

## **Dead Rising and the Gameworld Zombie**

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### **Introduction**

As an undead enemy that comes in hordes and respawns, the zombie holds a special place in the videogame corpus. The zombie trope invites players to engage with them as monsters to be conquered. As they are already dead, the player does not have to consider any ethical ramifications (Backe and Aarseth 2013; Krzywinska 2008), and since they are hostile, tend to come in numbers, and have a strict rule-bound behavior (Weise 2009), they can be a challenge that the player must figure out how to overcome. At the same time, the zombie trope is also heavily laden with lore that points to a decaying world and what it means to be human in such a context. Although videogames “produce a new kind of monstrosity which follows the principles of informatic control” (Švelch 2013, 195), it is clear that representation also matters (Backe and Aarseth 2013; Krzywinska 2015). According to Weise (2009, 240), “[t]he rule system does not exist in a vacuum however, as it is entirely derived from and reinforced by the fictive context”.

In this chapter I investigate how the open-world game *Dead Rising* (Capcom 2006) uses zombies in its construction of the gameworld interface. Drawing on Weise’s (2009) research on ludic adaptations of the zombie and in particular his analysis of *Dead Rising*; as well as my own theory of gameworld interfaces (Jørgensen 2013a; 2013b; 2016), which highlights the gameworld as an activity space that designed for a particular kind of gameplay, I argue that the zombie is a defining feature of the gameworld in *Dead Rising*. Zombies are

detrimental to understanding the game environment both as a fictive universe and a gameworld meant for play, and is the central object of ludic interaction. As a basis for my argument I will discuss the zombie trope itself, and combine this with how the zombie trope works in relation to gameworld interfaces. Further, I will argue that the videogame zombie is in itself paradoxical, in that it on the one side is an otherworldly and disturbing abomination, but on the other side is a generic game opponent with which players are familiar. In other words, they are disgusting, but do not create a sense of disgust.

### **The Zombie Trope in Videogames**

The zombie has gained popularity in games much due to the characteristic behavior established by the trope. According to Weise (2009), the zombie trope as reiterated in videogames is an adaptation of the trope as established in apocalyptic zombie films. Like many other supernatural beings that inhabit videogames, the zombie is “not the domain of a single genre, subgenre, or medium. It is a figure, like the vampire, that appears first in legend and then in various forms of literature before arriving in film” (Weise 2009, 251). Numerous accounts have been made of the zombie trope, and it is beyond the scope of the chapter to repeat them here. Suffice it to say that having its origins in Haitian voodoo culture, the trope has moved into the domain of popular culture by way of literature and films. The zombie trope positions the monster as undead; as someone who has come back from the dead in a monstrous state with limited motor capabilities but no higher intelligence, and now feeding on the living. Also, as a general rule zombies can only be killed by damage to their brains, and humans bitten by a zombie will eventually turn into one themselves. Characteristics central for the videogame zombie are their emergent behavior, which makes crowd control necessary; and their soft flesh, which makes them easily beatable (Švelch 2013). They are in Clara Fernandez-Vara’s (2010, 12) words, “the least powerful and the easiest to defeat”. Since zombies are already dead and with no apparent soul or consciousness, killing them is

justified (Backe and Aarseth 2013; Krzywinska 2008), and while they may be visually and implicitly disturbing, they are also often used as a tool to sanitize in-game violence and make it acceptable. As dead humans but not at rest, zombies are defined by being the antithesis of humans. They are a paradoxical *Other*; an example of *otherness within sameness* because they are “in this world and not of this world” and “threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established order of things” (Beal 2002, 4). However, as Backe and Aarseth (2013, 2) argues, conceiving of zombies as “a completely alien, post-human abomination is ethically and politically charged”.

As an unnatural monster, zombies inhabit a suspension between scary fiction and controllable gameplay. While zombies are often associated with the horror genre in film and literature, in videogames, zombies tend to be included for their gameplay affordances rather than for their ability of creating horror. While the survival horror genre has traditionally aimed for suspense through diminishing a sense of mastery (Krzywinska 2015) by way of techniques such as restricting vision (Fernandez-Vara 2010; Krzywinska 2008), using disturbing or confusing sound (Krzywinska 2008), and ensuring that the monsters’ abilities remain unclear (Švelch 2013), Perron (2009) argues that many so-called horror games have an increased focus on action-oriented game mechanics and heroic protagonists skilled in weapon use. Krzywinska (2008) argues that through gameplay, the player accrues a sense of control; not only of the gameworld, but also of the horrors within. In games, the player can be put into a role where they have proper gear and skills that allow them to be in control over the situation, thus relieving tension (Krzywinska 2008), and allowing the players to turn the monsters into objects of play (Švelch 2013). Although game monsters may look and act like monsters in other media, their behavior is modelled according to the logics of databases and algorithms, and although a zombie may present a certain fictional reality, they can be analyzed and defeated: “By turning monsters into objects of play, the game dispels their mystery” (Švelch

2013, 196). For this reason, many games in which zombies are central for gameplay cannot be characterized as horror games. Although zombie-oriented games use conventions from horror games for worldbuilding and as a cue to game design, they are not designed to be scary (Fernandez-Vara 2010). Thus, zombies are paradoxical in the sense that they are a horror trope, but tend not to create a sense of horror.

### **The Gameworld Interface**

I have so far showed that zombies have rule-bound behaviors and characteristics that are easy to model in a gameplay context. In games where zombies are central to gameplay, they are also integrated with the gameworld itself; not only by being objects in the virtual environment, but also because zombies define the gameworld and provide fictional as well as ludic cues for how the player should interpret and interact with the game environment.

Worlds inhabited by zombies create a civilization-altering situation that affects human mastery over the environment (Russell 2005; Weise 2009), which in fictional terms involves a post-apocalyptic world where human civilization has been overrun by hordes of walking dead, and in ludic terms involves a game space whose challenges and affordances are closely connected to how zombies behave and how they affect their surroundings.

In order to understand how zombies work in connecting the ludic and the fictive and thus in establishing the gameworld interface, it is essential to understand what I mean by gameworld and how it can be said to also be an interface. Although *gameworld* is often used without being defined as a common-sense term that means anything from the fictive universe of the game, to the simulated space of the game, it is important to understand that gameworlds cannot be reduced to neither. As world representations, gameworlds are indeed venues for fictional engagement, but gameworlds are also distinguishable from other world constructs by being world representations designed for gameplay, and structured as arenas for

participation and contest (Klevjer 2007). The fictive frame works to establish tropes that provide guidelines for interaction with the gameworld. While the gameworld's fiction offers a playground for exploration and creativity, game mechanics create rules for interacting with that world.

Designed with a particular kind of activity in mind, gameworlds are also *activity spaces* (Kaptelinin and Bannon 2012). Gameworlds are built for the purpose of gameplay and governed by game mechanics in order to support the gameplay activity in question. Thus, gameworlds are designed in a way that is meant to influence the player's perception of, as well as interaction with, the game environment (Björk and Holopainen 2005). Gameworlds work according to principles of gameplay challenges and satisfying play experiences, rather than according to principles of photorealism or natural interaction, and do not have to follow any other rules than the internal logics of a particular game's mechanics (Jørgensen 2013b). Further, gameworlds have a sense of *worldness* (Klastrup 2003, 2010): They have qualities that make them unique and distinguishable from other worlds, and that invite specific navigational properties and possibilities for interaction. Perhaps most importantly, worldness is connected to a sense of presence that is positioning the gameworld as a habitat and thus as an *ecological* space in which the inhabitants and the environment have an impact on each other (Gibson 1979). Designed as ecology, gameworlds affect and are affected by player actions. In this sense, gameworlds cannot be seen as synonymous to the fictional worlds of other media (Jørgensen, 2013b).

An important feature of the gameworld is its liminal properties. Deriving from the Latin word *limen*, *liminality* indicates a phase between two states, or a transition between one reality and another, and is typically used in describing rites of passage in human culture (Turner 1974). The liminal qualities of the gameworld position it as an *interface*. An interface is commonly

understood as an intermediary between two otherwise separate domains, and in human-computer interaction, it is generally understood as the input devices and graphical features that allow the user to interact with the system (Lauesen 2005; Jørgensen, 2013b). As an interface, the gameworld allows players to communicate with the system beyond the hood, at the same time as it is a visualization of that game system. Most importantly, the gameworld interface is an informational space that provides information about how to act in the gameworld, what to interact with, and provides feedback on player activities.

I use *gameworld* and *gameworld interface* interchangeably. When I call the gameworld an interface, this is related to its ability to transcend and merge different spheres of information; thus, being both *content* with which players interact, and *mediator* of game system information at the same time (Jørgensen 2013a). This does not mean that the gameworld is simply a communicative tool that helps the player interact with the game system; nor does it mean that the gameworld is not *really* the game. On the contrary, the gameworld is at the core of the game and the gameplay experience, and the idea that it is also an interface means that the interaction is always central to the gameplay experience, and that the gameworld itself is characterized by gameplay interaction. In combining a world representation with an arena for gameplay guided by game mechanics, gameworlds brings together two kinds of sign systems at the same time; the game system operating beyond the surface of what the player can see, and a world representation that the player interacts with directly when they play. Although players are generally aware of this duality, they may choose to focus on **one of the sign** systems when playing. This means that while some players focus on fictional engagement, others put emphasis on how to manipulate and interact with the game mechanics themselves.

Important for the argument in this chapter, is the instrumental role of the zombie as interface. Like the traditional interface of games and other software, zombies support player interaction by being that through which we interact with the game. Not only are they themselves interactable and manipulable; zombies provide information about how to act in and interact with the gameworld, and are thus key to understanding how to play the particular game. Rather than a feature to avoid, zombies are there to be interacted with and conquered.

### **Why *Dead Rising*?**

In the following I will show how the open-world *Dead Rising* (Capcom 2006) uses zombies in its construction of the gameworld interface. Despite of the fact that the game has aged more than a decade, it is relevant due to its status as a classic. At release it was well received, and was praised for its sandbox approach to zombies (Navarro 2006). As an open-world sandbox game, it was contrasted with other zombie themed games such as the *Resident Evil* series (Capcom 1996-2017), which more faithfully adapts to the survival horror genre. Also, compared to other, more narratively focused zombie oriented games, such as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) or *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) where zombies can be considered one among many threatening elements in a post-apocalyptic world, in *Dead Rising* zombies have a much more direct impact on gameworld interaction and navigation. Also, the fact that is considered the game that most faithfully adapts the zombie trope as known from George A. Romero's classic zombie films (Weise 2009, Weisman in this volume) – in particular *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) – makes *Dead Rising* interesting from the perspective of this chapter. This link means that in terms of worldbuilding, the game had the advantage of utilizing zombie tropes that were well established, and that provided cues to zombie properties and behavior.

Taking the role as the photo-journalist Frank West, the player can roam the interiors of a shopping mall for 72 in-game hours, in search of a “scoop” and an answer to the lockdown of the shopping mall. The navigable environment is restricted to the four wings of the mall, but as an open-world game, all locations can be freely roamed and are only restricted by natural restrictions in the environment. The player may pursue a number of quests, all which have a time limit: If the player does not start them within a certain time frame, they will be gone. Quests often include assisting other survivors, but are also related to researching the source of the zombie outbreak. In-game enemies are of two kinds: Either they are zombies, or they are humans, most notably antagonistic bosses with special rules. This is also a trope close to the Romeroesque zombie myth: while zombies may at the outbreak appear to be the biggest threat to human civilization, over time it turns out that other humans are people’s worst enemy.

*Dead Rising* is not a horror game, and the zombies are not positioned as an element of horror or suspense. Instead, they are a defining presence in the gameworld environment, which determines what kind of world this is, and also how to interact with that world. This serves the gameworld both as a ludic and a fictional environment. The game is what Weise calls a ‘zombie simulation’; that is, a game modelled after the modern zombie film and where zombies follow the ‘rules’ of behavior as presented in Romero’s now classic zombie films (Weise 2009). For *Dead Rising*, this means that most activities that the player undertakes involve fighting zombies: while this rarely is the goal of any one action, it more often than not become necessary for traversing the mall and to reaching the departure point for quests.

### **A World Designed for Zombie Play**

In *Dead Rising*, zombies are a defining aspect of the gameworld. This means that they are not merely random monsters in a game environment. Stressing the important point that

gameworlds are ecological environments, zombies are inhabitants in that world and their presence has an impact on that environment in multiple ways. Following the rules outlined earlier in the chapter, the zombies in *Dead Rising* are slow moving and generally attracted to human prey. Once encountering zombies, the player must make strategic decisions about whether to navigate around them or interact with them. They are fragile and soft, and can easily be conquered when they are alone, but when encountered in groups, care must be taken not to be overrun by their swarms and the player must thus plan their actions accordingly. Further, the *Dead Rising* zombies are an example of what Švelch (2011) calls the *endemic monster*: They blend in with the environment and are homogenous in the sense that they behave in the same way and do not constitute an isolated challenge. They also have obvious soft spots and are easy to defeat. In Švelch's (2011) words, "their mechanical otherness lies simply in being non-player and hostile", indicating that the endemic monster is not primarily an agent of horror, but first and foremost a challenge to be conquered and thus important piece of information to the player about how to play the game.

The zombies in *Dead Rising* define the gameworld also because they make players interact with the gameworld environment in a particular way. According to Weise (Weise 2009), the zombies of *Dead Rising* affect both navigation in and interaction with the gameworld. The player's navigation of the environment in *Dead Rising* is to a high degree influenced by the presence of zombies. First, the accessible gameworld is itself delimited to an area where zombies are a defining element – the avatar is stuck in a shopping mall overrun by zombies and his only means of escape is being picked up from the roof at a specific time by the helicopter that first left him there. Inside the shopping mall, certain areas are locked off due to the presence of zombies and hinders the players from entering them, but may at certain points later in the game be made accessible either because zombies break through doors, or because the area is made available through other entry points. Sometimes, the presence of

zombies can constitute physical hindrances for gameworld navigation; for instance, in situations where they are blocking passage through particular doors in the shopping mall. As such they become part of the world design at the same time as they provide a fictional justification for why a certain area is inaccessible. Zombies are also the reason for the current situation and provide a fictional context for the affordances of the gameworld. The people encountered in the game are in their certain state and situation because they were at the mall at the zombie outbreak, and the help they need is a consequence of this situation. This fact also works as a context not only for what actions can be done in the game, but also for why. Also, being in a shopping mall also justifies the presence of all kinds of venues, from restaurants to recreational parks and a plethora of shops where resources and potential weapons can be found. In addition to the possibility of doing quests for people at the mall, gameplay in *Dead Rising* is about interacting with zombies in lethal or non-lethal ways.

### **Ludic Zombie Interaction**

Švelch (2013, 199) points out that videogame monsters are both ludic challenges and “objects of play”. This is also a carrying mantra for *Dead Rising*, where the zombies are the focus of gameplay. While the gameworld’s fiction offers a playground for exploration and creativity, the game mechanical aspects of the zombies and how they are easily analyzed and understood as game resources also makes them a conduit (or interface) for scoring points and conquering the game. Psychology separates between a *telic* and a *paratelic* meta-motivational state (Apter 2007) that are relevant for understanding the mindset that we engage in when we play. The telic mindset is a goal-driven and serious mindset in which an activity is engaged in order to reach a goal or purpose at a later moment in time. The paratelic mindset, on the other hand, is oriented towards present time and the activity itself is its goal. This is a playful state characterized by immediate gratification, fun, emphasis on process, spontaneity, creativity and exploration, and make-believe (Stenros 2015). While the paratelic state is recognizable in

what we often call playfulness, the telic state is compatible with the strategy-oriented mindset that we can recognize from gameplay focused on tactics and careful calculation for the purpose of mastering or winning a game. This ‘gameful’ (Deterding et al. 2011) approach presupposes a focus on game mechanics, competition, and win conditions. We find both of these mindsets present in *Dead Rising*, although I will argue that the paratelic state is more central for zombie interaction.

The zombies of *Dead Rising* can be interacted with in a non-violent, and a violent way; both which combine the paratelic (playful) and the telic (strategic) mindset. The non-violent way of interacting with zombies is through photography. As a photo-journalist, Frank West is equipped with a camera, and the player receives achievements for taking zombie photos (McCrea 2009). Although motivated by the fictional setting of the game, photographing zombies is central to gameplay. It supports a playful and paratelic interaction of finding fun motives and composing images in an interesting way, but the gameful or telic element is also highlighted through the fact that the player gains experience points from photographs, which are also rated according to the categories *drama*, *erotica*, *brutality*, *horror*, and *outtake*. While the categories refer to Frank West’s desire for a “scoop” and his idea that shocking or surprising photographs may work best to capture an audience, these categories and their antropomorphization – and even sexualization – of the zombies are also indicative of the liminal existence of the zombies as living dead and as human-like, uncanny monsters.

However, violence is the main option for interaction with zombies in *Dead Rising*. The gameworld environment is modelled so that the player can pick up nearly any object and use them in their interaction with the zombies, thus allowing the player to stroll into weapon stores or recreational outlets to find anything from guns to sports gear to use as weapons for

neutralizing zombies. Killing zombies is a matter of necessity for survival in *Dead Rising*, but it also has telic properties in that the act provides experience points, and special attacks also provide bonuses. While killing zombies is largely instrumental in the sense that it concerns the safety or well-being of living humans trapped inside the shopping mall, or clearing areas in order to be able to move from one place to another, this interaction also makes the zombies into playthings (Švelch 2013) in a way that borderlines slapstick comedy (McCrea 2009, 228). Hitting zombies with musical instruments and mannequin limbs, or running them over with lawn mowers, and otherwise neutralizing them in creative ways become a playful and humorous element that justifies the excessive violence in the game. Here the endemic quality of the zombies that makes them into game features to be manipulated and played with also in particular highlights the paratelic aspects of gameplay. Further, the combination of telic and paratelic oriented gameplay is also a potential Achilles heel for the *Dead Rising* player. As killing zombies is easy and provides experience points, players may soon find themselves in the deceptive situation where they are soon overrun by zombies without realizing it. The combination of an open gameworld design and the trope of zombies as predictable and fragile, invites the player to employ a paratelic mindset. While this is a trick of gameplay that utilizes the seductive power of playfulness, it is also a precise simulation of how zombie film survivors get killed as a consequence of hubris (Weise 2009). This makes *Dead Rising* also a primary example of how a videogame can translate and simulate cinematic drama through gameplay.

### **Conclusions: A World Designed for Zombie Play**

The chapter has shown how zombies in *Dead Rising* is a defining aspect of the gameworld. In *Dead Rising*, zombies are heavily integrated with the spatial architecture of the game and affect thus navigation as well as the game challenges, and are therefore as Švelch (2013,199)

argues both ludic challenges and “objects of play”. Also, by being present in smaller or larger numbers at almost every traversable location, they are also available for emergent playful engagement. Also, the fact that they are part of almost every available space makes them a dynamic game feature that combines fiction and gameplay: By stating that a particular area of the shopping mall has been overrun by zombies, the game designers can justify that the player’s navigational and gameplay space is altered. While the way the player interacts with the gameworld in survival horror games may have little to do with whether the monsters are zombies or something else, in other games it is indeed the zombies and how the gameworld is designed accommodate them that guide interaction in *Dead Rising*. In this game, the zombies have specific informational purposes and provide relevant information about how to act within the specific gameworld. In this sense, there is little doubt that the zombies contribute not only to understanding how to play the game, but in the construction of the gameworld as an ecological environment made for play, and thereby also to reinforcing the Romeroesque trope of the zombie.

Since gameworld interfaces are complex constructs that combine representational fictional features with cues and instructions for how to play the game, they benefit from features that tap into both aspects. In this context, zombies are convenient because they build on tropes that are strongly established in popular culture at the same time as they have concrete characteristics that can be modelled and utilized as game mechanics. While this is a benefit in a game context, there is no doubt that the paradoxical aspects of zombies also support this. The fact that zombies are part of a trope that specifies them as otherworldly and uncanny gives the player justification to kill them, but the fact that they are such a common game enemy with recognizable weak spots has transformed them to a controllable and familiar enemy. Due to the pervasiveness of the zombie trope in Western culture, the inclusion of the

zombie also affects the understanding of the gameworld interface in *Dead Rising* beyond the instrumental. Revisiting Kjaer's idea of *worldness* (2003, 2010), the zombie trope also stresses the gameworld as a fantasy world where zombies are defined as those that inhabit a liminal position between living and dead. This is also in line with the idea of liminal qualities of the gameworld interface as that which connects the player with the game environment and allows them to have agency inside a universe in which they are not physically present.

Last, it is important to specify that this has been an investigation of one particular zombie oriented game; one which also positions itself as an open world sandbox game. Although the chapter has shown that the zombie indeed is paramount for the establishment of a gameworld interface in *Dead Rising*, I do not claim that the inclusion of zombies in a game automatically will transform the gameworld interface into a zombie gameworld. If we compare with many other zombie games, either relating to the survival horror genre (*Resident Evil*) or the action-adventure genre (*The Last of Us*, *The Walking Dead*), it will become evident that the presence of zombies in these games has a very different impact upon the construction of the gameworld. Thus, rather than implying a “zombie determinist” viewpoint, I believe that the world building and sense of worldness in *Dead Rising* is the result of a combination of the open world sandbox genre and the inclusion of endemic, Romeroesque zombies.

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