

9-3-2013

# Zombie Economics: Violence and Economics in three first-person shooter zombie-themed video games.

Brynn S. Shaw

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**ZOMBIE ECONOMICS:  
Violence and Economics in three First-person shooter zombie-  
themed video games.**

by

**BRYNN S. SHAW**

**Bachelors of Arts, Theatre**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**August, 2013**

## **DEDICATION**

For Jason Rupley, my inspiration, and for my father, Doug Shaw, whose support helped make this thesis possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Pamela Cheek, my committee chair, for her hard work and dedication to this project. Her encouragement, advisement and assistance were invaluable.

I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. John Carr for his dedication, humor, and ability to ask poignant, thought provoking questions; and Dr. Osman Umurhan for his enthusiasm and insight.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. David Craven, who started this project with me, left this earth too early and is greatly missed.

Finally, I would like to thank Deana Richter for her support, assistance with editing, and encouragement.

# **Zombie Economics**

**By**

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**M.A., Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, University of New Mexico,  
2013**

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis presents a textual analysis of three zombie-themed video games: *Left4Dead*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor*. The relationship between violence and economics presented in the in-game actions is analyzed to demonstrate that when capitalism is seen as ideological in nature, the zombie-themed games observed can be seen as evidence of the reiteration of that ideology. A gradation of economic systems becomes apparent through a comparison of these video games to the zombie myth presented in film, using a combination of the methods of narrative examination and ludology. The games which imitate the capitalistic market do so by utilizing the money-for-bodies ludic system, where players earn points of money for killing. Money-for-bodies raises questions about the subjectivities that arise in first-person shooter games—as the embedded capitalistic actions within video games which focus on killing leads to a combination of the two subjectivities connected to Empire, the worker-consumer and the citizen-soldier. Violence and economics are also connected through multiplayer interactions where players enact counterplay by committing avatar suicide to financially assist teammates, making life a resource and enacting a type of capitalism with moral haziness.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis analyzes the ludic systems<sup>1</sup> in three zombie themed video games, comparing them with zombie apocalypse narratives and arguing that game play promotes a demoralized form of capitalism which incorporates a relationship between money and killing. Zombie-themed media offers a chance to envision or interact virtually in a crisis situation where the social structures of modern day have broken down. Such a situation can offer the imaginative space for emergent thinking about new and better social structures, or conversely, as the findings in this thesis show, the opportunity to reiterate current social structures such as capitalism. One of America's most prevalent pastimes and a billion dollar a year industry, the video game appeals to the cultural studies field because of the interactive nature of game play. Video games invite the player to immerse him or herself in the world of the game. In-game players follow different rules and engage in different actions which allows for the embodiment of new subjectivities. Previous academic studies of the economic situations contained in video games are extremely rare, creating a void this thesis is intended to fill and allowing for advancement in the emerging field of game studies.

The three games analyzed in this study are: *Killing Floor*; the *Left4Dead* franchise, consisting of *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2*; and the zombie modes available on the *Call of Duty* games. All three games are highly popular and together they form a spectrum of economic ludic<sup>2</sup> strategies, meaning that the ways in which the players

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<sup>1</sup> The actions players preform in-game to advance through the video game.

<sup>2</sup> Ludic refers to the study of ludology: “a specific analysis of the ‘gaming situation’ itself” (35 Wardrip-Fruin & Harrington). Ludologists seek to understand new media in itself and not through the influence of



satisfy the needs of the avatar vary from game to game. The *Left4Dead* franchise began in 2008 with the original *Left4Dead*. The sequel *Left4Dead2* was released in 2009. The franchise was created by Turtle Rock Studios and later purchased by Valve Corporation. The most popular and well known of the games analyzed, the *Left4Dead* franchise had sold over eleven million units by 2011<sup>3</sup>. Most game review websites give the game an A- or 89/100 ranking, with most of the complaints citing the lack of narrative and the repetitiveness of the game play. The *Call of Duty: Zombies* modes are extra levels, a type of mini-game contained in the regular games of the Call of Duty franchise<sup>4</sup>, meaning that they were originally not available for sale on their own<sup>5</sup>. Released by Treyarch in 2008, *Call of Duty: World at War* is the fifth installment in the *Call of Duty* franchise. It features missions set in World War II. After a player finishes the campaign mode, a mini-game called *Nazi Zombies* becomes available for play. This became so popular that it was expanded. New maps were created and made available for purchase and download. Zombie mode was also featured in the next Treyarch game, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, which added more maps and expanded the zombie villains to different nationalities such as American, Japanese and Soviet descent. *Killing Floor* was a Mod created from Epic's *Unreal Tournament 2004*. Based on the Unreal Engine, *Unreal Tournament 2004* is a video game that includes highly adaptable software allowing players and novice

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other academic research fields. To do this, they study the actions of the game, not the narrative a game tells, but the actions the player commits from physically pushing buttons to virtual interactions with game rules and systems. Formally, ludology is the study of play and can apply to board games and other non-technological games as well. It is derived from the Latin word *ludere* which means "to play".

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from <http://media.giantbomb.com/video/vf-tnt-08111-1500.mp4>

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the gameplay of *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies* is extremely different from the video games to which they are connected.

<sup>5</sup> However, in 2009 the original mini-game *Nazi Zombies* was released as a stand-alone game for the iPhone in 2009.

designers to design their own games or Mods<sup>6</sup>. Headed by Mod designer Alex Quick, *Killing Floor* was then adapted into a stand-alone game at Tripwire Interactive<sup>7</sup>.

Originally sold over Steam, a digital distribution and communications platform started by Valve Corporation, Tripwire eventually released *Killing Floor* to stores, selling over a million units and making it one of the top selling PC games<sup>8</sup>.

Video games differ from traditional media because of the interactive relationship between the game and the player. The player is led to believe that he is not a passive recipient of the story but rather—that he is able to perform with the medium and change his gaming experience based on his personal preferences or choices. However, Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter state: “interactivity does not mean virtual play is free from ideology; rather, it intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, of their own choice, rehearse stipulated subjectivities” (Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter 193). Can the rule and prohibition system players must learn to win the game be compared to economic narratives? The video game meta-narrative of limited choices disguised in a world of seemingly unlimited choices could be compared to the capitalistic narrative in several ways: both champion an active, ambitious hero who through his, and sometimes her, choices can succeed or fail; both posit that possible choices are unlimited, while obscuring the reality of the rules or the ideology; and finally, within both, the

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<sup>6</sup> A mod is a process in which a person who is not a corporate developer creates a video game using the game engine.

<sup>7</sup> The mechanics of *Killing Floor* vary vastly from the mechanics of *Unreal Tournament 2004* because *Unreal Tournament 2004* does not contain a trader or monetary system. Likewise, *Call of Duty* and *Call of Duty: Zombies* also differ specifically in the points system observed. Because of these differences, *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies* will be examined as stand-alone games for the purposes of this study.

<sup>8</sup> From the Tripwire Interactive website: [www.tripwireinteractive.com/about/](http://www.tripwireinteractive.com/about/)

knowledge of the restriction of action is belied by the hope of finding a new and creative way around the circumstances at hand. Describing this hope for agency in the case of the video games, Steven Poole writes that “technology, far from being liberating, actually circumscribes the possibility of action. But a good videogame will allow predetermined actions to be combined in creative ways that certainly weren’t deliberately predicted at the design stage” (57). Actions within video games, just like actions within the confines of an ideology, can be regulatory or emergent—meaning that the actions players take in-game can exemplify the rules and structures of the game, or emergently, players can discover or combine actions in ways unthought-of by the designers of the game, and thus, subverting the intended rules of the video game.

Video game genre and classifications are always multilayered since the games are comprised of narrative and ludic elements. Traditionally, games have been categorized according to the type of environment presented. For example, the games discussed here are horror games in the same way that George Romero's “Night of the Living Dead” is a horror film, because of the environment presented and the types of characters (monsters) that the viewer/gamer encounters. Each of these games utilizes the current myth associated with the zombie figure, the zombie apocalypse--“a fictional enemy that subsumes anxieties surrounding the possible failure of social, economic and technological networks” (Boluk & Lenz 8)--to create a dystopian game-world. Dystopian first-person shooters present a fantasy world explicitly different from our present real world. As opposed to a game like the Sims, in which the player's virtual avatar holds a job and outfits a house, experiences that the player knows from real life, the world and game play of dystopian shooter games are unlike the typical American's lived experience. Despite

this, or perhaps because of it, games with dystopian or apocalyptic worlds are hugely popular. Games featuring zombies are currently so popular that some non-zombie games are even including zombie levels as a bonus feature.

However, video games are also categorized by the type of play or the mechanics of the game. *Killing Floor*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and the *Left4Deaths* are all first-person shooters (FPS)<sup>9</sup>, a ludic or gameplay style. According to Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock: “A ludic genre is defined by the rules that structure play” (Call et al 6). A ludic genre consists of video games which have similar game play structures. The choice of looking at this particular genre of action video game, first-person shooters, as opposed to strategy games with clear economic elements, is deliberate.

FPS video games present the player with one basic goal: to survive a violent encounter by killing. In an FPS, the player controls an avatar that is rendered in first-person perspective, which indicates that the camera acts as the avatar's eyes and only the hands of the avatar or gun it is holding can be seen. The goal is for a player's avatar to survive successive levels or missions by killing various types of foes to advance in the

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<sup>9</sup> FPS games have a long history. According to Mark J.P. Wolf, shooting is a game tradition that starts formally with “shooting galleries on carnival fairgrounds from the late 1800s onward” (Wolf 26). Carnival games which used guns brought the fun of shooting competitions into a formalized setting and made shooting competitions available to those who did not own weapons. From here, shooting games were mechanized into coin operated electromechanical games referred to as shooting gallery games. Similar to pin ball machines, shooting gallery games required no operator and were completely contained in game cabinets. Even at this early point in the FPS history the “skills needed for the games no longer translated into skills needed for the use of real weaponry” (Wolf 27). The concept of shooting gallery games was incorporated into the new video game genre, incorporating the act of shooting into narrative and game world creation. Gerald A. Voorhees and most video game scholars suggest that *DOOM* (1993) is the beginning of the FPS genre in video games. He states: “While id's 1992 *Castle Wolfenstein* has the best claim to it, *DOOM* is typically considered the origin of the FPS genre...and for several years FPS games were described as *DOOM* clones”(Voorhees 97). *DOOM* had a typical FPS narrative where the player had to fight through various enemies to save the world. In *DOOM* the hero is a space marine, who must fight denizens from hell, including zombies. *Left4Dead*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor*, structured quite similarly, are still very much *Doom* clones.

game. The ending or finale of the game usually consists either of one final boss fight or the hardest level mission, which the player must survive to finish the game.

Not only are economic factors strange to a zombie-themed game-world, but accruing financial wealth is not the explicit goal of an FPS video game. In fact, the characters may not even use money or currency. However, all characters or avatars must acquire items such as guns and ammunition for fighting and medical supplies for healing. While the central focus of each game is a mission or a competition and not simply the acquisition of wealth, each game nonetheless resolves the problem of how the avatar may acquire munitions with an economic solution. How, then, do these games meet the consumption needs of the avatar and how is the munitions “market” structure within these games related to the ideologies of real life?

Mirroring the multilayered genre system, critical game theory generally falls into two distinct fields of methodology: theorists who study the video game's inner-narratives using literary methods, and ludology, which studies the meta-narrative unique to the gaming experience. Ludologists oppose using previous critical methods and hope to create a new type of study specific to video games. Inspired by Espen Aarseth and his book *Cybertext*, these theorists work “toward an understanding of new media text on its own terms, rather than as a reflection of the already understood” (Wardrip-Fruin et al 36). To achieve this, they often emphasize the technological nature of video games, their physical and digital construction, and the rules that define the video game as a game. Studying economic elements in video games is both a narrative and a ludological effort. It is narrative because the economy fits into the creation of the world of the game and the

back story, which explains the players' purpose. It is also ludological because it is often involved within the system of reward and punishment that establishes the rules of the game that a player must follow to win. Within the ludic aspects of video games, the gamer's interactions with the game result in cues that affect economic thinking. Some of these cues may cause players to think in capitalistic terms, reiterating that ideology. However, some cues may cause the players to think of economics in new ways different from what they experience in their real lives. This analysis will therefore use a combination of the two methodologies. An analysis of narrative and ludological elements in zombie-themed video games, each with slightly different but related economic structures, reveals inconsistencies between the ludic elements of some games and the zombie narrative they rely on. Zombie themed media is highly popular, and its representation of a dystopian world, a world in crisis, can often be seen as a world without capitalism. However, when the ludic actions of video games incorporate actions that reiterate capitalism, they exist contrary to the zombie myth and show that the internal actions of video games can be as ideologically based as their creation and sales.

### **Literature Review**

Due the nascent nature of critical video game studies, critical literature on the three specific games analyzed within this thesis is extremely minimal. In fact, literature on zombie-themed video games, beyond the three contained within, is scarce at best and the analysis within these articles is extremely limited. Because of the lack of specific resources the type of articles used for background knowledge, and contained in this literature review, has been broadened. Two areas of discussion will be presented—

breaking down the background of this analysis into the study of zombies and violence in critical video game studies. Within these two categories, the existing zombie-themed video game literature will be analyzed.

### **Monster Meaning**

The first component on the zombie-themed video game is the zombie itself. Literature concerning the zombie-themed video game is just starting to appear. Because of this, the main theme of these articles is the preliminary question—why are zombies used in video games? This question mostly concerns zombies as villains. However, one or two articles cover the desire a gamer might have to play zombie avatar. Some gamers are drawn to enact characters like zombies because they see the irony in the trope of goodness—the idea that such black and white values as “good and evil” can exist, even in fantasy form, in the postmodern world (Scott, 2008; McIntosh, 2008). Mostly, however, zombies are villains in video games and their popularity is linked to being versatile, and most importantly, guilt-free victims.

The versatility of the zombie as a video game villain is enacted in two ways. First, zombies are suited to the video game because they can be placed into any type of environment (McIntosh, 2008). This is a tradition passed down from the zombie movie genera, where zombies were put into any number of different scenarios—a versatility which is continued in zombie video games where zombies are placed in dystopian futuristic settings, on the moon or in alternative past scenarios, such as *Wolfenstein 3-D* or *Call of Duty: Zombie Mode*. However, the versatility of the zombie figure can also be seen in the creativity of their deaths. Part of the pleasure of killing video game zombies is

the numerous ways they can be killed (Schott, 2011). Video game zombies can be shot, burnt, and hit with any number of items—in *Left4Dead* they can be hit with frying pans, cricket bats and guitars. The capacity for a “creative death” leads to over-the-top violence or ironic violence, which then is seen as humorous.

The capacity of the zombie to die a “creative death” hints at the most prominent argument for their use and popularity as video game villains. Killing zombies does not register as immoral; they can be killed guilt-free (McIntosh, 2008; Schott, 2011; Krzywinska, 2008). With an insatiable drive towards cannibalism, it is easy to establish that zombies' are villains or predators. They are the ideal enemy, and can be killed en masse without guilt, because they are already dead. The analysis of zombies as video game villains does not go much further. While they may represent cultural fears of the loss of autonomy or the scientific ability to create devastation (Krzywinska, 2008), overall, they are just seen as a useful vehicle—as villains who can be utilized to make forms of violence excusable.

As is the case with the video game genre itself, many of the first critical articles on this subject are concerned with the very basics of validation—the existent zombie-themed video game literature is no exception. However, there is a vast amount of room for the advancement of the study of this particular type of game. Relevant for this analysis is the shaky argument of the guilt-free villain. Seeing zombies as easy cannon fodder, things that can be killed on a whim, disconnects the zombie from some of the meaning and work it embodies in media beyond the video game. In contrast to zombies in the video games, zombies in movies do not present the same meanings.



Though considered a relatively new monster type to Western media and literature, the zombies' history is extensive enough for their defining characteristics to have evolved. Scholars categorize the zombies' history into two embodiments: first, the Haitian zombie<sup>10</sup>, a body deprived of will and forced to work for another, and second, the modern zombie, infected humans who are driven by the carnal need to feed on human flesh. The defining characteristics of the Haitian zombie differ from those of the modern zombie. Haitian zombies are magically-induced, mindless slaves. They are controlled by the zombie master and are most often used for labor, not violence. The fact that Haitian zombies are *controlled* is the most important difference between them and modern zombies. Haitian zombies are characterized by their slave status and are not considered predators of their own will. Essentially, Haitian zombies are always part of a villain hierarchy; without the zombie master they would not be considered a threat. On the other hand, modern zombies are uncontrollable predators. Although the two types of zombies presently coexist and share meaning, attention will be given to the modern zombie, as it is the most popular in current video games.

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<sup>10</sup> The Haitian zombie is a monster steeped in colonial tension. Haiti declared its independence from France in 1804, and from this point forward uneasiness about a nation run by formerly colonized peoples and freed slaves plagued the United States and Europe. Leading up to and during the American occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, the Haitian zombie was used by the United States as a signification of barbarism in Haiti. This signification aided in the excuse for military intervention. During this time, and even still today, the existence of real Haitian zombies was questioned and feared. This quandary is discussed by Franck Degoul in his article “‘We are the mirror of your fears’: Haitian Identity and Zombification.” Degoul provides a wonderful history of the cultural work done by the Haitian zombie, including its relation to slavery, its connection to Vaudou or voodoo, and its use as a tool by American media: “The American imagination appropriates, then, a theme that issued from the Haitian imagination, racializes it and eroticizes it, all the while associating it in quasi-symbolic fashion with the Haitian, with Negro Haitianness more broadly, as marked by witchcraft” (27). The Haitian zombie is then reappropriated by the Haitians themselves in reaffirming and defining Haitian identity. What was once used to define them as barbarians and inferior is reconnected to and becomes a source of national pride.

The popularization of the second zombie type, or the modern zombie, is owed, in large part to the films of George A. Romero, specifically his 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*.<sup>11</sup> According to McIntosh, the apocalyptic theme accompanying Romero's zombies "fits well with a culture that had a generation of people growing up under the threat of nuclear annihilation and that was coming of age and questioning their government's policies, as well as their own identities, in the turbulent 1960s" (McIntosh 9). After this point, zombies take on the characteristics they are more known for today--mindless cannibals driven by the need to feed on human flesh. Media manifestations of modern zombies tend to have similar back stories: people are infected by a virus or affected by some strange phenomenon. In some cases the infection causes death, while in other movies it does not. Undead or living, the zombies are without will and form a mob or horde. *Night of the Living Dead*, and its sequels, utilize zombies to contrast class and racial structures, to comment on inequality, and to criticize consumer culture. For example, in *Night of the Living Dead*, the main protagonist Ben is African American and even though he is not a zombie, the careless shooting of him by local police at the end of the film suggests that he is viewed as expendable. *Land of the Dead* (2005) features a rebuilt city that separates the humans from the zombies; class difference within the city is clearly delineated as Cholo, a secondary character, tries to climb the social ladder and fails. Outside the city, the zombies, who try to "live" their former blue collar lives, are eventually led by an African American zombie to crush the city in the climax of the movie. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, 2004), the survivors lock themselves in a suburban shopping mall after ridding it of zombies. One character remarks "that zombies are

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<sup>11</sup> Mogk points out that Romero never intended his monsters to be zombies but instead referred to them as ghouls. The inspiration for Romero's film came from *I am Legend* by Richard Matheson, where the monster villains are vampires.

coming to the mall because they return to places that were important to them when they were alive—essentially saying that consumer culture has become such a core element in the American consciousness” (McIntosh 10). Romero described zombies as: “the working-class monster” (Mogk 269) a theme recognized by many theorists who discuss his movies. Zombies are universal monsters—a group anyone can join because they lack any kind of social requirement for membership. Any person can become a zombie regardless of rank, gender or ethnicity. Romero's use of zombies as a tool for critical discussion has clung to the zombie form, and many subsequent movies also use zombies as a tool for social criticism since they represent an existence without the escape that death offers from servitude, whether this be to a slave master, to factory production lines, to meaningless work in a white collar office, or to pointless consumerism.

Zombies are often used as a metaphor for the economic drudgery of modern life, implying a society in which individual will power has been lost to technology or capitalism. Foreshadowed by the Haitian zombie's connection to slavery, zombies are now personifications of Marx's theory of alienation, criticism of capitalism, and class struggle. (Lutz, 2008; Embry & Lauro, 2008) Zombies take on two representational roles: they exhibit class difference and racial exploitation. For example, “the subhuman conditions of the zombie masses, permanently afflicted with an insatiable hunger coupled with rudimentary intellectual skills, serves as a powerful allegory for the condition of alienation described by Marx”(Lutz 125). The post-apocalyptic city itself is a representation, not only of a highly polarized class hierarchy, but also the capitalistic imperialism of the present-day United States.

Beyond this Marxist interpretation, there is a range of new interpretations of the zombie in relation to modern capitalism. Lauro and Embry put the zombie in relation with the cyborg of Donna Haraway, as a boundary figure that can neither, be contained nor defined. While Haraway presents the cyborg as the antisubject because it is subject and object, man and machine, Lauro and Embry envision the zombie as neither subject nor object, but rather as a swarm organism. The zombie is a unique monster in that it is part of a horde or mob. One does not usually encounter just one zombie or a few zombies--the fear lies in the fact that there are usually a lot of zombies. Lauro and Embry equate that fear not with fear of the pack, but rather with fear of losing one's own will and consciousness: "Humanity defines itself by its individual consciousness and its personal agency: to be a body without a mind is to be subhuman, animal; to be a human without agency is to be a prisoner, a slave" (Lauro&Embry 90). It is this particular fear that Lauro and Embry relate to Adorno and Horkheimer's criticism of the self/other paradigm under capitalism. If the zombie is both subject (because it was once a person) and object (because it has lost its consciousness), then it is reflective of the human state under capitalism, where there is "the illusory separation of subject and object" (Lauro&Embry 92). They also state that this relates to Marx's concept of the alienated worker, in which a worker is already part of the machine without any will of his or her own.

### **Validation and Violence**

The choice of video games as a topic of study is apt for two reasons: video games are a relatively new technology and they have a unique structure. New and different, video games are causing a rethinking of academic categorization and methods of

criticism. In his recent book, *The Art of Videogames*, Grant Tavinor offers a useful analogy. Video games, he says, are “Cultural Platypuses”--Composed of mixed elements, they are reminiscent of the mammal that caused the rethinking of biological categories and definitions (Tavinor 2009). Indeed, video games have caused academic theorists to re-investigate theories on narrative, questions of aesthetics, questions of reality and ethics. Composed of multiple elements similar to movies and traditional games, but also incorporating new technological elements that have never been dealt with before, video games are unique because of their technology and relationship with the player. Video games hold importance to the theoretical field because of this unique composition. Relevant to this study is the critical work done on video games and violence. Zombie-themed first-person shooter games overflow with violence and violent acts are the main form of ludic functions within these games. Therefore, the economic functions of the game need to be observed in light of the violence contained within the games.

The violence in video games has been frequently discussed. Historically centered on the possible link between the game and the real world—specifically the question of whether the violence done within video games leads to violence in the real world, the discussion of video game violence has expanded, in a limited fashion, to questioning the moral consequences of viewing and participating in fictional violent acts, as well as to evaluating virtual violent acts in ethical terms. Goldstein states that most studies done on the connection between video games and real world violence are misconstrued due to “ambiguous definitions of violence, poorly designed research, and the continued confusion of correlation with causality”(Goldstein 341).

Two studies of zombie-themed video games discuss violence entirely as a question of opportunity for developing markets among beginning players (McIntosh, 2008) and across gender divisions (Krywinska, 2008). McIntosh argues that zombies are good villains for beginning players because of their slow movements and because they are relatively easy to kill, which leads to a sense of empowerment for the gamer. According to Krywinska, considering video games from the view of the market is important for video game analysis because of the risk factor. Companies who develop video games stick to formulas that have been popular to minimize risk and commercial loss. This relates to branding and genera, with specific genera and brands being marketed towards specific age and gender groups—horror games are mostly intended for hard core gamers. With young males as the main market, virtual violence is at the core of most zombie games. However, it is not the zombie element, but the type of game that determines the player's abilities and game play structure. Some types of games are more restrictive than others, such as the difference between an adventure game and a shooter game. Adventure style games require world exploration, resource management, and puzzle solving. This creates more opportunities for cross genera/gender markets, because the games feature a learning curve and it is assumed that female players and non-hard core players prefer a slower pace. The way that the games ramp up the violence allows the players to learn and thus feel in control of the game world and its horrors. These games offer a promise of mastery, which is an essential part of their appeal.

Mastery is an important aspect in video game studies. Scholars take two typical approaches to the defense and discussion of violent video games: cathartic/mastery, the theory that the video game offers an acceptable way to commit violent acts for emotional

release or display of talent, and attaching the question of violence to a broader discussion. Jeffery Goldstein supports the former argument of mastery. Goldstein feels that the mechanism of the game is more important and apparent to the player than the virtual act of killing, and that it, rather than the violence they perform, retains their focus. So the act of lining up a shot within a game is the focus of the game, and not the act of killing an enemy. According to Goldstein, studies show that the distinction between real violence and fantasy violence is well understood by even the youngest player, and there is a distinction between the feelings experienced by gamers and people who are committing real violence, with gamers “reflecting concentration and play” (Goldstein 345), not aggression. Therefore, the ludic aspects of the game are more powerful than the narrative and the player stays present in the act of gaming and not in that of killing.

The concept of mastery can be linked specifically to zombie-themed games. Zombies are good villains for beginning players because of their slow movements. They are “relatively easy to kill, quickly giving players a sense of empowerment within the game environment; and yet continue to frighten with their sudden appearance around corners, their moans, and their relentless, plodding pursuit of the player character” (McIntosh 12-13). It is this sense of empowerment that McIntosh feels is at the core of zombie video game appeal, as well as the difference between the medium of the video game and the movie. He states: “in the movies, the audience could of course only watch passively and imagine what they would do in that situation or think how they would run away from the zombies. When playing a video game, the player can do exactly what he or she wants” (McIntosh 13). The way that the games ramp up the violence allows the

players to learn and thus feel in control of the game world and its horrors. These games offer a promise of mastery, which is an essential part of their appeal.

Also a champion of video games, Steven Poole suggests that video games do affect violence but in a very specific way: “by having a particular style that may be imitated.” “But if you are going to kill,” he goes on to say “you can find stylistic inspiration anywhere” (Poole 210). Thus video games have the same influence as other media, they present a narrative or style that can be emulated, but do not push violence onto the readers/players. Poole’s argument places responsibility for the violent act with the individual rather than with the media with which they have interacted.

Violence in video games is currently being linked to the idea of American Imperialism or Empire ( Dyer-Withefor& de Peuter, 2009; Miller, 2012; Voorhees, 2012). Pointing out that the historical connection between the Military Industrial Complex and video games continues, these critics suggest that video games, and particularly FPS games, are expansions of the Pentagon's militaristic agenda. Video game companies often produce video games that are used as training resources by the military; as well creating releases of the same games for the civilian population. The actions portrayed within civilian released video games affect the gamer's mentality, decreasing their reactions to violence and instilling them with the subjectivity of citizen-soldiers (Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter, 2009). Therefore, video games can be tied to American Imperialism's need to control global resources because “...FPS are crucial to that project by providing practical training in, and ideological support for, killing” (Miller, 2012).



Video games help establish a numbness towards violence and war, which helps enable the American Imperial agenda. This concept will be discussed at length in chapter one.

By examining video games, this analysis can advance the understanding of the relationship between ideology and media, as it offers an opportunity to study how a power structure, such as capitalism, can be found in media in ways that re-establish its dominance as a preferred economic ideology. Žižek observes that the distortion in ideology comes not from a lack of knowledge but from continuous action. Ideology is habitual. It is a belief that is not changed because it is inherent in practices. Žižek states: “the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing” (“Sublime” 30). Therefore, the effects of ideology, and its reiteration, is contained in actions, not conscious thought. This is how ideology can be realized and seen by those caught up in it, and not changed. Žižek reiterates: “today; we only imagine that we do *not* ‘really believe’ in our ideology—in spite of this imaginary distance, we continue to practise it.” (“First as Tragedy” 3). It is the habitual nature of the actions themselves that is problematic. This is why the study of video games is so important, video games thrive on habits. Ludic actions are repetitive, and very often violent. Although violent ludic acts must be understood, it is also important to examine what other ludic actions are connected to the repeated violence.

Chapter one, “Money-for-Bodies”, examines the economic structure inscribed in the ludology of zombie-themed video games in a comparison with the economic narrative presented in the zombie-themed films that have provided the ‘environment’ on which the games depend. Zombie films offer two ways for protagonists to acquire munitions,

through already equipped military-like organizations and through looting. In contrast, two of the games, *Call of Duty: Zombies* and *Killing Floor* contain economic elements that suggest market transactions, something that is not seen in the majority of zombie-themed films. Zombie-themed video games that contain monetary based economic ludic systems exhibit the money-for-bodies ludic system, where players are rewarded money for killing. The money-for-bodies ludic system combines the twin subjectivities of Empire, the worker-consumer and the soldier-citizen, into a mercenary subjectivity: the worker-consumer-soldier-citizen.

The second chapter, “Avatar Suicide”, observes how the money-for-bodies ludic system operates as a social aspect in multiplayer video games. All three games observed have multiplayer options, where players can choose (and often do choose) to cooperate. Similar to the economic variation seen in chapter one, the *Left4Deads*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor* have different options for cooperation similar to the different economic ludic functions contained within each game. Forming cooperative groups to ensure survival, the players take on specialized job roles based on the experience gained through leveling up the performance of their avatars, through the avatar capital system, or through their particular type of mastery with certain weapons. These cooperative groups function through small group dynamics—instances where players help each other for the good of the group by specialization or sharing munitions. Sharing turns into counterplay<sup>12</sup> in *Killing Floor* when players have their avatars commit suicide for the benefit of their teammates—a cooperative act that reiterates the relationship between money and killing established in the money-for-bodies ludic system.

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<sup>12</sup> Counterplay is a ludic action unanticipated by game designers.

## **Chapter 1: Money-For-Bodies**

The following chapter explores the economic ludic systems embedded in three zombie-themed first-person shooter video games released in 2008 and 2009 and their connection to violence. As noted above, there is a disconnection which often happens within zombie-themed video games—a separation between the zombie myth, as established by previous zombie-themed media, and the ludic functioning of the game. This disconnection can be observed by juxtaposing the economic functions—such as the use of currency, and market transactions—and the narrative aspects of each game. The video games *Left4Dead* (and its sequel *Left4Dead2*), *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor* will be examined and their in-game ludic systems will be compared to the limited economic system presented in zombie films. In all three of the games analyzed, the back-story of the game is not an in-game feature. Instead, the gamer's previous knowledge of the zombie apocalypse media serves to explain the game's content. Within the zombie myth, items are either looted or provided by a military-like organization; there is no need for currency or market transactions. This consistency is dropped in two out of the three games observed. Of the three games analyzed, the *Left4Dead* franchise remains consistent with the zombie myth developed in movies, while *Call of Duty: Zombies* and *Killing Floor* do not. Both of these games retain capitalistic economic functions which are inconsistent with the zombie apocalypse narrative. The gap presented between the narrative aspects of the filmic zombie myth and the ludic aspects of the inconsistent video games represents an example of the money-for-bodies ludic system, a highly used video game mechanism which links earned income to killing. Money-for-bodies is the economic relationship governing the virtual characters in first-person shooter games,

which Nick Dryer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter have connected to the subjectivities established in Hardt and Negeri's description of Empire. The production of a mercenary subjectivity emerges in zombie-themed video games not from the zombie narrative or back story but from the economic relations embedded in the games' ludic system.

While the relationship between video games and violence is well-documented, it is a discussion that has historically been narrow in scope and it is this narrowness that has not yet brought the money-for-bodies phenomenon to light. Most analyses center on one specific aspect of play, such as internal violence or economy, and how that same specific aspect affects the real world—for example, whether committing violence in video games leads to violent behavior in the real world or how currency in a video game is traded in real markets. Interestingly, the link within the video game between these two aspects is rarely discussed. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter come the closest to connecting economics and violence when they discuss the two in tandem by positing that video games are ideological texts that reiterate and confound Empire<sup>13</sup>. Analyzing two games, *Second Life* and *America's Army*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue that “The two games reassert, rehearse, and reinforce Empire's twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen”(xiv). *America's Army* is a FPS made by the U.S. Department of Defense, in which gamers can experience military service. *Second Life*, much like *The Sims*, is a life simulation video game, in which people build virtual houses,

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<sup>13</sup> Working from the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter define Empire as: “the global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states, among whom the United States still clings, by virtue of its military might, to an increasingly dubious preeminence” (introduction xxii).

buy virtual goods and control customizable avatars. To say that these two examples reiterate the military violence and consumerism inherent in Empire seems self-evident.

Gerald A. Voorhees offers a similar argument about the connection between the FPS and the Military Complex of the United States. Through an examination of the history of the FPS genre specifically looking at the relationship between public controversy and the type of antagonist killed within the game, Voorhees explains that once the content of the FPS became more in tune with the American military the genre received less criticism. He states: "...public perceptions of the FPS games improved as their themes became more militaristic and their narratives more directly supportive of American Imperialism" (Voorhees 90). According to Voorhees, when the FPS was first created, it was the center of controversy because its purpose was unknown. However, after the avatars of the FPS became soldiers, FPS video games became more acceptable because militarization and normalization go hand-in-hand in the present day United States.

Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter, and Voorhees examine games staged in virtual worlds that imitate reality, providing players with the opportunity to experience warfare scenarios. In contrast, Edward Castronova analyzes economic structures in fantasy-themed video games, especially the massively multiplayer online role-playing game or MMORPG<sup>14</sup>, which he refers to as virtual worlds or VWs. He suggests that:

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<sup>14</sup> The MMORPG is a video game genre which expanded on the RPG or role playing game. In the RPG, a gamer would use his avatar to go through a series of quests that creates a story line or narrative arc. The MMORPG is similar but allows thousands of players and incorporates numerous story lines. These video games allow different gamers to corporate and interact in many different ways. Castronova refers to these video games as virtual worlds and synthetic worlds.

The attraction of the VW lies in its ability to replicate the physical and economic world of Earth, with slight but significant changes in the rules. These changes—such as granting people the freedom to have whatever appearance and skills they wish—are sufficient to generate a society and a flavor of daily life that is so attractive that many thousands of people apparently consider themselves permanent residents. Tens of thousands of adults now devote more time to VWs than to paid employment. Similar numbers use their Earth money to buy things in VWs. Almost one million seem willing to pay a monthly fee to at least see what VWs are all about. And these numbers are growing. (“Virtual” 37)

Castronova makes the point that money within video games has real world value, like a dollar or euro, because it is deemed valuable by the gamers who play the video games. Because of the value given to it by players, in-game money can often be exchanged for real-world money. He also shows the connections between the in-game economy and the real-world economy. According to Castronova, video games are possible markets, blank slates where fantasy economies can be played out and new economic options can be discovered. However, even though Castronova offers a broad description of how MMORPGs function, he does not examine games with less developed game-worlds such as the FPS.

These three studies create a useful frame for the analysis in this chapter. The purpose of this analysis is to identify similar results effecting subjectivity in video games with more fantastic themes than the ones observed by Dryer-Witthof, de Peuter and Voorhees, and with less complex economic systems than the ones analyzed by Castronova—thereby expanding their work and making it more applicable to a larger number of video games.

According to John Black, economics is “the study of how scarce resources are or should be allocated” (Black 137). Economist Lionel Robbins offers a similar and widely

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used definition of economics. He states, “Economics is a science which studies human behavior as a relationship between [a given hierarchy of] ends and scarce means which have alternative uses” (qdt. in by Blaug 87). This definition is “now echoed in the first chapter of every textbook on price theory” (Blaug 87). Blaug goes on to describe “Robbin’s famous definition of economics as the science that studies the allocation of scarce means among given but competing ends” (Blaug 149). These definitions are echoed by Castronova, who defines economics as: “the study of choice under scarcity” (“Synthetic” 171). He explains this by saying: “The idea is that any human being has desires, and that these desires can never be fully satisfied with current resources. Resources are scarce, and that forces us to choose where to allocate our resources so as to obtain the best mix of desires that we can” (“Synthetic” 171). Castronova's definition of economics is useful because it is easy to see how any video game involves choice and thus involves an economy, a point he stresses. Castronova focuses on larger video games, whose world building is more complete—allowing the players to engage in more and different types of actions. However, his definition of economics can be used for video games that are less expansive, such FPS video games. Because economics is based on a scarcity of resources and how these resources are acquired and used, economic functions can be observed in the simplest of games.

In light of the definition of economy given by Castronova, it becomes apparent that scarcity is consistent with the dystopian myth that surrounds the cinematic zombie archetype. Choice, however, is limited because the characters must fight with what they can find. In zombie-themed films supplies such as food and, most importantly, weapons are obtained in two ways— by looting or through a military-like organization. Starting

with the films of George A. Romero and specifically *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), looting is a constant factor. *Night of the Living Dead* establishes the structure of the zombie narrative—a small group of survivors flee flesh-eating monsters, stopping and taking refuge in abandoned buildings. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the characters fight the zombies with what they have at hand, looting the farm house in which they have taken refuge. For example, the main character Barbra takes a butcher knife from one of the kitchen drawers. The protagonist, Ben comes in fighting with a crowbar and later discovers a shotgun in a coat closet. He also speaks of taking food. The theme of looting is carried on in the other Romero movies and their remakes. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, 2004), for example, the survivors camp in a shopping mall and take what they need from the stores. In *Day of the Dead* (1985), the survivors are a mix of military men and scientists who inhabit an underground bunker filled with weapons and supplies. In the Remake of *Day of the Dead* (2008) the protagonists try to escape a quarantined town. Several of the main characters are military who start the movie with guns, however, when it comes to restocking, the same characters pillage an abandoned gun store. In *Diary of the Dead* (2008), the main group of survivors flee cross-country in an RV. They meet up with another group of survivors who have looted a town and stockpiled the goods. When the heroine offers money for gas and supplies, the leader of the second group refuses and gives them what they need. A deviation from the looting rule is *Land of the Dead* (2005). *Land of the Dead* varies slightly from the looting practices because it is a commentary on class hierarchy. Set long after the zombie apocalypse has been established, *Land of the Dead* shows a reconstruction of society. The survivors create a walled-off town where the



rich shop for goods provided by lower class members of society who loot the abandoned area surrounding the town.

Military characters bearing weapons and the theme of looting also appear in the spin-out films of the *Resident Evil* franchise. *Resident Evil* is a video game released in 1996 by Capcom; its popularity has spawned a franchise of about twenty-three video games, comic books, novels and movies. Similar to Romero's films, the *Resident Evil* franchise also centers on survivors of the zombie apocalypse. The zombies in *Resident Evil* are scientifically created from a virus made by the Umbrella Corporation. The *Resident Evil* video games are a mix of role playing games (RPGs) and third-person shooters. The avatars are specific members of S.T.A.R.S (Special Tactics and Rescue Service), a police-like organization. Avatars gain munitions and other items by finding them scattered around the map or by looting the bodies of fallen comrades. In the first *Resident Evil* film, *Resident Evil* (2002), a group of Umbrella security personnel are sent into the Hive, an underground lab facility, to eradicate the zombie problem. The security team carries with them their own weapons, and frequently comments on the status of their supply of bullets. In *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), several of the main characters are either S.T.A.R.S. or Umbrella security personnel, who again have their own weapons. However, in the beginning of the film, Alice, the protagonist, takes a shotgun from an abandoned cop car and a few scenes later she loots a gun store. Similar to *Land of the Dead*, *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) is also set far after the zombie apocalypse has been established. In this film, the survivors travel, nomadically, in a caravan bringing what they can (they travel with a gas tanker) and loot what they can find.

Looting as an aspect of the zombie apocalypse myth appears in several non-franchise movies as well. *28 Days Later* (2002) features a scene where the survivors loot food from a grocery store and, as they are leaving, one of the characters humorously leaves a credit card sitting by the empty register. In *28 Weeks Later* (2007) the survivors escape from a military encampment and have weapons from there. Finally the comedic tribute films, *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Zombieland* (2009) also feature scenes of looting. Overall, there is a consistency in zombie-themed media about how the protagonists obtain supplies. The world-in-crisis featured in these films and games causes the characters to use what they have on them as weapons or forces them to loot their surroundings. This situation is a very limited economic system or almost a lack of an economic system; neither black markets nor any other kind of market for transactions are ever portrayed. In zombie films, characters face a situation of scarcity because society is no longer functioning to produce more goods, and of limited choice because characters have to use what is at hand to defend themselves.

In a post-apocalyptic world, where society has broken down, resources would be scarce. Utilizing that aspect of the zombie myth, the game designers must then choose how to enact economy—what actions the players must complete to fulfill the needs of their avatar and ensure their survival. Choice in FPS video games is very limited; it is not like RPGs or life simulation games where the player can outfit a house or choose the color of his armor. In these zombie-themed video games, choice is limited to the type of weapon the avatar wields. Therefore economy in these games is limited to the types of transactions the players are allowed to enact enabling them to choose weapons. In an analysis of these processes, an intriguing comparison becomes evident between two

different game types—one type that builds on the narrative aspects of the game and is consistent with the zombie myth generated in film, and another that builds on ludological elements at the expense of the consistency between world creation and the filmic zombie myth.

### **The Games**

The *Left4Dead* franchise, consisting of *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor* are not known for their narrative elements. Instead, they rely on their choice of villain (zombies) and the gamer's knowledge of the zombie myth to flesh out the game-world. Narrative within video games is usually created through cutscenes or interactions with non-player characters (NPC), which the game system controls. Cutscenes are animated clips interspersed between game action that tell a story or advance a storyline. NPCs tell players stories, through voice-over or text, furthering an overarching storyline. The limited cutscenes and NPCs in *Left4Dead*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor* do not convey large amounts of information. Within these games, an actual storyline is almost non-existent. Instead, assumptions by the players complete the game-world.

### ***Left4Dead***

The traditional narrative aspects in *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2* consist primarily of only a few cutscenes. The beginning animation for *Left4Dead* starts with the words “2 weeks after first infection” in white lettering over a black screen. Next, it shows the survivors walking through a dark alley in a deserted city. The animation is a continuous

action sequence that introduces the specialized zombies within the game and shows the characters being attacked by the zombie horde. *Left4Dead2* commences with an animation sequence or cutscene that mimics a theatrical trailer, showing animated clips of multiple action sequences accompanied by voice-overs of the characters. Neither sequence explains the reason for the zombie presence or the history of the characters; instead it offers visual and verbal cues or references which the player is expected to connect to an existing knowledge of the zombie myth. For example, one of the first images in the *Left4Dead2* cutscene is of a hotel sign that states “Closed until further notice due to sickness.” The player is expected to connect the word “sickness” to the illness that creates zombies. Next the voice over commences. Coach, a middle-aged black male character, reads a flier. He says: “Report unusual behavior. Barricade your homes. Avoid all contact with infected individuals. Wait for official instructions (he laughs) wait my ass.” Ellis, a young white male character responds, “Kill all sons of bitches. That’s my official instructions.” From this voice-over interaction, the player again is given clues to the video game’s world—unusual behavior, barricades, the word *infected*—all things connected to the zombie myth. However, it also contains the motto or spirit of the game “Kill all sons of bitches,” which is repeated at the end of the animation. Both games-worlds are set in the Southern United States and proceed south towards the Florida Keys. *Left4Dead* starts its character’s struggle for life in Pennsylvania. *Left4Dead2* commences in Savannah. It is indicated that the characters will seek refuge on an island where the zombies cannot follow them.

*Left4Dead* and its sequel were both created for four players. Originally intended for consoles such as the Xbox or the Playstation 3, the games were “ported” or adapted to

also be playable on the PC. Each incarnation involves three male characters and one female: Francis, Bill, Louis and Zoey in *Left4Dead*; and Nick, Ellis, Coach, and Rochelle in *Left4Dead2*. These characters are survivors of the zombie apocalypse who are trying to avoid becoming zombies themselves. The appearances of the avatars are set; the game does not allow players to customize their appearance or dress. Clearly, fulfilling desires through transactions in the game converges on survival rather than on the fashioning of subjectivity. The styling of the characters makes them look contemporary to the release of the game. They wear jeans and t-shirts, dress pants and button down shirts, or mechanic's overalls and a baseball cap. These would be considered regular clothes, portraying the idea that the character's lives were contemporary with the gamer's but were then caught in the zombie apocalypse. The characters not chosen by a player as an avatar remain in the game and are controlled by the computer artificial intelligence (AI). The only visual difference between an AI-controlled character and a gamer-controlled character is that the gamer's name or handle appears in the character interface—the visual apparatus which frames the gamer's screen allowing him or her to monitor the status of other players/avatars.

The zombies in *Left4Dead* follow along the lines of the character's appearance. Visually they look contemporary as well, like regular people who became zombies. Along with the massive horde of regular zombies, there are several types of special zombies who provide specific challenges. These special zombies are more grotesque than the typical mass. They are disfigured and emit special sounds that warn the player of their advance. While the human survivors that the players use as avatars can employ guns and other hand-held weapons to fight, zombies attack only with biological weapons such as

brute force, biting, or scratching. They are cannibalistic. An injury to a player's avatar will result in the zombie horde attacking that avatar in mass numbers.

As in all FPS games, the object of gameplay in *Left 4 Dead* and *Left4Dead2* is survival. The four players complete missions by running through areas filled with zombies. A round of an FPS game is referred to as a map and in *Left4Dead*, finishing the round is typically the same as covering the required distance on the map. Movement is key and the players hone their skills at making their avatars run and shoot zombies at the same time. Additionally, some maps require a task for completion, such as to find and collect gasoline to power a car or a generator. In these maps, players run from one spot to another, collecting objects and fighting zombies as they move. While running, the players find and pick up weapons and medical supplies, such as medical packs that restore health and pain pills that ease the symptoms of low health. As an avatar's health deteriorates, changes occur in the character—visibility is reddened, movement slows down, and the character's “heartbeat” is heard, decreasing the player's ability to hear other sounds. All of these changes make gameplay more challenging, leading to a connection between a decrease of agency in-game as an indication of the effects of a real world injury. The goal of gameplay is to finish all of the maps and reach the non-zombie zone or to reach a point where the characters can be rescued by helicopter.

Of the three video games analyzed, the *Left4Deads* are most consistent with the zombie myth developed in film, because the characters rely on looting and finding items to fulfill their needs. There is no point system in *Left4Dead*, or formal currency. There are only munitions and health-related items which can be passed amongst the players but

these transactions are typically one-sided. For example, one player may give another player a bottle of pain pills but the player giving the pills does it to help the team, not because he or she expects an item in return. Because of their consistency with the zombie myth, *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2* can be seen as a control—an exemplary example which can be used as a comparison.

### *Call of Duty: Zombies*

The first *Nazi Zombies* map of the Call of Duty franchise, Nacht der Untoten, has only a very short cutscene before gameplay. It features an animated view of the game world with a Nazi zombie running in a shuffling manner toward the screen. The successive versions of the video game have beginning cutscenes similar to the Left 4 Dead franchise. The content of the cutscene is based on the content of the map. The cutscene introducing a map called “Five,” the second map contained in *Call of Duty: Black ops*, is a comical animation featuring John F. Kennedy, Robert McNamara, Fidel Castro and Richard Nixon. The four characters are seated in a pentagon war room talking when they are interrupted by zombies. At this point John F. Kennedy declares: “Zombies. Gentlemen, at times like these our capacity to retaliate must be and has to be massive, to deter all forms of aggression. Gentlemen, lock and load!” The characters all grab guns and form a line. The others ask Kennedy if he has any words of encouragement and he says, “Do not pray for easy lives, my friends. Pray to be stronger men.” The quotes serve to set the tone of the game, violence and militarization, but they do not explain why the pentagon is being overrun with zombies or why they exist. As with *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2*, the cutscenes for *Call of Duty: Zombies* are not expansive or explanatory.

The cutscenes set the scene of the map but do not explain why the zombies exist. In addition, the time periods and content of the maps vary. Some maps are set in the era relative to the game they are accompanying. For instance, the first maps in *Nazi Zombies* are set in World War II, while concurrent maps were set in the Korean War. However, some maps take place in non-specific eras or on the moon. Most maps feature an alternate past theme more than a futuristic theme. Map sequencing is on release date not content, without narrative content to tie the maps together. Each map can be seen as its own entity.

The game is designed for four players whose avatars all have similar, unchangeable appearances. The players do not get to choose their avatar's appearance or which avatar they get to embody. Instead the process seems to be randomly generated—a player may be Russian the first time he or she play the map and English the next time. In the original *Nazi Zombies*, there are four avatar types: Russian, English, Japanese and American. The nationality of the avatars plays a very minimal role, primarily just giving the characters funny stereotypical lines to say throughout the action. The dress of the zombies in *Call of Duty: Zombies* is similar to the avatars, if more distressed, and appropriate to the time period of the map and the type of soldier the zombies were in life. *Nazi Zombies* for example, has zombies in World War II uniforms of the German military. Other maps have zombies dressed in camouflage uniforms or even as Japanese peasants. The zombie's eyes glow and their movements are halting.

Like *Left4Dead*, players of *Call of Duty: Zombies* must kill successive waves of decomposing zombies. But unlike *Left4Dead*, players have the option of fortifying a



room to try and hold out against the zombies or they can remain mobile. Advancement in *Zombies* depends on killing a specific number of zombies, not the distance covered on the map, as in *Left4Dead*. Maps have successive rounds of play, with a certain number of zombies per round. Once that number has been killed, players advance to the next round without changing the map. The area or map remains the same, while the number of zombies increases successively. There is no “boss” or end round to *Zombies*. Players continue until they are wiped out, then they try again, attempting to complete more rounds than before. Gameplay in the zombie modes is very different than the main portion of the *Call of Duty* video games and the *Left4Dead* franchise, specifically in that zombie mode includes a points system. Each time a player kills a zombie he or she receives points, which then can be used like money to buy new, higher-firepower weapons. The award of points does not occur through the agency of a named character; it is an anonymous mechanism of the game's universe.

Lottery is another interesting economic element in *Call of Duty: Zombies*. The players have two choices for buying weapons: they can buy them from multiple spots along the wall where there is a painted outline of a gun and its price, or they can attempt to buy munitions from “the mystery box.” The mystery box is an army footlocker that players find at various locations on the gaming map. For a price, a player can open the mystery box and receive a random weapon. The possibility of receiving a high-powered weapon for a low price keeps the players coming back to the mystery box to try their luck. However, if a player opens the box and finds a teddy bear, that means the mystery box will then transport itself to another hidden location and the players will have to fight to find it again.

The points system in *Call of Duty: Zombies* functions as a monetary system, because the points the gamers earn are utilized to purchase munitions. For example, to use the mystery box in the original *Call of Duty: Nazi Zombies*, it costs nine hundred and fifty points, “regardless if the player takes the weapon or not”<sup>15</sup>; along the walls, the World War II era, Springfield Bolt-Action Rifle costs 200 points<sup>16</sup>. When a player runs out of ammunition, he or she can return to the spot along the wall where he or she originally purchased the gun and buy ammunition for half the price of the weapon—again the price is expressed in points. By comparison, neither *Left4Dead* nor *Left4Dead2* contain points or the in-game mechanism to purchase munitions. Therefore, *Call of Duty: Zombies* abandons the strict looting system established in the zombie films and reiterated in *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2*. *Call of Duty: Zombies* is inconsistent with the filmic zombie myth because of the in-game point system. To advance in the video game, gamers must use points earned from killing zombies to buy weapons from either the walls or the mystery box.

### ***Killing Floor***

Like the other two video games, *Killing Floor* does not have a substantial inner narrative. It does not even contain cutscenes. Instead, the player sets up the game by choosing a map, which has a paragraph of text establishing a setting. For example, one of the first maps, Bioticslab, is accompanied by a paragraph that reads:

Within ten hours of the containment breach, nearly three quarters of the security and research detail at Horzine's London laboratory has been killed. Those who couldn't escape set up makeshift defenses in their

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<sup>15</sup> [http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Mystery\\_Box](http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Mystery_Box)

<sup>16</sup> <http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Springfield>

dormitories, or the labs. In the depths of the facility, the incubators remain functional—spawning more and more clones. Your task is to eliminate every last one of the bastards.

The paragraph for another map, West London, reads:

Less than a month ago, the capital was thriving at the height of the tourism season. No longer. A light breeze carries distant screams and the scent of gasoline fire and rotting flesh. You and your squad have been assigned to this particular quadrant in the west end of the city, with orders to hold off a large number of specimens reportedly heading east to a survivor enclave. Failure is not an option here.

As with the cutscenes in *Left4Dead* and *Call of Duty: Zombies*, these scenario texts set the tone of the video game but explain little else. Set in post-apocalyptic London and surrounding areas, *Killing Floor* is a dystopian world that has been taken over by zombie-like clones. Following a trend in zombie-media<sup>17</sup>, the video game's creators are ambiguous about the status of their villains as zombies. The overview on *Killing Floor* begins by calling them zombies: "The aim – cleanse each area of zombies, in waves, until you get to the last one." Then it refers to them as specimens: "They are the left-over 'specimens' from a cheap and dirty government program to clone soldier-monsters." And then it finally reverts back to zombies: "Zombies. Lots of them. Big ones, little ones. Armed and Dangerous. JUST MAKE THEM ALL GO AWAY!"<sup>18</sup> Despite the ambiguity, the villains in *Killing Floor* can be categorized as zombies because they are very similar in appearance and purpose to the zombies in the Resident Evil films. Both sets of zombies were created to be super soldiers. According to the *Killing Floor* website, the cloning machines for the specimens are still in operation, which explains the numerous creatures available for each level of the game. The appearance of the

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<sup>17</sup> The zombies in zombie media are rarely referred to as zombies within the film. They are instead referred to as infected, zeds, creatures or simply as "them."

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.killingfloorthegame.com/overview/>

specimens is grotesque. Consisting of ten different types, two of them being noticeably female, they are anthropomorphic and often have weapons fused to their hands.

The avatars in *Killing Floor* are simplistic, with little individualization except for player name and choice of skins. Skins consist of pre-made appearances from which the gamer can choose. Most of the skins are masked; some have total body radiation suits. Until recently all skins were male. However, in June of 2012 Tripwire heeded players' requests and created the first female skin and voice pack, available as a purchasable upgrade or downloadable content. Skins are also used as a replay tactic, with specific skins being rewarded to players who complete certain accomplishments within the game. For example, during the Twisted Christmas event, a skin called Bad Santa was rewarded to gamers who completed all the Christmas themed achievements. Compared to some other video games, the avatars in *Killing Floor* are remarkably well suited to the dystopian atmosphere—avatars wear military garb, hazmat suits, gas masks and full body clothing. These clothing choices seem more appropriate than skins offered in other games, which appeal to sexuality and are unrealistic.

The second part of avatar development is choosing and playing a specific class. Choosing an avatar's class is akin to choosing its job. There are six different types of classes from which to choose; each type gives the player certain advantages or perks with specific weapons. For example, the commando class has greater accuracy with automatic firearms such as the bull pup or scar, and the fire bug class has greater stability with the flame thrower. Other bonuses include faster reload and resistance to fire. Players are not limited to only the guns specific to their class, as they can pick up a random weapon from

the road or buy any weapon they want. However, if the weapon is not specific to their class, they will not receive the same perks they would for a class-based weapon.

In *Killing Floor*, up to six players battle through successive rounds of specimens. As in the other two games, survival is the goal. Similar to *Call of Duty: Zombies*, *Killing Floor* is organized by maps with successive rounds. The maps are individual units with no connecting plot or narrative. After selecting a map and a class, the players fight through seven to ten waves of monsters. Each wave has a specific number of enemies, and, once that number has been killed, the players have a minute to reach the trader's shop to buy weapons or munitions. The final wave is the "Boss" round where the players fight the patriarch, a mutant man/zombie mix who is the creator of the specimens. When the patriarch is killed, the game is won.

The connection between *Killing Floor* and money is not easily missed, and jarringly bizarre. In the game, players buy weapons from the trader's shop. The trader, a NPC, repeats lines during gameplay reminding the players to find and utilize the shop. One such line that occurs at the end of the round is: "They're all dead! Time to go shopping!" The oddness of this line serves as an example of how far *Killing Floor* moves away from the filmic zombie myth of looting and scrounging for munitions, to a naturalization of a market within the zombie apocalypse. At the trader's shop gamers can also sell weapons and even exchange funds. To give money, a gamer points his/her avatar in the direction of the receiving avatar and he then presses a single button. This ludic action causes a spray of glowing fifty dollar bricks to fly from one character to the other, accompanied by a sing-song English voice saying "Money, Money, Money." This visual

is so popular that it has become connected to victory, as gamers will throw cash once they have won the game. Money in *Killing Floor* is further celebrated by the creation of the avatar skin named Harold Lott in 2012. This particular skin drops phantom cash as the avatar wearing it runs around a map. Differing from the cash used to buy munitions, Lott's phantom cash cannot be retrieved by teammates for use, and it just serves as decoration or visual detail. *Killing Floor* is the least consistent with the filmic zombie myth because it features a monetary system, which is not disguised as a points system, and celebrates in-game funds.

### **Gameplay**

Numerous similarities are found among the three games. When broken down into their component parts, *Left4Dead*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor* are alike in the composition of their gaming worlds. They are visually dystopian and post-apocalyptic, avatars function similarly with little personalization, and the choice of villains is zombies. All three games also have single and multiplayer options. Winning all these games is similar, and dependent on survival. Yet, it cannot be said that all three games play like the same game. They differ, most strikingly in the details of their gameplay or ludic elements. Ludic difference is often noted by reviewers such as Jeff Buckland, a professional video game reviewer who makes such a comparison in his review of *Killing Floor*. He states: "And what I do like is that you can survive by welding a couple of doors shut and making a stand if you've got the skills to keep the enemy at bay; you always know how many zombies are left to kill before the next wave and the

goal is getting kills, not traveling from point A to B like in *Left 4 Dead*.”<sup>19</sup> As Buckland points out, the basic gameplay is different because in *Killing Floor* the players have the option to hold a room or a hallway. Movement during the round is not essential in *Killing Floor* or *Call of Duty: Zombies*, as it is with *Left4Dead*. The actions of the games also differ in the ways players acquire munitions for their gaming avatar.

The economies within these games are minimal at best, and yet they do contain economies because they feature scarcity and desire. The economy of a FPS is dependent on how players handle the scarcity of resources, often called resource allocation, and how they acquire items in the game. Since the avatars are dependent on these items for survival, it follows that they should be called needs, not desires as Castronova names them. Players can acquire needs, weapons and ammunition, in these games in three different ways, but each option is not available in each game. One way is to have the weapons already available on the avatar or provided nearby—a mechanism similar to the military provision seen in the zombie films. An example of this method is the beginning of *Left4Dead*, in a map called “No Mercy—The Apartments.” The four characters begin on a roof top and must descend through a building full of zombies. After a short introductory cutscene, players gain control of their chosen avatar and are provided an assortment of weapons on a near-by table. The second way to acquire munitions is to find them; this mechanism is similar to the looting scenes in the zombie films. After the initial start-up of any *Left4Dead* map, finding weapons is the only way to gain successive or more powerful weapons. Guns can be lying on the ground or placed in closets or

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<sup>19</sup> [www.atomicgamer.com/articles/794/killing-floor-review](http://www.atomicgamer.com/articles/794/killing-floor-review), by Jeff Buckland 5/31/2009

cabinets. At one point the players even raid a gun store. Randomly found weapons and ammo occur in all three games. The third type of munitions acquisition is buying weapons. This aspect of gameplay sets *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies* apart from *Left4Dead* and the zombie myth.

As stated previously, between waves of zombies, the players of *Killing Floor* have a minute to find and use the Trader's Shop, where weapons and other items are sold for money. This option is not available in either of the other games in which there is no shop or trader. However, the most important point is that in *Killing Floor* money still exists. In fact, it is a vital part of the game. The player's level affects the prices for ammunition, with the higher levels paying the lowest prices. Thus the need for purchasing power is one of the motivations for players to become better and level up their avatars. An economy also plays a vital role in *Call of Duty: Zombie Mode*; with currency in the form of “points” substituting for money. For example, to activate several special bonuses in *Zombies*, a player must kill the right zombie. Once the zombie is killed, a grisly voice announces “double points” and, for an allotted amount of time, the players earn double points for each zombie they kill. The players can then take the points they have earned killing zombies and use them along the walls or at the mystery box to buy the weapons they need to advance in the video game. It is possible to see within these three video games a variant scale of reward for killing zombies: *Left4Dead* offers no reward (other than survival), *Call of Duty: Zombie Mode* offers points as a reward, and *Killing Floor* offers virtual currency as a reward.



In relation to the filmic zombie myth on which all three games are based, it is apparent that each falls into one of two categories. They are either consistent economically with the zombie myth, such as *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2*, or not consistent, such as *Call of Duty: Zombies* and *Killing Floor*. In *Left4Dead*, there is a world of scarcity where the needs of gamers are fulfilled by their finding or looting items. These items are used and then discarded—there are no transactions or currency. This game world is consistent with the zombie myth, where social structures no longer exist due to the zombie pandemic. *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty* have currency based economies. These two games defy the post-apocalyptic narrative associated with their choice of villain in favor of a quick and easy reward system. The majority of players' needs are met through currency transactions. Scarcity and resource allocation are still challenges, but scarcity does not work on the same level as in *Left4Dead* because of the greater availability of weapons—meaning that the acquisition of weapons is dependent on the amount of currency the player possesses, and not the luck of finding them.

Castronova studies how MMORPGs have market economies, with gross domestic products and a living wage. The same cannot be said of *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies*. There is constant supply in both of these games; the trader never runs out of weapons and the walls of *Call of Duty: Zombies* have an endless supply of ammo. So, if these ludological processes do not mimic a true market economy, what are they evidence of? Both are examples of currency based transactions—in *Killing Floor* the currency is British Pounds, in *Call of Duty: Zombies* the currency is points, which can be seen as a currency because they are used to purchase munitions. The action of purchasing munitions reiterates capitalism even though the trader and walls are not full markets,

because the transactions merely mimic market practices: unlimited demand is met by unlimited supply unfettered by production constraints. Players are able to use currency to buy and sell goods, an action similar enough to real life to be a metonymy for capitalism.

The variation between zombie-themed video games that is evident in the comparison of the *Left4Dead* franchise, *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies*, speaks to a wider phenomenon in the gaming world. While earning money or a type of currency in a video game is not uncommon, earning money in a game world that is inconsistent with the broader cultural narrative leads one to the question: how are gamers and their avatars earning money? In *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies*, players are earning money for killing. According to the online *Killing Floor* wiki<sup>20</sup>, the bounty for a scrake (a high level zombie with a chainsaw fused to its right arm) is £75. In *Call of Duty: Zombies*, the number of points earned per zombie starts at 130 for a melee attack.<sup>21</sup> The video games *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombie Mode* are two examples of what I would call “money-for-bodies”—a video game reward system in which the gamer/avatar is given in-game currency for killing one of the video game's enemies. It is a bounty-based ludic system. Each game has a range of values given to a kind of attack or type of zombie, but the connection between money and killing cannot be missed. And yet, it is. Academic criticism of violence and economy in video games is prevalent, but the connection between the two is a lacuna.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://kf-wiki.com/wiki/Scrake>

<sup>21</sup> [http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Points\\_%28Zombies%29](http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Points_%28Zombies%29)

The ramifications of money-for-bodies may be described in light of the arguments of Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter. They state that video games can be seen as representative of one of the other of “Empire's twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen” (Dyer-Withefor& de Peuter xiv), using a particular video game example for each pillar. However, Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter fail to point out that both pillars of Empire appear within the bulk of video games in the money-for-bodies ludic system. The violence and economics in money-for-bodies connects the two pillars of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen into one entity: the worker-consumer-soldier-citizen. It is a subjectivity of the consumer-worker whose job is being a soldier-citizen.

Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter expand their argument in their analysis of another military-based FPS video game, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, which is similar to *America's Army*. They state that such video games “Contribute to the culture shock necessary on the homeland to banalize the global violence of primitive accumulation” (Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter 118). Primitive accumulation encompasses acts carried out by capitalists or corporations in which they take over new spaces by force, usually in less developed countries, to accumulate natural resources or to install industry that will thrive in market economies. Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter indicate that video games help create a media space which makes violence and war trivial in the eyes of the American public, and thus the acts of warfare driven by capitalism's need for new economic spaces become trivial. In this way, Dyer-Withefor and de Peuter connect video games to Naomi Klein's concept of shock doctrine: “the calculated method of seizing or fomenting crisis of various types as an opportunity to crack open zones formerly restricting capital's free play” (Dyer-

Withefor and de Peuter 118). Shock doctrine can also be observed in zombie-themed video games. The zombie-based dystopian worlds are worlds in crisis. When these game-worlds incorporate the money-for-bodies ludic system, they suggest that capitalism can survive even in such worlds in crisis—that capitalism could survive the zombie apocalypse through its embodiment in the worker-consumer-soldier-citizen.

This mercenary identity is appropriate for the citizens of United States of America, as it is a nation that is undergoing privatization in the military. According to Naomi Klein, the military is undergoing a change from public to private control. Following the Pentagon budget cuts enacted by Donald Rumsfeld: “Private security companies flooded into Iraq to perform functions that had previously been done by soldiers...Once they were there, their roles expanded further in response to the chaos. Blackwater’s original contract in Iraq was to provide private security for Bremer, but a year into the occupation, it was engaging in all-out street combat” (Klein 479). Chalmers Johnson states that private firms contracted through the US government are being sent into foreign countries to train and support troops: “The Pentagon’s most recent route around accountability is ‘privatization’ of training activities...these are privately contracted mercenaries who, by their nature, are not directly responsible to the military chain of command.” (Johnson 85). Privatization in military matters confounds matters of accountability and information. Johnson continues: “One reason privatization appeals to the Pentagon is that whatever these companies do becomes ‘proprietary information’. The Pentagon does not even have to classify it; and as private property, information on the activities of such companies is exempt from the Freedom of Information Act.” (Johnson 85). This increase of real life mercenary activity is echoed in media such as video games

that use money-for-bodies. And the inclusion of such an economic ludic system in zombie-themed games increases the naturalization of mercenary activities (killing for money) by inserting it into the crisis situations presented by zombie-media, eventually equating survival with killing for money. Overall, the money-for-bodies ludic system adds to the banality of warfare presented by violent media, in which every citizen is a possible soldier, making being a soldier as natural as any other means of employment.

## **Chapter Two: Avatar Suicide**

The gamers who enact the worker-consumer-soldier-citizen subjectivity often do so in the social atmosphere offered by the multiplayer game. Players who choose to cooperate form small groups of four to six, which operate on a basis of capitalistic styled job specialization and sharing. Thus, the embodiment of the mercenary identity of the worker-consumer-soldier-citizen has a surprising twist when it is observed as an in game social aspect—it is enveloped in cooperation. Similar to the gradient scale of economy found in chapter one, the *Left4Dead* franchise, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and *Killing Floor* form a gradient scale of possibilities for cooperation—ranging from a complimentary actions, such as utilizing specialized avatar roles or choosing weapons that preform different functions, to sharing items and money. The specialized avatar roles are dependent on the leveling up achievements each player has competed, called avatar capital, and on the players' personal preferences of playing style and gun choice. Together, avatar capital and gun choice, enact the fantasy of capitalism as unlimited but as really funneled through limited choice. Through cooperation, gamers create small group dynamics—actions within the video game where players help each other. Small group dynamics is evidence of a dialog between the harsh economics of the money-for-bodies ludic system and the offer of cooperation in multiplayer games. When these two video game mechanisms work in tandem, the space is created in-game for the players to come up with new and creative ways to move beyond the limited actions of the video game.

*Killing Floor*, *Call of Duty: Zombies*, and the *Left4Dead* franchise are all multiplayer games. They offer gamers the opportunity to join together and play on the

same map. Players can then work as a team or compete against one another. The multiplayer option can be either a group of friends playing through a LAN connection (LAN, or local area connection, is a geographically small connection between a few computers) or, alternatively, players can try their luck and join an online pub. A pub is a game hosted on a public server, in which players may meet up with friends or experience playing with total strangers. Multiplayer capability is a highly desirable option for gamers and is a selling point for video games—it is something gamers look for and consider when purchasing video games.

Cooperation is possible in *Killing Floor*, *Call of Duty: Zombies* or *Left4Dead*, because they are multiplayer. However, competition is also possible. It depends on the desire of the gamer, whether his or her goal is to win the game or compete for highest number of kills—essentially mastery alone or with a group. A player can compete with others on the map, trying to steal their kills by acting and shooting sooner than the rest, or the player can be obstructive, blocking other gamers' point-of-view. Stealing kills and blocking the view of others will allow that specific player to gain money and points, but such actions are often contrary to winning the game. Online game reviewer Chris Pine, in his review of *Killing Floor*, states: “Teamwork is essential. It’s all about working as one unit, concentrating fire on the most threatening enemy units and supporting one another by using the various perk tracks”<sup>22</sup>—perk tracks are *Killing floor*’s name for job specialization. The same could be said of *Call of Duty: Zombies* even though there are not specific perk tracks. One player might shoot zombies, while another could be boarding up

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<sup>22</sup>Chris Park June 21, 2009, [www.cpugamer.com/reviews/4822/Killing-Floor-Review](http://www.cpugamer.com/reviews/4822/Killing-Floor-Review)

widows and making sure each area is secure. Within *Left4Dead* players can perform as a team by choosing different weapons that perform different tasks. In the video games that contain the money-for-bodies ludic system, whether a player chooses to compete or cooperate can directly affect him or her economically—influencing the player personally and all the other players on the map. Beyond winning, multiple goals exist within these zombie-themed video games. Other achievements are also appealing to the players and add replay value to the games. Small group dynamics work not only within the framework of winning, but also with leveling up and achievements.

### **Preference with a Punch**

Small group dynamics are created by groups of gamers who find ways to work together. This often means creating a team that has specialized jobs for each member. Specialization is enacted in the zombie-themed games observed in two ways, through the avatar capital system addressed below and through the actions and weapons choices players make. One player may perform a menial task such as boarding up the windows in *Call of Duty: Zombies* or wielding a door closed in *Killing Floor*, because of the constant onslaught of zombies in both these games maintenance jobs such as these may be performed continuously during a round. However, most specialization happens in regard to weapons. Weapon choice is a mixture of personal preference and group need. For example, a *Killing Floor* team might have a sharpshooter who can take down larger zombies at a far range combined with specializations that work at a closer range, such as a firebug with a flamethrower or support specialist with a shotgun. In such a group the sharpshooter would deliver a large amount of damage in one blow to one zombie, while



the support specialist with a shotgun would do a wider range of damage to a greater number of zombies. What makes one player opt for a certain weapon is dependent on his or her abilities and playing style. Returning to Castronova's definition (described in chapter one) economy is "the study of choice under scarcity" ("Synthetic" 171). Even though economy is limited in the zombie-themed video games and players need munitions to survive, choice is still available through weapon preference. Players can choose what weapon they pick up or buy along the walls or at the trader. Weapon choice correlates with players' particular types of play and the mastery skills they acquire for specific weapons; the choice of weapon is not always dependent on what is most powerful or popular.

According to the *Call of Duty* wiki, the ray gun is the most popular weapon: "The Ray Gun is often the most favored weapon in Zombies due to its ability to kill in one shot until rounds 18 to 22, or 22 to 25 when Pack-a-Punched<sup>23</sup>, and its large ammo capacity for such a high-damage weapon."<sup>24</sup> The Ray Gun is only available from the mystery box. However, in a *Call of Duty* forum entitled "Best Black Ops Zombie Guns to Pack a Punch"<sup>25</sup> gamers show a wide variety of preferences, from the FN FAL assault rifle (also only available from the mystery box and which can be upgraded to a gun named "EPC Win") to a ballistic knife upgraded to become "the Krauss Refibrillator." In a *Left 4 Dead* 2 forum, a gamer called Shanetasse asked "What are the best weapons?"<sup>26</sup> The answer that was voted most helpful by the readers was from a gamer called XReaperX\_Grimm.

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<sup>23</sup> "Pack-a-Punched" refers to the Pack-a-Punch machine, which players use to upgrade their weapons. It costs between 1000 to 5000 points depending on the map.

<sup>24</sup> [http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Ray\\_Gun](http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Ray_Gun)

<sup>25</sup> [http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:Best\\_Black\\_Ops\\_Zombie\\_Guns\\_to\\_Pack\\_a\\_Punch](http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:Best_Black_Ops_Zombie_Guns_to_Pack_a_Punch)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.gamefaqs.com/xbox360/960511-left-4-dead-2/answers?qid=135687>

He or she goes through each weapon type comparing and contrasting attributes of different guns. Then XReaperX\_Grimm states:

When it comes down to it. It really depends on your preference as a player. I always select a gun type I feel like using a whole campaign, and just upgrade weapons as I go along. Basically going from the regular pump shotgun, to the chrome, then deciding on the Combat or Auto shotty depending on how many tanks I've fought by the time I've gotten it.

For *Killing Floor*, where players have a choice of class as well as choice of weapons, team combinations are various. In a forum entitled “Killing Floor: Recommended Best Arsenal”<sup>27</sup> a gamer called Caleb500424 starts off with the following suggestion:

medic: MP7M medic gun/shotgun with flashlight. Beserker: Axe/Dual Handcannons. Commando: AK47(optional)/Hunting Shotgun. Demolitions: PipeBombs/M32 Grenade Launcher/M72 L.A.W (forget the L.A.W. it weighs too much) Support Specialist: Dual 9MMs/any shotgun. Don't agree? Post what you think what weapon combo should be for the class of ur choice.

Other gamers agree or vehemently disagree with Caleb500424. Bartmanekul puts it plainly, writing the best weapon is, “The weapon you get the most fun out of. Tis a game after all.” It is evident that the weapon that each player finds the most fun is variable. Gaming style, or the way in which players' choose to fight zombies also differs. Some choose melee weapons, such as the frying pan in *Left4Dead*s or the katana in *Killing Floor*, and wade into huge mobs of zombies. Some players prefer to keep as much distance as possible between themselves and the zombies, opting for sniper rifles or crossbows. The games in which the team can defensively hold a position, such as in *Call of Duty: Zombies* and *Killing Floor* allow for a wider range of specialization options for more maps. *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2* concentrate more on mobility, mostly requiring

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<sup>27</sup><http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-1056219.html>

players to run from safe house to safe house. However, the *Left4Deaths* do offer the occasional respite from running and the opportunity to snipe zombies from a relatively safe position. Playing style can be enhanced through the avatar capital system.

### **Avatar Capital**

Leveling up one's avatar has been an essential aspect of gameplay for a long time. To level up, a player finishes missions or kills enemies and then receives experience points which add up to increase the level of the player's avatar. A higher level gives the gamer's avatar certain benefits such as increased strength and stamina. Castronova discusses the concept of leveling up and labels it avatar capital. He states:

It follows that an avatar must have skills to do and see much in the world. However, developing the avatar's skills takes time; monsters must be killed, axes must be forged, quests must be completed. The result of all this effort, which can take hundreds of hours, is “avatar capital”: an enhancement of the avatar's capabilities through training. In most VWs, capital is given by a number called the “level” (Castronova 2001).

Avatar capital is one of the techniques game designers use as a replay tactic—a device to keep gamers interested in playing the game. Players work to gain a level, which is a goal of their play and an excuse for the time spent in game. It relates to in-game mastery and works as a system of reward. The gamer gains certain benefits through an experience point system as his or her avatar reaches a certain level.

The way that avatar capital works is different in the three video games analyzed. *Killing Floor* is the most traditional example of avatar capital. The avatars in *Killing Floor* can level up to level six in each of the seven specialized perk classes. For example, a player can have an avatar who is a level six firebug, a level four sharpshooter, and a

level one support specialist. However, the player can only enact one perk class at a time and reap the benefits from that role. He or she cannot be a firebug and a sharpshooter at the same time. As the character gains a level, he or she gets added bonuses, such as better accuracy with certain weapons and the ability to hold bigger magazines of ammo, which is the point of leveling. Economically, there are benefits as well. As avatars gain levels, weapons become cheaper and players can afford higher powered weapons sooner in the game.

Avatar capital works differently in *Left4dead*, *Left4Dead2*, and *Call of Duty: Zombies*. There is no traditional leveling system in any of these games. There are no experience points or perks. However, along with *Killing Floor*, the games substitute achievements for level-based avatar capital. Through the Steam game distribution engine or Xbox live, players can gain achievements. Unlike leveling up, game system achievements are based on particular goals such as killing a certain number of zombies or killing zombies in a certain way. For example, in *Left4Dead2* there is an achievement called “A Ride Denied” which requires the player to “Kill a Jockey within two seconds of it jumping on a survivor.” A Jockey is a specialized zombie in *Left4Dead2* that kills a gamer's avatar by jumping on its back and taking control of it, causing the avatar to run around hectically and perhaps fall off a cliff. If a teammate sees a Jockey attack a player and manages to kill it within two seconds, then the teammate will complete the “A Ride Denied” achievement. An example from *Call of Duty: Zombies* is “They are going THROUGH!” To complete this achievement a player must be on the map Ascension and “kill at least 5 zombies with 1 Gersh Device.” According to the *Call of Duty* Wiki:

The Gersch Device can only be obtained through the Mystery Box for 950 points, and three are received when found. When thrown, it creates a small singularity that will slowly drag all the zombies that are present on the map towards it, killing them upon impact with the singularity, awarding the player 50 points per zombie, or 130 points if the player holds the Ballistic Knife on Ascension. A player can dive or jump (but not walk or sprint) into the black hole, which will then teleport the player to a random location.<sup>28</sup>

So this particular achievement requires the player to take quite a few steps—he or she must find the Mystery Box, have the money to purchase from the Mystery Box, receive the Gersch Device, throw one and, with that throw, kill five zombies.

When a player completes one of these achievements through the Xbox live system he or she receives points that go toward the gamerscore. For completing “They are going THROUGH!” the player will receive thirty-five gamerscore points. The gamerscore is displayed with the gamer's name/gaming tag in the Xbox live interface as a type of rank. Castronova describes this sort of phenomenon as a rank-based system in that gamers can display their mastery to others to prove themselves. He states: “The leveling and integration system also draws on the basic human tendency to get self-esteem from the opinions of others, and the result is that users are powerfully motivated to increase their avatar's abilities” (Castronova 14). Achievements and gamerscore increase gamers’ social standing, a tactic to keep them playing the game. In September 2012 Xbox live made achievements economically valuable as well, linking them to slight monetary rebates. WebProNews reporter, Josh Welford states:

Once you hit 3,000 Gamerscore, you’ll start receiving a “special gift” on your birthday. According to fine print, that gift will retail at around \$0.25.

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<sup>28</sup> [http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Gersch\\_Device](http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Gersch_Device)

That's the "Contender" level. When you hit 10,000 Gamerscore, you've become a "Champion" and will receive the birthday gift plus a 1% rebate on Xbox LIVE Marketplace purchases accumulated every month. The top tier is called "Legend" and you hit it when you reach 25,000 Gamerscore. At that level, your Marketplace rebate is bumped up to 2%.<sup>29</sup>

He continues: "When you think about all the hours it takes to accumulate a 25,000 Gamerscore, you start to realize just how modest these rewards really are." The time spent on the achievements is not financially equal to the rebate offered, but it does offer the reward of cultural capital within the gaming world.

Game system achievements work differently within *Killing Floor*. *Killing Floor* is not a part of the Xbox live system because it is available only on PC. Thus, the game system achievements are actually part of the game and not run through an external company. In *Killing Floor*, obtaining certain sets of achievements results in the prize of a specific avatar skin—a skin that is unavailable for purchase as downloadable content. The Bad Santa skin mentioned previously is an example of this type of non-purchasable skin. To obtain the Bad Santa skin a player must first finish five other achievements, which "unlocks" the Bad Santa skin and enables the player to wear it as a sign of his/her achievement and mastery of the game. To add to player motivation, Tripwire also makes these gimmick skins aesthetically desirable or silly. There are men wearing classy suits and ties with gas masks, a grim reaper, and even a chicken suit. When players achieve

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<sup>29</sup> WebProNews/Gaming. Josh Welford. September 28 2012. "Your Xbox 360 Achievements Aren't Totally Worthless Anymore." <http://www.webpronews.com/your-xbox-360-achievements-arent-totally-worthless-anymore-2012-09>

and wear these kinds of skins, they can not only portray mastery, but also have the fun of enhancing their avatar's appearance at the same time.

Beyond winning, avatar capital serves as a goal for the player. Leveling up and game system achievements keep the video games interesting. They work as goals, elevate social standing, and enable the player to display mastery. In these ways, avatar capital is similar to capitalism. Indeed, it could be said that avatar capital is very much like the specialized worker—someone who trains in a specific area to fulfill certain goals and advance to the next level of his/her position. Castronova discusses how specialized training then works in-game within a group:

...a budget constraint applies: those who can heal or hypnotize often have difficulty summoning a fireball worthy of mention. As a result, avatars come to view themselves as specialized agents, much as workers in a developed economy do. The avatar's skills will determine whether the avatar will be a demander or supplier of various goods and services in the VW. Each avatar develops a social role. (Castronova 12 2001)

Cooperation within groups or teams happens because of the specialized skills of the players with different weaponry and in the different tracks of avatar capital. When forming a team, often players will pick weapons or skill sets that complement each other; offsetting the weaknesses of one job or weapon with the strengths of another. Also, within groups, the mastery of one player can benefit the other players, allowing them to advance their own mastery. The specialization required to fulfill avatar capital does reiterate capitalism. Although players can accumulate avatar capital on their own, playing alone and simply concentrating on their own needs, cooperation within a group can facilitate advancing towards the achievement.

## Small Group Dynamics

Under the avatar capital structure, gamers can cooperate or compete. The type of multiplayer video game seems to be a factor in the dynamics of play. Some multiplayer games like the zombie-themed video games are group games with gamers fighting against a computer controlled enemy. Other multiplayer video games will set two teams of players against each other, like capture the flag, while in still others, such as team death match, each player is on his/her own and can be killed by any other player. The preference to compete or cooperate differs in each type of game, especially when avatar capital is a factor. Meades observes the influence of avatar capital on social identity in the main game<sup>30</sup> of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. In the multiplayer maps of *Modern Warfare 2*, players can kill each other—in this situation rank and avatar capital become vital. Higher avatar capital and the perks that come with it give the player advantages over others and allows the player to live longer. Meades relates these instances to biopower, stating that: “It represents a compelling example of the extent to which players genuinely have become seduced by the game – willing to allow the procedural rhetoric of the game to filter good and bad players, which in turn is used to assert hierarchy and status” (Meades 211). He notes that players become so desperate for status that they will go to great lengths and monetary expense to cheat to gain advanced levels. The zombie-themed games observed work differently than the free-for-all examples such as *Modern Warfare 2*. *Call of Duty: Zombies*, *Left4Dead* and *Killing Floor* mainly set players

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<sup>30</sup> *Call of Duty: Zombies* is a mini game or alternate game available after the main game is finished.



against computer controlled enemies, so the desire for cooperation is greater because it enhances the abilities of the whole group and increases their chances of survival.

Cooperation works slightly differently in the zombie-themed games. The number of players and the presence of computer controlled teammates change the dynamics of each game. *Left4Dead* and its sequel allow a total of four players on a map at a time—one player for each character-avatar in the game. For example, in *Left4Dead2* the four avatars are Rochelle, Coach, Nick and Ellis; once each of these character-avatars has been chosen by a player, the game will not let other players join. If one of the characters is not chosen, for instance if only three people want to play and Nick is not chosen by one of those players, then the computer will take over that character and control him using AI. So, with *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2*, there are always four characters playing on the map, with a mix of gamer controlled characters and AI controlled characters. The AI characters will automatically help the real players by giving whatever med packs or pain pills they have to the avatar with the lowest health. In *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies*, there are no AI players; the number of players is directly connected to the number of real people who want to play. If there are only three players, not four, in *Call of Duty: Zombies*, the gaming system will not create an AI player to round out the group. In *Left4Dead* it will. Therefore, the group dynamics in the *Left4Deaths* always has cooperative aspects, as the computer assists the players and models cooperation. To make up for the lack of AI controlled characters, *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies* will make the number of zombie villains contingent on the number of players—two players will face fewer zombie foes than a full group of six players.

In *Call of Duty: Zombies* small group dynamics are limited to teamwork for winning the round or the completion of system achievements. Even though the main maps of the *Call of Duty* video games have the ability to level avatars, this is not an aspect that is available in the zombie mini games. On the zombie-themed maps, players can defend each other from zombies and complete actions, such as boarding up windows, which enhances the security of the whole team. However, sharing items is not possible. If a player has a weapon he or she cannot give it to another player. Within *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2* small group dynamics are enhanced by the sharing of items. Not only can players defend each other and complete actions that assist in the completion of the map, as in *Call of Duty: Zombies*, they can also give medical supplies to each other. Even though money is not a factor in this found item video game, gamers will pass off what they have to others, because it is the survival of the group that is key to getting to the next safe point. While cooperation between players is available in all three games, it reaches its highest point in *Killing Floor*, the game with the most capitalistic aspects.

Within *Killing Floor* players can give each other money. The higher level players can give funds to the lower level players, enabling them to buy higher grade weapons faster and sooner than on their own. Or, one high level player may spawn with a high grade weapon and hand it off to someone else. The player who receives the weapon can then sell it to afford whatever weapon he or she needs to level his or her class or complete an achievement. Players can also ask for money. Within *Killing Floor* there are prerecorded avatar voice chats that players can utilize. These include giving commands to a team, simple yes and nos, and asking for money. (All of these chats are in British accents.) There are several variations on the language for requesting funds but the most

common is “Give me a tener.” This request is heard a lot between rounds as the lower level players try to get assistance to buy better weapons. In this way, economic thinking effects exclusion and inclusion, because the players have the choice to give each other money. If a team of gamers does not like the way another gamer is playing, because he is playing recklessly or being unaware of his fellow teammates and blocking their shots, then the group can refuse to give the unwanted player assistance with money. Less money decreases a player's ability to buy munitions, causing the unwanted player frustration and typically resulting in that player leaving the pub.

Helping each other financially and assisting other players with gaining the different types of avatar capital are all examples of small group dynamics. However, the players in *Killing Floor* have found a way to enact what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter call counterplay<sup>31</sup>, in-game actions which are subversive to Empire. “That game players do not always accept the imperial option reflects a base-line capacity of 'refusal'” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 193). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter explain that players will not always choose the actions suggested by the ludic system; sometimes they will refuse the actions offered and find new ways to engage with the game. They discuss counterplay by citing examples where gamers purposefully choose a “bad subjectivity” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 193), such as in a civilization-building game in which the gamer chooses to incite the ire of its subjects just to be cruel. Yet within *Killing Floor*, players exhibit a positive example of counterplay. They martyr themselves to help their teammates with money or weapons. Consider the following scenario: A rookie player enters a map of

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<sup>31</sup> Countergaming—coined by Alexander Galloway Gaming essays on Algorithmic culture 2006

*Killing Floor*. He is inexperienced and lags behind his team mates. His avatar is low level—its movements and reactions are slower. The current players on the map have several options for how to adapt or deal with this new player. They can ask him to leave<sup>32</sup>, or they can adjust their mode of play and help this new gamer. The latter choice emphasizes the team experience of the game and favors small group dynamics that help to win. There are several ways the players can assist one another. For example, if the new player is trying to increase the level of a specific class, such as the sharpshooter, a higher level teammate can spawn as a sharpshooter himself. Having attained level six, the highest character level, the teammate spawns with a crossbow—the most advanced weapon of the sharpshooter class. He then drops the weapon for the inexperienced player and subsequently drops a grenade as well so as to kill himself. He then respawns with another crossbow or switches to a new job class entirely. The newer player is then given an advantage. He is able to work on leveling his character with the higher grade weapon and receive more experience points because he can kill zombies more efficiently. This practice of martyrdom basically uses suicide to generate money. Each time players hand off the weapons they spawn with, drop grenades on themselves and respawn, they are using the respawn aspect in a way unanticipated by the video game's creators to give their team the upper hand. They are using counterplay to facilitate the success of other players with the goal of improving the position of the whole team to which they belong.

The avatar suicide example of counterplay is highly dependent on the money-for-bodies ludic system and the avatar capital system. Only in *Killing Floor*, the most pure

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<sup>32</sup> There are maps that insist that all players are above level 5, specifically because these players do not want to deal with the learning curve the new player will have to undergo.

form of money-for-bodies, can players share munitions and exchange money, and also because *Killing Floor* also has the highest options of avatar capital, the higher level players can enact counterplay. The opportunity to martyr oneself for a member of the team is dependent on the player's avatar's level, it is only after level five that sharpshooters, and the other classes, spawn with higher power weapons (before level five they spawn with pistols). So once the gamer's personal achievements and level of mastery is achieved, he or she can help others. Players who cooperate in such a manner continue to enact the worker-consumer-soldier-citizen subjectivity because they are using the economic ludic system based on killing in a reverse manner, using their own suicide to earn munitions or money for others. *Killing Floor* is an example of a video game in which "it is life itself that becomes a resource whose loss is survivable" (Poole 55). Thus, in the correct system of money-for-bodies, players earn money for killing enemies. In the counterplay of the same system players earn money for others through their deaths. In both systems, death equals money.

### **Conclusion: Death and the Gamer**

All three zombie-themed video games enact economy by creating choice under scarcity—offering the players different weapons and specialization tracks as ways to ensure their survival. The ludic actions that make up the money-for-bodies system and its counterplay are ideological in nature. When capitalism is also seen as ideological in nature, the zombie-themed games observed can be seen as evidence of the reiteration of that ideology. Money-for-bodies normalizes capitalism by having players enact market-like transactions. The limited choice offered in video games, in the ability to choose weapons and job specialization, enacts the fantasy of capitalism as unlimited, while obscuring the limited range of choices. Although players can choose which weapons to utilize, their range of actions is limited because they are still embedded in the money-for-bodies ludic system and the rules of the game. And yet, the money-for-bodies games and the example of counterplay form an economic system in which money is awarded for death, whether for killing zombies or for suicide. Since there are no negative consequences for the death of the avatar or the death of the zombie, monetary value exceeds the value of life in these games. Such a system not only reiterates capitalism and the fantasy that surrounds it, it also separates all moral questions from the desire to acquire funds. A system without moral implications reflects back on those who engage with the games.

Zombie-themed video games create a subject who embodies a disconnect to death: the zombie gamer. Within the zombie-themed video game, the areas of achievement, consisting of avatar capital and winning, are a metaphor for agency. The players see themselves as becoming more powerful through their control over death, but

it is false agency—a fantasy restricted to the game world. It is also ideological because the actions that the players feel as agency are restricted by the mechanisms of the game. Thus these zombie-themed games create an ideological subject who experiences agency through violence, violence to others and violence to themselves. The existence of such a subject suggests questions that go beyond the mechanics of the video game to the moral implications of their play.

Video game players are affected by the rules and world built within the game. They insert themselves within the fantasy of the game, suspending the rules of the real world in favor of the medium-specific rules of the game. This alters the relationship of the player to traditional concepts, sometimes creating hazy or gray areas versus the stark realities of the real world. One of these hazy areas is the player's relationship to death in the video game, whether it is death of a villain, death of a teammate or death of the player. What does it mean when in-game characters and avatars die? What happens when life and health and conversely death and woundedness are registered in the virtual avatar body in terms of fitness to play? Call touches on these questions when he discusses the video game as a cyborg identity, a mix of the gamer and the gaming machine. He states: “The avatar cyborg indexes its hybrid status in multiple ways. Given the reliance of the FPS genre on the embodiment of the player in the avatar, the mechanic of registering and reporting damage and pain is integral to successful ‘being-in-the-game.’ (Call 142). Thus, the manner in which the game signifies the pain and lowering health of the avatar is vital to the success of the game. As described above, in *Left4Dead* and *Left4Dead2* weakened health changes the abilities of the avatar. Injured avatars move more slowly, the visual interface through which the player sees the game is reddened and becomes increasingly

darker, and the avatar's heart beat becomes audible, making it more difficult for the other sounds of the game to be heard. All of these elements add up to a decrease in ability for the player and gameplay becomes more challenging. These are the ludic aspects the video game's designers chose to portray failing health and pain. Because they cannot mimic the real pain associated with physical injury, the designers utilize visual and audible cues to inform the player that they must heal themselves in order to play more effectively.

Although the cues do provide frustration and fear that could be similar to real pain, there is still a vast disconnect between real pain and in-game pain. As Call notes, “The perception of injury to the avatar's body is an imaginative consequence of the immersion of the player in the game through the vehicle of the avatar. In short, the interface provides the means for this interaction while also denying the prospect of total consubstantiation” (Call 144). Because pain and death in-game do not have the same consequences as in real life, the concepts become hollowed out and devoid of meaning. Players can commit suicide without a blink of an eye, as they do when they martyr themselves in *Killing Floor*, because there are no negative consequences, only gain. Once dead they will respawn immediately without pain, loss of money or loss of munitions. Gamers will run through map after map shot up and injured, because pain and death are inconveniences that merely make gameplay more challenging. The numbness zombie gamers feel towards avatar death is also conveyed when killing zombies.

There is a difference between watching a film and playing a video game: “Because of the interactive nature of video games, they engage players in the content of the game much more than simply passively watching a movie on television. Players must fight and figure their way out of whatever predicament the video game puts them



in”(McIntosh 11). Due to the interactive nature of video games and the feeling of agency they incite, the relationship between the player/viewer and the monster onscreen is different. The change in the viewer/player relationship, due to the change in medium leads to a change in the interpretation and meaning that is attributed to the zombie character. Zombies as villains in video games are “throw-away cultural icons that allow for cheap, guiltless destruction of the human body” (Weise 151). However, much of the fear and many of the questions presented in zombie films and TV shows lie in the reinterpretation of “that which it once was,” when a person or family member is bitten and turns into a zombie him or herself. Then, the non-zombie characters—the heroes—must go through the horrid task of killing a person they knew and may have loved before that person commits horrible acts as a zombie. In the movies and television shows, this presents a moral quandary. Viewers are asked to put themselves in the hero's position and feel the uneasiness of killing for mercy. However, this aspect is not present within video games. The zombie-themed games observed which utilize money-for-bodies represent the failure of the filmic zombie myth. When zombies become “cannon fodder,” useless targets killed for monetary reward, they lose the emergent possibilities presented by the film zombie. Video game zombies present no moral challenges, and no questioning of social norms. So even though the lack of narrative elements in the video games causes the players to rely on the filmic zombie myth, the players in these games are never put in a position where their morals would be tested. There are no sympathetic zombie characters. If a player is injured by a zombie, he or she can be healed without adverse effects. If the injuries are too severe, the player dies. If all the players die, they fail at the game and can

start over. Becoming a zombie is never a fear—players will not become undead if the zombies get to them because they are already immortal.

The lines between play and counterplay (killing and suicide) and player and zombie blur under the subjectivity of the zombie gamer. Zombie gamers feel indifferent towards death, their own and the zombie's, and they reiterate the rules of the ideology they are participating in—even when finding creative ways to push the limits such as avatar suicide. Zombies, with their undead status, history of slavery, tireless consumption, and connections to alienation, are the ultimate embodiment of the capitalist worker. So where does the difference between the two lie? The difference between the zombie gamer and the zombie figure is contained in how each acts as a group.

The scariest thing about zombies, and ultimately why they are so successful in video games, is not their cannibalism and consumption. It is in their existence as a horde. As most zombie-themed game theorists have noted, this enables the zombie to be cannon fodder. While, as noted above, this does disconnect the zombie from its filmic meaning and work, it establishes meaning in another way by setting up a comparison between two groups: the small group dynamics of the video game player and the zombie horde.

Zombies are cannon fodder not only because there are no moral implications associated with their deaths, but also because they exist in large groups. As noted by Lauro and Embry, the zombie horde is a “swarm organism” and they quote Adorno and Horkheimer in saying that fear heightens our awareness of ourselves as individuals and offers a threat to individuality (Lauro&Embry 89). Lauro and Embry equate that fear not with fear of the pack, but rather with the fear of losing one's own will and consciousness:

“Humanity defines itself by its individual consciousness and its personal agency: to be a body without a mind is to be subhuman, animal; to be a human without agency is to be a prisoner, a slave” (Lauro&Embry 90). Lauro and Embry conclude that as a swarm organism, the zombie is neither subject nor object. Zombies in video games are never subjects, they are only objects, and they are objects to be killed. While Lauro and Embry raise a good point, fear of the horde or pack cannot be dismissed. Nothing gets the adrenaline pumping for a gamer like being surrounded by zombies, and that is why zombies are used in video games. The zombie horde is an incoherent mass that has the ability to surround and overwhelm the player.

Conversely, the zombie gamer is never part of a horde; gamers’ social situations are determined by small group dynamics. Although multiplayer capability is not specific to zombie-themed games, the dynamics of a small group of survivors fits in with the typical narrative of zombie media. In zombie films, and previous games, the story line follows five to ten people as they try to survive. It is in small group dynamics that the capitalistic games, *Killing Floor* and *Call of Duty: Zombies*, reconnect with the zombie narrative. By cooperating and sharing objects, the players in the game can enact social relationships. Beyond this, the opportunity for achievements and avatar capital also produce social recognition and social dynamics. Cooperation becomes more important for the social aspects than the monetary aspects. Because needs are limited in the video games, once the players have the munitions they need for the round, they then have extra money that can be passed on to someone else. Having a large bank account is useless in the game as players will eventually have so much money and nothing else to buy.

Conversely, however, there are always more achievements to win, weapons to master and maps to beat.

In conclusion, the social aspects of the video games—cooperation and social standing—set the zombie gamer apart from the zombie monster. Zombies have no social aspects; they do not cooperate or achieve social standing. The zombie horde is like a tidal wave or a plague. Comprising a swarm organism, they do not have the where-with-all to conduct themselves in a social manner. Therefore, by conducting themselves in a social manner, gamers produce community and in this way reiterate their humanity.

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*Dawn of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. David Emge, Ken Foree, Scott H. Reiniger. Laurel Group, 1978.

*Dawn of the Dead*. Dir. Zack Snyder. Perf. Sarah Polley, Ving Rhames, Mekhi Phifer. Strike Entertainment, 2004.

*Day of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Lori Cardille, Terry Alexander, Joseph Pilato. Laurel Entertainment, Inc, 1985.

*Day of the Dead*. Dir. Steve Miner. Perf. Mena Suvari, Nick Cannon, Michael Welch. Millennium Films, 2008

*Diary of the Dead*. Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Michelle Morgan, Joshua Close, and Shawn Roberts. Artfire Films, 2007.



*Land of the Dead.* Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. John Leguizamo, Asia Argento, Simon Baker. Universal Pictures, 2005.

*Night of the Living Dead.* Dir. George A. Romero. Perf. Duane Jones, Judith O'Dea, and Karl Hardman. The Walter Reade Organization, 1968

*Resident Evil.* Dir. Paul W.S. Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Michelle Rodriguez, Colin Salmon. Sony Pictures, 2002.

*Resident Evil: Apocalypse.* Dir. Alexander Witt. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Sienna Guillory, Eric Mabius. Constantin Film, Ltd. 2004.

*Resident Evil: Extinction.* Dir. Russell Mulcahy. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Ali Larter, Oded Fehr. Resident Evil Productions, 2007.

*Shaun of the Dead.* Dir. Edgar Wright. Perf. Simon Pegg, Nick Frost, and Kate Ashfield. Universal Pictures, 2004.

*The Walking Dead.* Dir. Frank Darabont. Perf. Andrew Lincoln, Jon Bernthal, Sarah Wayne Callies. American Movie Classics, 2010-2013.

*Zombieland.* Dir. Ruben Fleischer. Perf. Jesse Eisenberg, Emma Stone, Woody Harrelson. Columbia Pictures, 2009.