

Undead ecologies: Reconceptualising zombiism in videogames

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INTRODUCTION

Zombies have long been a mainstay of videogames, providing players with hordes of abject reanimated corpses to gun down, stealthily avoid or hack and slash at in the desperate last moments of a virtual life. However, the form zombiism takes within contemporary videogames is changing in ways that radically redefine the boundaries of this familiar apocalyptic menace. This transformation resituates the ludic undead at the nexus of our present climate crisis and the material conditions surrounding play. In this presentation I make a case for an emerging figuration of the zombie as an *undead ecology* rather than an embodied figure. This view rests on the observation that the necrotisation of the planet Earth, a process accelerated by the ecological relations associated with late-stage capitalism (McBrien 2016), is intricately connected to this new form of ludic zombiism. I examine two games that sit outside the conventions of traditional zombie texts—*Timberborn* (Mechanistry 2021) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022)—to reveal that, just as the shambling corpses of earlier zombies destabilised biological and ontological meaning, virtual landscapes and ecologies in contemporary games now ply the margins of life, subjectivity and meaning.

Videogames are powerfully positioned to reflect the fractious circumstances occurring on Earth within a necrocentric era. Ecocritical game studies scholars have established that videogames knowingly and unknowingly recreate different modes of human–environmental interaction (Abraham and Jayemanne 2017; op de Beke et al. 2024), physical and virtual worlds intermingle in the simulations and interactive systems of games (Bianchi 2014; Chang 2019), and unanticipated ecological meaning infuses mainstream videogames that otherwise appear unconcerned with ecocentricity (May and Hall 2024). In short, videogames seem to bear a particularly productive fictive connection to the environmental conditions surrounding their production and play. This connection can be understood in the context of a broader and growing ‘material turn’ in game studies scholarship (Apperley and Jayemanne 2012). The material provenance—and environmental impact—of games is both unavoidable and substantial, wrapped up as they are in damaging industrial practices including mineral and metal extraction, exploitative labour relations, fossil energy

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production and toxic pollution (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Abraham 2022, 202).

Surrounded by ecological and climate crises, and with its mediation made possible by the resources of our decaying Earth, the zombie is taking on a new material form. The case for games' reflection of our world's ecological undeath through undead ecologies is a continuation of the zombie's historical allegorisation of humanity's repressed and destructive ills (MacCormack 2013, 303). Recent work has directly connected the zombie to the violence of the neo-liberal project and capitalism (Wilde 2022; Zimbardo 2015), while variations on the traditional bodily figure of the zombie have included the 'eco-zombie' (Lauro 2011) and a 'greened' zombie (Oloff 2012), which cast the living dead as motivated by humanity's impact on the natural world and seeking vicious retaliation. I highlight in particular Oloff's observation that zombies are ideally positioned to support *eco-materialist* critique of contemporary conditions (2012, 31) and Lauro's case that the eco-zombie is an expression of the core impulse of zombies to summon an "interzone that makes murky a distinction between the living and the dead, the natural and the unnatural" (2011, 55).

Drawing on these important precursors from zombie studies, I turn to textual analysis of *Timberborn* and *Elden Ring* to reconceptualise undeath as saturated across ecologies, ecosystems and environments. Both *Timberborn* and *Elden Ring* imbricate players within ecological dynamics that reflect the living death of our own planet, illustrating distinctive characteristics of both this new form of videogame zombiism and the environmental violence of the Anthropocene. *Timberborn*, a beaver colony-building game, is defined by its expression of a contradictory temporality that exposes the undeath underlying ecological interdependence with environments whose life-giving resources are exhausted. *Elden Ring*, a fantasy themed role-playing game, emphasises in its ludic experiences the game's own status as a networked artefact and in doing so draws attention to the role technologised communications play in estranging us from our own ecological relations.

By transitioning from an embodied horror to an ecological, distributed threat, the undead ecologies found in *Timberborn* and *Elden Ring* reflect the diffuse nature of the threats of our present era of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is characterised by temporalities that are at once moving too fast and too slowly and consequences that are evident sometimes locally, other times globally, and never equally or predictably. These new ludic undead, drawing their monstrous energy from the material devastation underpinning their digital mediation, manifest what Ben Woodard has described as the "darkly productive monster" that underlies Earth's geology (2013, 86)—a collection of dangerous forces that come together to signal to us our planet's suffering. The way that videogames are indelibly linked to their own monstrous materiality means that they—and their zombies—can engage us in a practice crucial to life amid planetary catastrophe: the "humble and difficult" act of "noticing the worlds around us" and the layers of entanglement, temporality, lives and deaths that surround and comprise us (Swanson et al. 2017, M7). Through the entanglement of their fictional worlds with the material provenance of media technologies, videogames' undead ecologies can turn our attention to these darkly productive monsters in ways that are unfamiliar and novel.

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