commentary – provides something for everyone. Some of the shortcomings, however, include the organization of chapters, the similarity of arguments and games discussed, as well as repetitive literature reviews covering seminal works from the same theorists or game studies scholars. If similarly themed chapters were grouped together and created a natural and logical flow, it might enhance readability. In addition, while some of the AAA games featured are indispensable in game studies discourse, indie games have mostly been ignored. Lastly, although the book blatantly comprises critical analyses, it would have benefitted from more qualitative studies providing insight into the actual uses and gratifications of zombie game players. In spite of these shortcomings and the fact that it might come across as a text catering for a niche circle of zombie game scholars, in a context of viral outbreaks and freak weather conditions, the currency of *The Playful Undead and Video Games* and its dedication to the undead reminds readers how terrifyingly close to home and relatable modern zombie narratives are.



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