

# “That tub a’lard’s in our way!”: Obese Characters as Obstructive and Antagonistic in Horror-Based Digital Games



Connor Jackson

Edge Hill University

A number of horror-based digital game characters conflate notions of obesity, overeating and monstrosity. For instance there is Eddie Dombrowski from *Silent Hill 2*, an overweight man who is shown eating pizza in a bowling alley, loitering in a prison cafeteria and is later fought in a meat locker—here it is revealed that he is a sadist who killed a bully’s dog before shooting him in the knee prior to the events of the game. In addition, there are the large Twin Chefs from *Little Nightmares* who prepare food in the macabre kitchen stage of the game when they are not trying to capture the player-character. Failing to flee from them can result in the avatar being thrown into a saucepan, an oven, and even a meat grinder. However, the abovementioned conflation is more discernible in zombie-based games in particular: a subset of horror-based games that are usually concerned with the struggle for survival of one or more humans during or after a zombie outbreak. This is evidenced by the Boomer from *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2*, the Whopper from *Resident Evil 6*, and the Bloater from *The Last of Us*. Each creature is significantly large (as their names imply) and signifies both overeating and monstrosity due to its condition as a zombie: a being that has come to be renowned for its insatiable appetite. What is more, they are symptomatic of a broader trend in zombie fictions which, after the turn of the century, have become increasingly preoccupied with the production and consumption of food: particularly fast and processed foods.

As a result of the contemporary zombie’s association with fast food, Michael Newbury reads zombie films as the fictional counterparts of food crisis texts: an umbrella term used to describe non-fiction books, documentaries and journalistic publications that “dwell at some length on what they understand to be an imploding system of industrial food production” (90). The goal of food crisis texts, then, is to combat the alienation of consumers from the origins and contents of the food they eat by exposing the mistreatment of animals under agribusiness, revealing the adverse effects of additives, and uncovering the risks fast food pose to consumer health. Moreover, some food crisis texts offer an alternative means of obtaining food by valorising local and organic food production. In opposition, Newbury asserts that the zombie film “extinguishes with brutal enthusiasm all aspirations to retrieving the pastoral, the natural, or alternatives to the industrial food chain” (97). Instead, these films revel in the nihilism of food consumption run amok through the cannibalistic consumption

of the undead as well as their associated landscapes, which are abound with visualisations of both real and fictional food products and brands.

Despite the associative connections between the undead in zombie films and fast food, a significant point of departure from food crisis texts in these films is that typically they do not explicitly tie their apocalyptic visions to fast food corporations. As Newbury points out, food crisis texts often link prophecies of devastating diseases and bacterial infections such as *E. coli* to the practices of agribusiness, whereas zombie films rarely implicate “food corporations as the specific catalyst for apocalyptic contagion” (100). The reluctance of zombie films to explicitly implicate agribusiness in their outbreaks is not resolved in the aforementioned zombie games; their antagonistic characters do connote rampant food consumption due to their obesity but like Newberry’s filmic examples they are not narratively bound to agribusiness. In this respect, when the Whopper receives verbal abuse for its weight—one non-playable character shouts “[t]hat tub a’lard’s in our way!” as the monster blocks their path to safety—the body shaming that this monster endures seems to exist in order to prompt a cheap laugh rather than tying into a larger critique of agribusiness. This changes in Capcom’s *Dead Rising* series, which depicts its overweight characters (both living and undead) negatively for the sake of satirising what it perceives as the gluttonous eating habits of U.S. citizens perpetuated by agribusiness.

In the first *Dead Rising* game non-playable character Isabela Keyes, sister of the terrorist who caused the zombie outbreak in the town of Willamette, reveals that the zombies originated from an American “Livestock Research Facility” built in her Central American hometown. Furthermore Dr. Russell Barnaby, the lead scientist behind the operations in this facility, expands upon the motivations of his team of researchers in his dying breaths: “We were... conducting... experiments to... reduce the costs of breeding... We... accidentally... made zombie livestock... [...] We were trying to mass produce cattle. Do you... have any... idea... how much meat... Americans consume... in a single day!?” The aim of these scientists was to produce more food for a country that was simply consuming far too much. Sustaining vast levels of consumption was their goal, and ironically was also the outcome of their work. As such, the cannibalistic nature of the undead in the *Dead Rising* series—many of which are presented with overweight character models—is not just taken as a given. Rather than simply imbuing zombies with a means of threatening the player-character’s life and consequently the player’s agency within the game, their cannibalism also functions as a satirical twist on the relentless intake of meat perpetuated and encouraged by U.S. agribusiness. Furthermore, the unquenchable appetites of *living* American citizens, which existed before (and indeed lead to) the outbreak, are maintained and explored post-outbreak.

In most zombie narratives the undead are ravenous, but they are not the only hungry consumers; humans must gather food to survive in their post-apocalyptic environments. For Newbury the food consumption of humans in zombie films functions cathartically. For example, candlelight dinners in *28 Days Later* and the *Dawn of the Dead* remake (as well as Romero's 1978 original it should be noted) serve as temporary releases from horrors of the present moment. They construct for their participants a façade of sophistication in an unbearably savage world. Cammie M. Sublette furthers Newbury's analyses of human food consumption in zombie films by investigating not just *what* these meals achieve in terms of escapism, but *how* they accomplish this. The decimation caused by zombie outbreaks often leaves survivors searching and squabbling for sustenance but Sublette points to a type of consumption distinguishable from that engaged in for necessary nourishment, one that is pursued for pleasure. This "food hedonism is nearly always linked to some variety of nostalgia, often with an idealized or revised past providing temporary psychological escape from the horrors of the zombie apocalypse" (179). No matter how fleeting the experience might be, human food consumption in zombie films enables survivors to indulge in fantasies that centre on what once was and what could have been. They alleviate tension and enable survivors to reminisce over real or imaginatively adapted past experiences, as well as forge communal bonds with one another.

This culinary bliss is unequivocally absent from the *Dead Rising* series, in which food is consumed by non-playable characters as a result of their rapaciousness. Additionally, Newbury claims that "[t]he food one eats and the way one eats it become primary signifiers of distinction between the malevolent dead or infected and those struggling to retrieve or retain a measure of human distinction from them" (104), but this statement does not apply to the *Dead Rising* series. In these games the food intake of survivors works toward the opposite effect. Survivors demand, hoard, and gorge upon food. They also eject food from their bodies by vomiting due to overeating. Their relationship with food is one of excess, thereby positioning them parallel to the undead as satirical and condemnatory exemplifications of human gluttony perpetuated by the industrialised food chain. This is made explicit from the first game in which the terrorist behind the outbreak, Carlito Keyes, declares that "all [zombies] do is eat, and eat, and eat, growing in number... Just like [...] good red white and blue Americans"—this remark about zombies continuously eating is also repeated during the prologue of *Dead Rising 4*, thereby emphasising its relevance across the series.

The message conveyed by *Dead Rising* is clear: zombies are gluttonous monsters and so are American citizens. This is evidenced in the first game when player-character Frank West encounters fellow survivor Ronald Shiner in a restaurant. The player can recruit and

rescue this overweight survivor under one condition: they must give him a food item. These are scattered around the environments of this game (and its sequels) and are usually present within the eatery itself but become absent from this location once the side mission is triggered. The obvious implication is that despite Ronald's claim that he is "starving to death" he has gobbled up the food in this area, which usually consists of two cartons of orange juice, four baguettes and four pies. Consequently, to recruit Ronald the player must give up one of their food items should they possess one, or worse endanger their player-character by going to the trouble of finding one elsewhere and returning it to him. Through the refusal of this character to adapt his eating habits in the midst of a zombie outbreak, *Dead Rising* constructs a topical satire on the self-destructive reliance of American citizens on industrialised junk foods whilst simultaneously shaming obese individuals.

Rebecca M. Puhl and Chelsea A. Heuer produce an extensive consolidation of literature pertaining to the perceptions and treatment of obese adults. Their amalgamation of research pertaining to healthcare settings more so than that conducted with regards to employment and educational contexts emphasises perceived reasons as to why people are obese. Sources invested in a number of healthcare professionals (physicians, nurses, medical students, fitness professionals and dieticians) show a recurring commonality in their values. Generally, these people view obese individuals as "lazy, noncompliant, undisciplined, and [having] low willpower" (934); consensus among these professionals determines that obesity is a personal responsibility. Significantly, this responsibility is repeatedly linked to food consumption. Overweight people are assumed to have an excessive body mass due to "overeating" and having an "unhealthy diet" (944). Their weight is understood as a result of their "personal choices about food" and their "poor eating behaviours" as well as their intake of "too much junk food" (945). This viewpoint is perpetuated by negative portrayals of obese people in mainstream media, particularly in what Heuer calls "fattertainment" (n.p.). For instance, in filmic or televisual entertainment overweight characters are marginalised, often by relegating their inclusion to that of supporting characters or objects of ridicule (Puhl and Heuer, 951; Heuer). This is even evidenced in children's media such as cartoons and books. Here, even when larger characters are not eating, they are shown to be "thinking about [...] food" (Puhl and Heuer, 951). Of course, as the *Dead Rising* series demonstrates, film, television and children's entertainment are not the only avenues through which obese people are represented in an unsavoury fashion; parallels can be drawn between their depiction in these formats and those found in digital games.

The aforementioned character Ronald coincides with notions of sizable characters continuously thinking about food even when they are not actually eating. His description in the player-character's notebook attests to this, simply expressing that he "[t]hinks

only of eating.” However, of further significance in the *Dead Rising* series is the blending together of obesity and antagonism. Puhl and Heuer determine that overweight characters in popular culture are attributed with “physical aggression” (951) much more than their underweight counterparts. In *Dead Rising* this is especially true, as the volatility of certain hostile characters throughout the series is bound explicitly to gluttonous food consumption. Arguably the most noteworthy example of this is the antagonistic Darlene Fleischermacher from *Dead Rising 3*. Hiding out in Uncle Billy’s Buffet, she is introduced to the player during a cutscene. Here, player-character Nick Ramos ventures into the diner and sees an unnamed male survivor attempting to unlock the door to the kitchen. Unfortunately, they attract the attention of Darlene. She is severely obese and bound to a motor scooter as a result. She tears away at a large chicken thigh. Food stains cover her clothes, which consist of a bib stylised with the image of a lobster and a bright yellow dress pattered with a cupcake design that her enormous stomach has actually torn through. Everything about her exaggerated appearance signifies food in excess. When she spots Ramos and the other unnamed survivor she yells “get away from my food”—clearly, she is under the impression that the entire buffet belongs to her. Ramos asserts that the eatery contains enough food for everyone while the other man argues that Darlene could not possibly eat all of it. However, rather than being persuaded to share the buffet Darlene takes this last comment as a challenge, shovelling multiple burgers into her mouth and swallowing them whole. When the unnamed man attempts to bypass her and claim some food for his own, she grabs a large spork and stabs him to death. Once again *Dead Rising* rejects the notion of human food consumption as representing reclamations of civility as proposed by Newbury, or evoking nostalgia as argued by Sublette.

Gluttonous food consumption is not only satirised by obese characters in the *Dead Rising* series, but also through the player’s choices during gameplay. Consuming certain foods has an adverse effect on the player-character in the first three *Dead Rising* games (stomach cramps in the first and vomiting in the second and third). These outcomes can be prompted by the consumption of food that had become “spoiled” over time. This is evidenced by the transformation of “Raw Meat” to “Spoiled Meat” and “Steak” to “Spoiled Steak” for example. Tying in to the series’ satire on voracious food consumption, the player is chastised for their dubious food intake and virtual gluttony should they choose to perform such foolish consumption practices. This punishment is made clear as their agency is momentarily stripped away while the player-characters doubles over in pain. In doing so they drop whatever item they were currently holding and leave themselves open to attack. This would be particularly detrimental to the player-character’s wellbeing if it should occur as the player was aiming to navigate through a crowd of zombies.

The *Dead Rising* series connects zombies to agribusiness by revealing the origin of its zombie infection as the result of unethical research into the mass production of cattle. In this way it coincides with twenty-first century zombie films, in which Newbury asserts that the undead “seem to emerge from and are profoundly associated with the landscapes of fast and junk food” (100). However, Newbury also claims that these films rarely implicate the food industry directly as the cause of their zombie outbreaks and offer no form of redemption from current food intake practices damaging people and the ecosystem at large. Contrastingly, *Dead Rising* makes its connections between zombies and fast food explicit, satirises overeating in the United States by portraying a number of troublesome and antagonistic characters as obese, and supports a sensible approach to fast food consumption through satirical gameplay consequences that punish the player for overeating.

### Works Cited

- 28 Days Later*. Directed by Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002.
- Dawn of the Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, United Film Distribution Company, 1978.
- Dawn of the Dead*. Directed by Zack Snyder, Universal Pictures, 2004.
- Dead Rising*. Capcom, 2006.
- Dead Rising 2*. Blue Castle Games, 2010.
- Dead Rising 2: Off The Record*. Capcom Vancouver, 2011.
- Dead Rising 3* Capcom Vancouver, 2013.
- Dead Rising 4*. Capcom Vancouver, 2016.
- Heuer, Chelsea A. “Fattertainment’—Obesity in the Media.” *Obesity Action Coalition*, <https://www.obesityaction.org/community/article-library/fattertainment-obesity-in-the-media/>.
- The Last of Us*. Naughty Dog, 2013.
- Left 4 Dead*. Valve, 2008.
- Left 4 Dead 2*. Valve, 2009.
- Little Nightmares*. Tarsier Studios, 2017.
- Newbury, Michael. “Fast Zombie/Slow Zombie: Food Writing, Horror Movies, and Agribusiness Apocalypse.” *American Literary History*, vol. 24 no. 1, 2012, pp. 87-114.
- Puhl, Rebecca M. and Heuer, Chelsea A. “The Stigma of Obesity: A Review and Update.” *Obesity*, vol. 17 no. 5, 2012, pp. 941-964.
- Resident Evil 6*. Capcom, 2012.
- Silent Hill 2*. Konami, 2001.
- Sublette, Cammie. M. “The Last Twinkie in the Universe: Culinary Hedonism and

Nostalgia in Zombie Films.” *Devouring Cultures: Perspectives on Food, Power, and Identity from the Zombie Apocalypse to Downton Abbey*, edited by Cammie M. Sublette and Jennifer Martin, U of Arkansas P, 2016, pp. 190-205.