

The Zombie Game I'm Still Looking For

(and yes, *State of Decay* is a good start, but not there yet!)

The only zombie apocalypse game truly worth its salt will be a 100% open-world game that promotes and sustains playability over the long-term by combining realism with a myriad of static and dynamic elements.

A key part of these elements are aspects throughout the game that purport plausibility and consistency: e.g. a generous but fixed amount of weapons, supplies, characters, vehicles and yes, a limited number of zombies are generated at the start of each new game.

Why a fixed amount vs. respawning zombies?

The argument against a fixed amount of zombies is always "*What's the point?! That defeats the whole purpose of the game! Gameplay will get real boring real fast as you start running out of zombies. Players will just drive around running over zombies until they're gone!*" Let me challenge that assertion (rationale below) by then asking what the point is of constantly working against a force you can never beat? Finding out that you lasted a week and your friend croaked after four days? Awesome. If zombies need to be harder to kill, or just more of them are needed to make the game tougher, so be it; but no more respawning nonsense.

Rationale for fixed numbers of zombies:

1. **Simple realism.** Zombies don't respawn in real life (once they're truly "dead" that is), so unless the local zombies are somehow equipped with mobile phones to call their rotting friends for backup outside the 16x16km map (or just happened to stumble upon your location while out on a road trip), there would be a fixed number of them in real life who probably aren't going to walk far (they never have in any zombie game I've played). After all, this *is* a limited area that's been infected, right? That said, even if the world *was* infected, new zombie emergence should be slow and arrive realistically from the *outskirts* of the map; *not from thin air within it*. This irritated the snot out of me in *Left4Dead/Left4Dead 2*—non-stop scripted rivers of zombies appearing out of thin air sprinkled with highly unrealistic (and annoyingly hard to kill) Mario Bros-style zombie "bosses". Fail.
2. **Limited zombies does not mean instant player win.** For starters, you are vastly out-numbered and have limited resources, health, and transportation. Unlike you, zombies don't get tired and don't have to search for food to eat; so while you're trying to stay alive, they're busy infecting your fellow survivors. Still sounds too easy? One small miscalculation on your part can rapidly turn you into a one-course meal for the horde (after all, they have no use for silverware). So if I survive and start getting the upper hand, it's because I fought hard for it and deserve that reward. If I manage to clear out an area, I'm free to explore further and be more daring and adventurous in the process.
3. **It gives the player a quantifiable goal to shoot for (pun intended).** Why not give the player a chance to actually win? To date, no zombie game I know of has *ever* offered you that chance (temporarily escape in *L4D/L4D2*, yes, but never win). Where is the satisfaction in knowing that the zombie I just killed will get replaced with two more zombies one minute from now? Nothing motivates more than knowing you have a chance to beat the odds. You are now a survivor with hope—not just another survivor on borrowed time. The enticement of winning

motivates me to be more daring, bold, and explorative in my approach to survival: if I fight hard and live long enough, I might just win. Compare that to an endless stream of zombies that are going to kill you sooner or later and you'll have to start again anyway. Why bother?

Third-person perspective (TPP) *and* first-person shooter (FPS): why not offer the best of both worlds?

First of all, Undead Labs noted that TPP prevented them from making all buildings enterable, so this would be a feature for Class 4. As an example, four games that are doing this are *Grand Theft Auto V* (FPS available at all times), *DayZ* (standalone), *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Metroid Prime*. Battlefield 3 used dual-modes as well—FPS for foot soldiers and the option of both TPP and FPS for vehicles—each are useful at different times. Optional, dual perspectives switchable in real-time offer unique advantages, such as:

TPP

- **Simple preference.** Some players simply prefer one perspective over the other, and some like a mix of both. More work to implement? Sure, but how good do you want your game to be? This flexibility provides appeal to everyone—console gamepad and keyboard/mouse gamers alike.
- **Situational awareness.** Though offering less realism, the wider field of view comes in handy for planning/strategy, and when you need to keep an eye on fellow survivors while you're on the move.
- **Variety.** Provides a break from the more focused field of view when things are quiet.

FPS

- **Realism.** When engaged in close-quarters combat with zombies, and especially when needing to view objects close-up, it's simply more immersive and engaging to see the world from your own eyes.
- **Tension.** Is a zombie sneaking up behind me? The player is forced to keep a wary eye around him. TPP throws a wrench into the works by cheating—allowing the player to see beyond their actual viewing range (e.g. this is a problem that presents itself in any TPP-enabled game).
- **Freedom of movement.** Allows navigation of small spaces: small barns, RVs, crawl-spaces under houses, tunnels, caves, etc. would all now be traversable. Undead Labs have noted that the third-person perspective made this impractical in *State of Decay* due to lack of vertical space.
- **Weapon aiming/accuracy.** How do you *really* implement fast and accurate weapon aiming, such as a sniper scope using a TPP? You can't. In *GTA V*, which uses TPP by default, sniping switches to a FPS perspective. It's simply more natural—making aiming a whole lot easier.

Key features

- **Open world without scripts.** An open sandbox game means no limiting scripts, predefined tasks, or "directors" (Yes, *Left4Dead* I'm talking about you) that spawn zombies out of thin air (whether one or an endless stream of them), or trigger "events" when things get "too quiet" or when I walk two inches past fence X. That nonsense belongs back in the 1980s arcade games where it came from. Seriously.

- **Natural terrain and man-made structures.** Expansive, realistically detailed hills, roads, mountains, caves, tunnels, and a wide variety of fully immersible, swimmable, and boatable water (streams, rivers, lakes). Fully enterable and climbable man-made buildings and structures, such as water towers, ladders/fire escapes, train tracks, cranes, zip lines, grappling hooks—you name it—for maximum movement and playability. Think *GTA V* on steroids. An island is the most plausible setting for this, considering its surrounding water forms a natural boundary (not surprisingly why *Crysis*, *Dead Island*, and *ARMA 3* used it).
- **Character movement.** Realistic (ala *Battlefield 3*—frankly, the most fluid and realistic I've seen anywhere in an FPS; though not the most verbose—*ARMA 3* easily gets that honor, but it's slow and very clumsy), with prone, diving to prone, object climbing, etc. that mimics the real world. If you can do it in real life, you should be able to do it in the game. There should be no limits to where you can go on foot or by vehicle, provided it's plausible within the immediate terrain.
- **Vehicles:** Fully operable cars, motorcycles, bicycles, speed boats, row boats, ultralights.
- **Interaction with the environment.** The ability to build, move, and destroy barricades, buildings, and other objects and interact with the environment (e.g. *Killing Floor's* door welding is a great example). Everything should be destructible, and without "pre-fab" destruction sequences—this has been possible for quite some time now—it needs to be standard. All buildings are enterable with relevant contents/supplies (hospitals with medicine, gun stores with weapons, convenience and grocery stores with food and drinks, etc.), but enough scattered items to be helpful along the way. Objects can be dropped, but also destroyed (the latter intentionally).
- **A fighting chance.** Give the player enough supplies and weaponry (at least a melee weapon) from the time they hit the ground running, and adequate opportunities to find ammo for the weapons offered in-game. Players shouldn't have to spend more time looking for weapons than *actually doing something with them*. They also need several safe places throughout the map to catch their breath, reload and heal, and plan their next move(s). Those places can be made available right from the start, or earned by the player.
- **Simple inventory system.** One that uses "stored" and "in-hand" models and doesn't require a Harvard degree or coffee break to operate. Calculates items based on size and weight.
- **Weaponry.** A vast array that provides a variety of defensive and offensive options to enhance gameplay: C4 (strategy), grenades (small and handy), rocket launchers (distance), claymore mines (to watch your back), plus the usual melee weapons and machine guns, hand guns, shotguns, sniper rifles, etc. Everyday objects can also be used with damage inflicted depending on the item's properties.
- **PhysX support.** Takes full advantage of PhysX, allowing the player a vast array of options for survival, interaction with the environment, and the creative destruction of zombies.
- **Moddable.** Openly moddable with some reasonable control over what gets added, to ensure it adds to—not detracts from—the gaming experience.

- **Damage/destructibility.** Vehicles, weapons, and buildings sustain scalable damage based on their materials, size, design, usage, and have limited repairability.
- **Realistic AI.** Zombies apparently have good hearing, but lousy vision. With that in mind, the player can both distract (e.g. throw firecrackers) and sneak past zombies (e.g. crouch-walking), but draw attention if they get too close or make too much noise because of something they did (e.g. car alarms, car engines, gunshots, explosions), and also evade (e.g. outsmart one or more zombies), and they lose interest in chasing you.