

## Through the Lens of the Living Dead – Using the Dead to Tell Human Stories

By: Grace Bazinet

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Zombies are popular monsters in fiction. The origin of these creatures can be traced back to Haitian folklore which illustrated zombies as reanimated corpses who were used primarily as slaves (Tenga & Zimmerman, 2013). Haitian zombies were never a threat to the living and had no appetite for human flesh. The modern view of zombies as terrifying decaying monsters with a taste for human flesh came much later. The modern zombie did not become popular until 1968 with the release of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, a film that has since defined the zombie genre (Longridge, 2017; Tenga & Zimmerman, 2013).

Although some depictions of zombies in current fiction differ slightly in their portrayal of these monsters with novels like *World War Z*, films like *28 Days Later*, and games like *The Last of Us* portraying them as much faster-moving creatures, one key constant remains with very few exceptions. This constant is that in zombie fiction the zombies hunt the living to fulfill a simple biological drive and have no conscious thought or personality (Morton, 2013; Tenga & Zimmerman, 2013).

In reference to zombie apocalypses themselves, they typically arise as a form of outbreak that leads to either the dead coming back to life or the living becoming mindless monsters. The origin of the outbreak can differ from virus to fungus to everything in between.

### More than what they seem – Using the Dead to Tell Stories about Life

“Zombies remind us that we will soon be decomposing flesh; the zombie horde embodies fear of loss of self and individuality; zombies expose the dark side of mass consumer culture; and zombies highlight the fragility of human identity in an advanced, globalised society” (Tenga & Zimmerman, 2013, p. 76).

The above quote highlights it best – zombies are more than decaying bodies with an unsatiated hunger – they are a symbol – one that represents our collective fear – death – both of the body and individuality. As such except in rare cases at their core stories featuring zombies in fiction are never really about the zombies themselves (Morton, 2013). Instead, the zombies are used as a mechanic to tell an interesting story and create compelling characters because when the world is overrun – stripped of governments, borders, and corporations the living are forced to live.

As horror author, Jonathan Maberry highlights, zombies are an immediate shared threat (Morton, 2013). Each character in zombie fiction is propelled into the same scenario, they are stripped of their life as they know it and are forced to adapt to survive. As such, stories in zombie fiction are about people dealing with a problem – people in real crisis (Morton, 2013). This crisis allows for interesting stories to be told as crises can bring out both the best and worst in humanity. To exemplify, take Maberry's young adult zombie quadrilogy *Rot & Ruin* into

account. Set fourteen years after a zombie apocalypse wiped out almost all of humanity the series follows 15-year-old Benny Imura as he reluctantly becomes a zombie-hunter after living safely in a fenced-off community for the majority of his life (Molgaard, 2012). Upon travelling outside the walls, he learns that the world is not what he thought it was and finds that amongst the endless hordes of zombies, the true evil lies in the people who are still living and breathing (Molgaard, 2012). As Maberry states in an interview, the series “isn’t a story about racking up a zombie headcount. It’s about the value of human life, the difference between assumption and reality, and the nature of what it means to be alive” (Molgaard, 2012). Having a zombie story at its core be about the nature of humanity and human relationships is not unique to Maberry’s series; it is the rule in zombie fiction rather than the exception. This point is further exemplified with the aid of other stories from different forms of media below.

### **Spoiler Warning!**

#### ***The Walking Dead***

*The Walking Dead* is an action-packed horror-drama television series based on the comic book of the same name that focuses on a post-apocalyptic world overrun by zombies. The exact cause of the outbreak is not yet known but the virus takes hold either once somebody dies or gets bitten (Kirkman et al., 2010-present). The cause and transmission, however, is of little importance when taking into account the complete narrative as like other zombie fiction at its core the show is not about zombies. Rather, it’s about how humans react when their humanity is stripped away – it’s about how far people will go to survive.

The show demonstrates both the best and worst in humanity. Like other zombie fiction, the real threat to our main characters and communities is never the dead, it’s the living – groups like the savors and whisperers who themselves are also trying to survive. These constant conflicts and us versus them mentality between fellow living and breathing humans demonstrate the worst in humanity. The communities themselves, however, like Alexandria and Hilltop, show the best in humanity. They serve as examples of what can be accomplished when people work together to overcome their differences and fight for the common good.

Through the characters, the show also demonstrates that nobody is completely good or evil but rather they make decisions based on circumstance. It also demonstrates that nobody is completely irredeemable. Negan is the best example of this, he starts as an undisputable villain as he kills a fan-favourite character in his introduction. But as seasons go on and we learn more about him it becomes evident that what he did and what he was doing was not that different from anything our main group of survivors has done to survive. Every character in that world has had to make tough decisions and has had to sacrifice some of their humanity in the name of survival. Everybody is the hero of their own story and the villain in someone else’s – the zombies in the show simply serve as a mechanism to help highlight this fact.

## *The Last of Us*

*The Last of Us* is an action-adventure video game set in a post-apocalyptic United States where the cordyceps fungus has ravished the human race by turning a large portion of the population into mindless monsters broadly referred to as infected (Naughty Dog, 2013). From the whimsical platforming of colorful marsupial Crash Bandicoot to the globe-trotting, gun-toting, treasure hunting adventures of Nathan Drake, the dark and gritty *The Last of Us* was a departure from the stories game developer Naughty Dog usually tells. In the fashion of zombie fiction at its core, the story the game tells is not about the infected, it's about the living.

Set 20 years after the outbreak, the player takes control of Joel a hardened survivor as he escorts Ellie a 14-year-old girl who may be the cure for humanity across the United States in search of a group known as the fireflies. In their journey, Joel and Ellie must overcome a variety of obstacles but the biggest ones are always other humans. Bill, a survivor they encounter on their way who lives by himself, highlights it best when he says that as bad as the infected are, "they're predictable. It's the normal people that scare me" (Naughty Dog, 2013). This is because as terrifying as the infected can be, they are not in control of their actions. Other humans on the other hand are in control of what they do, so if with this control they decide to embody the worst of humanity by terrorizing others this decision makes them much scarier and more of a threat than the infected will ever be.

In the end, the heart of the story is not the infected, it is Joel and Ellie's relationship and the love and trust that develops between the two characters. At the end of the game, Joel who has struggled for a long time with surviving tells Ellie that the key is finding something to fight for (Naughty Dog, 2013). Before Joel met Ellie, he was only surviving; in her, he found something worth not just fighting for but living for which is why in the end he made the decision any parent would make – he saved his child.

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