

MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

Left 4 Dead

Developer: Valve, Publisher: EA
Platform: Xbox 360 (review copy), PC

When Microsoft launched its underwhelming Zune media player it used the tagline ‘Welcome to the social’. Pity they hadn’t thought of that one sooner, it would have been just as good a fit for their Xbox LIVE service. With over 17 million subscribers pushed by tentpole titles like *Halo* and *Bioshock* it makes good business sense to explore potential ways of driving game and hardware sales – not to mention paid subscriptions worth in the region of \$300 million and growing. And that’s before we get to PC gaming.

The *Halo* experience has proven the model for console-based multiplayer online gaming, and 2007 saw a new approach to gaming leveraging this social space, using a freeform, sandbox campaign model typified by *Frontlines: Fuel of War*. No longer would levels have to be played through in sequence; instead, join up with your friends, pick a starting point and go – not entirely unlike chapter skipping on a DVD.

Valve, the developer of the much lauded *Half Life* series, took this malleable gameplay style and applied it to their zombie holocaust first person shooter *Left 4 Dead*.

This survival horror game draws inspiration from a variety of sources, from the classic rpg style of *Silent Hill*, the frenetic energy of *House of the Dead* and the fluid gameplay of the most recent *Resident Evil* games, but brings two novel elements to the genre: a new kind of AI and a style of multiplayer gameplay that demands a constant state of interdependence between players requiring tight formations and combined firepower.

Taking its cue from the classic Romero zombie movies the backstory is intentionally vague. Somehow an ‘infection’ has been released (to what extent we don’t know) and four people from disparate backgrounds are forced together to fight their way to safety. The ambiguous plotting is also something of a departure from the genre when put up against its progenitors, with their more overt reliance on ‘science gone wrong’ shenanigans. The current *Resident Evil* entry, for example, relies on a linear story of corporate machinations and a comic book cast of the bold, beautiful and unrepentantly maniacal, aided by cut scenes to keep things chugging along. Similarly this year’s *House of the Dead* instalment, the Wii’s *Overkill*, occasionally tries to ‘inject’ some fun into the proceedings by adding a love triangle, crime lords and a hint of incest – and why not?

In comparison *Left 4 Dead* might seem embarrassingly threadbare but the lack of soap opera histrionics only serves to create an atmosphere of pure desolation and focuses the mind on gameplay.

The player has the choice of any four characters: biker Francis, grizzled soldier Bill, Louis, a regular guy trapped by circumstance, and horror geek Zoey.

Gameplay is split into four campaigns varying in location from a desolate city to a small town to a disused airport and a typically bloody jaunt in the woods. The campaigns are presented in a similar fashion to a series of four films (albeit stand-alone), with players taking on the roles of the main characters within a

film about a zombie apocalypse. Valve has developed this to the extent that film posters were used to promote the game, and once a campaign is completed it lists the credits in the standard film format, listing the gamers as having been “starring as...”

Each campaign is subdivided into five chapters, all of which are accessible through the main menu. Stuck on a specific chapter? Don't worry about it, just move on to the next, or change campaign completely. It's not like you are actually in 'competition' with anything – or that your characters will find the solution to the zombie problem. Staying alive long enough to get rescued is all you have to do. It just turns out that 'all' is something of a task. .

The bad guys – perhaps unfair to call them such – come in all shapes and sizes. The Horde represent bog standard zombies/infected who do most of their damage through weight of numbers; Witches, who would rather be left alone to weep but are devastating when they attack; the annoyingly agile Hunters; Boomers, who attract the Horde by vomiting bile all over you; Smokers who use their rather long and elastic tongue to strangle their prey; and huge mindless berserkers called Tanks. It's quite a rogues gallery but it does expose a disjointedness in the backstory: are we dealing with the shambling, decomposing walking dead of Romero – for shamble they do until roused – of unknown origin, a ferocious *28 Days Later*-style yarn of viral infection or do the range of enemies represent a 'third way' of supernatural interference? All three interpretations are open to debate but really they are of little consequence. It's not like you get the chance to find out; this just isn't that kind of ride. Instead, *Left 4 Dead* is intended to be driven, not by plot, but by characters. The uniqueness of the game thus becomes apparent, as the gamers themselves fill the shells of the playable characters, providing the weakness and strengths with their own gameplay strengths and playing styles rather than developer applied boundaries (such as having the old gaming stereotypes of a slow but powerful character, a fast but weak character and an all rounder that everyone wants to play...).

Pulling the strings is a new kind of AI developed by Valve, dubbed the Director. There are two AIs driving the gameplay. The first controls the spawning points, intensity of attack and the numbers and location of infected you will encounter. Its role is to keep you challenged but not to the extent that you find the action so tough as to get you frustrated. Replay value is top of the agenda so the game moulds itself around your level of ability.

The second Director controls the score and sound effects, issuing audio cues called 'crescendo points' used to foreshadow sudden attacks of either individual or hordes of zombies. The conceit will be too familiar to gorehounds, but nonetheless enjoyable for it.

Structure aside, the look and feel of the game is strong on atmospheric and, naturally, everything takes place at night. The use of Smokers and Boomers present constant threats to your field of vision, as do your teammates from time to time stepping in the way of shoots and then complaining that you've just shot them in the back, although it must be said, on the single player campaign, the friendly character AI is excellent, with fellow, game controlled, survivors regularly healing and saving you from zombie attacks without prompting

The character designs, however, do belie the game's aspirations as a cross-platform success. While perfectly acceptable on a PC one gets the feeling the Xbox 360 is not exactly being taxed. In comparison to *Halo* or *Gears of War* the lack of fine detail gives *Left 4 Dead* a slightly brittle feel, with pieces of your cohorts literally disappearing in front of you in tight spaces.

Having addressed this much it's time to get into the real reason for playing *Left 4 Dead*, the multiplayer modes. These come in three flavours: local multiplayer, multiplayer online and versus – where you can play on the side of the infected.

Regardless of which mode you pick two factors are given: the firefights will be frequent and frenetic, and any attempt to stray from your teammates will result in a nasty end. This is not a game for glory hunters or team killers; success demands four guns blazing at all times. This can be particularly difficult when deciding just how fast you should move through a level, whether to concentrate on taking a position and picking off targets from a distance or make a call on who the last person to get on the escape chopper should be. These seem like small points but try acting on them while being chased down by dozens of infected. It's a harsh lesson on the concept of loyalty.

A patch is currently available via Xbox LIVE that expands the versus mode which lets you play the part of the zombies, taking over from the Director in choosing spawning points, lending more of a tactical shooter element in terms of where to place special zombies and when to mass your zombie horde for the final attack that will leave nothing behind but a few splatterings of survivor meat and some temporarily sated undead appetites.

Back to single player mode and you'll find it a much lonelier experience. As the characters have no distinct personalities beyond which weapon they use it can be hard to go back once you've gotten a taste of multi-player. What's more you can virtually walk through the levels if you stay to the rear and do the bare minimum to pull your weight. The other characters will even turn around and heal you without prompting.

All things considered, *Left 4 Dead* is another killer app for Xbox LIVE and a shot in the arm for PC gaming. It's best to treat the single player mode as a training session for the real thing and as for the plot holes...

Caveats aside, go forth and enjoy. You never know when the real thing is coming. And perhaps unsurprisingly, a sequel is already in the works.

Niall Kitson

Left 4 Dead

Graphics: 7

Sound: 8

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 9

Overall Score: 8

back

Dead Space (18)

Developer: Visceral Games, Publisher: Electronic Arts
Platform: Playstation 3, Xbox 360 (review copy), PC

A massive ship lies floating in orbit around a broken world. No hails are answered, a few desultory lights blink in the darkness and there are no signs of life. On a routine mission it has mysteriously gone quiet and now you and a crew of rescue experts have been sent to see what the problem is. After a crash disables your own vessel you find yourself trapped inside the massive vessel, fighting the horror that lurks within...

No, despite the fact that the premise sounds eerily familiar, they haven't made a game of Paul W.S. Anderson's 1997 film *Event Horizon* - this is *Dead Space* - , although you can be forgiven for thinking they share a certain resemblance. *Dead Space* utilises the same Lovecraftian style of horror, down to a crew driven insane by voices only they can hear in their heads and the occasional vision of people who may or may not be dead.

Dead Space opens with a small rescue ship approaching the leviathan USG Ishimura, a military mining ship sent to a planet to strip it of precious metals and minerals. All contact has been lost with the Ishimura and the crew on the USG Kellion have been sent to help make repairs and investigate the reason for the loss of communication. Soon after its arrival, the rescue ship is destroyed and the crew is slaughtered by pointy limbed monsters called Necromorphs. One of the few survivors, Engineer Isaac Clarke, is left to repair the Ishimura and get off the ship alive, all the while trying to figure out what happened to the thousand strong crew and discern just what the hell necromorphs actually are.

Dead Space is essentially a revamping of the classic RPG survival horror genre. You're an isolated survivor, fending off hordes of monsters and trying to get to safety. Thankfully, *Dead Space* has several unique features that set it apart from other Survival Horror games. The main difference is that it does not use a heads up display or HUD. Rather than having half the screen dominated by information on health, ammunition and status updates, *Dead Space* makes use of the character model itself, with Isaac's environment suit showing his health via a blue strip running down his back. As he becomes injured the strip gradually fades away, eventually turning to a bright warning red when your health is low. Ammunition is shown via displays on your chosen weapon and mission information and communications from other survivors is displayed by a hologram that sparks out from the arm of the environment suit.

The environment suit also provides Isaac with some unique abilities. The suit can be used to slow time in a localised field and also to pick up and carry/hurl objects. These abilities are used within the game both for puzzle solving and for attacking enemies. Whilst these abilities are nothing new within videogames, they are used to great effect within *Dead Space*, for instance, the player is able to use the dismembered limbs of dead necromorphs to destroy new attackers.

The game adds an extra level of strategy for players via the nature of the necromorph enemies. They absorb bullets, with an early level enemy taking almost a full clip of assault rifle ammo to kill. The only way to quickly disable one of the necromorph enemies is via dismemberment, causing the creatures to gorily bleed out. This encourages players to choose weapons more suited to Isaac's engineering abilities like Razor Saws, Plasma Cutters and other engineering tools, rather than the normal FPS (First Person Shooter) weapons of automatic weapons and shotguns. A level up system utilising items known as power

nodes allows the player to improve their weapons and environment suit. However, the power nodes are extremely rare, making levelling up equipment a tough choice: Do you enhance the oxygen allowance within the suit or do you spend the node on upping the firepower on your plasma cutter? This adds a surprising amount of depth and in later levels you can find yourself spending minutes at a time trying to decide where best to spend your limited supply of credits and power nodes.

There is a slight puzzle element within the game, with it necessary for Isaac to restore ships systems in order to make his escape from the Ishimura. Some of these follow the simple flip a switch variety, but others, and the more fun ones, involve using the environment suits ability to slow time. Upon first playing, I ignored this ability, using it only rarely. However, as the game progressed the sheer usefulness of this ability became more and more apparent. Using it you can freeze arcs of electricity, massive rotating ventilation blades, and most importantly, slow down the hordes of necromorphs attacking you.

The lack of a HUD is remarkably refreshing with the genre, leaving an open screen to enjoy the excellent graphics. However, it can be difficult to use the holographic display, with the writing on the screen being very small and faint, especially in some of the brighter environments in the game. Whilst not a massive issue, it can be a tad awkward, especially if you are following the games back-story and trying to unlock the mystery of what occurred on the ship before your arrival. Another quibble is the repetitiveness of some of the missions. Isaac is continually sent on repair missions, from one end of the ship to the other and after you've fixed one part of the ship to be told another bit of it is malfunctioning for the eighth time, you find yourself hoping Isaac will tell them to go and fix it themselves, especially after you meet the Leviathan for the first time, a massive beast that takes up half the ship and has a tendency to attack you randomly throughout the game with its grasping tentacles.

Horror games have generally followed the survival horror template developed by early console games like *Alone in the Dark* and *Resident Evil* and *Dead Space* is no different. There is a focus on using limited resources to survive, and on later difficulty levels you spend much of your time scrabbling about for health and ammunition in an almost frantic manner, so much so that the feeling of relief that sweeps you when you get a few more plasma charges is unbelievable. The enemy design is also excellent. The Necromorphs are monsters born from the corpses of the recently deceased and take a variety of forms, from the pointy armed stalkers to the massive bosses that occasionally appear. By far the most disturbing enemy appears after you find a seemingly innocent medical report that mentions the number of pregnancies amongst the thousand strong crew. Soon after you meet the offspring of these births and they will freak you out a bit, especially when they grow tentacles...

Dead Space takes its influence from a variety of sources, unashamedly borrowing concepts from both videogames and films. The necromorphs scamper about through ventilation ducts in a similar fashion to Ridley Scott's *Alien*, launching unexpected attacks that will have you swearing and firing wildly. As the plot unfolds the Lovecraftian influence can be seen, with it becoming apparent that a cult was operating amongst the now deceased crew which worshipped a giant stone monolith that had been unearthed on the planet below. Later in the game the player will be stalked by a cult fanatic who openly welcomes his change into a monster, helping the necromorphs track down and slaughter surviving crew members.

Dead Space is a must have for horror game fans. Excellent graphics and sound are matched by wonderful gameplay, with Isaac moving easily throughout the vessel. Once you've fought your way across the ship and to the planet below, you'll find yourself itching to get back to playing it from the start, but this time on a harder level and with the hope that this time you won't jump *too much* when that tentacle grabs you.

But you will.

Eoin Murphy

Dead Space

Graphics: 9

Sound: 9

Gameplay: 9

Replay Value: 8

Average: 8

Resident Evil 5 (18)

Developer: Capcom

Platform: Xbox 360/PS3

This is the one we've all been waiting for. Ever since the phenomenally successful reboot of the *Resident Evil* series with the fourth entry back in 2005, gamers, and indeed scholars interested in how games reproduce the gothic, have been waiting with baited breath for this game.

You can breathe a sigh of relief: *Resident Evil 5* builds upon the success of its predecessor. The over-the-shoulder dynamic camera makes shooting enemies an accurate affair: technically precise but also visually pleasing. The camera can still be panned left and right of your character, giving you a good look at what might be lurking in the shadows waiting to attack you from each side. The weapons, much like in *Resident Evil 4*, can be upgraded at a market with diamonds and gold that you find on the corpses of your downed enemies. It's a nice aside which gives the game a stat-based leaning to add depth to the otherwise relentless action. These enemies themselves, not so much zombies, are classed as 'infected': civilians robbed of their humanity by being exposed to the game's biological virus. They aren't your standard undead fodder, and display a remarkable amount of intelligence for being in a game. These infected will naturally work out ways to get to you: climbing up ladders and over fences, jumping through windows and breaking down locked doors. To combat this, you're able to kick down these ladders and block entrances to buildings with furniture like wardrobes and crates. It all feels natural, far away from the scripted corridor roaming that both the *Resident Evil* series and countless other Survival Horror games are renowned for. This makes *Resident Evil 5* feel like a true successor to the now-classic fourth entry, a familiar continuation of tried and tested gameplay.

One thing new to *Resident Evil 5*, however, is the fully formed co-operative mode. While there was a brief pairing between *Resident Evil 4*'s protagonists Leon Kennedy and Ashley Graham, *Resident Evil 5* takes two player gaming a step further. The game can be played co-operatively throughout: one player playing as series veteran Chris Redfield, and the other his new assistant, Sheva. There are points in the game where both characters must rely on combining their abilities such as one giving the other a leg up to a higher platform, or using their collective strength to barge open heavy doors. While it's not a revolution in design, it thoughtfully expands the *Resident Evil* formula into areas of gameplay well tilled by other franchises, such as *Gears of War* or *Left 4 Dead*. However, when *Resident Evil 5* is played with only one player, Sheva is controlled by the game's own artificial intelligence. Here is where the clever co-operative gameplay is slightly undone. Occasionally, the artificial intelligence will make bad decisions when directing her: using the most powerful weapons on the weakest of foes, or getting stuck in a horde of zombies when trying to follow you through a level. This somewhat breaks the immersion of character and environment that the game works so hard to build up.

The setting of *Resident Evil 5*, North Africa, is perhaps the most interesting element of the game, and one most worthy of analysis with respect to Gothic studies. Here, the tropes of Post-Colonialism are rendered Gothic through the game's surface: its visuals and sound. In the power vacuum left by the absence of colonial regimes, dictators of the nation itself have swept in to abuse the power of its newfound freedom. The game's depiction of this abuse is manifested through tribal warfare. However, rather than this being the representation of racist conflict as some segments of the press noted, it is instead the game's recurring biological virus which powers the violence between people; science having the power to strip human consciousness from the human body, rendering it abject where no abject existed before. However, *Resident Evil 5* provides what is most certainly an outsider's view of Gothicised Africa. Its main

protagonist, Chris Redfield, is an American agent sent in to deal with the spreading of the biological virus in much the same way as *Resident Evil 4*'s Leon Kennedy in another foreign national environment with Gothic associations: the heartland of rural Spain. While both games feature fantastically well-researched architecture concurrent with each setting, both are also subject to misappropriations and misinterpretations of the local culture, left in ruins or horrifically transformed by the biological virus. For example, in *Resident Evil 4*, the leader of the infected monks, the Los Illuminados, speaks with a strong German rather than Spanish accent, and frequently uses modern Americanisms in his grand speeches, breaking the illusion of restaging the Spanish Medieval Catholicism of classic Gothic. Similarly, in *Resident Evil 5*, the developers get sidetracked in representing the local culture as predominantly Voodoo: a spiritualism that has its origins in the colonial West Indies, and is now only a residual identity in current-day Africa.

Here, the transition from *Resident Evil 4* to *Resident Evil 5* charts the movement of Gothic setting from its eighteenth century European origins in Spain and Italy to the more recent Developing World and the New World. However, as the cultural inaccuracies inherent within each game reveal, these environments are not the games own. Unlike the aspects of Gothic in some videogames, such as the Ukrainian developed *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* or Nibris Software's upcoming Polish peasant Gothic game *Sadness*, these two entries in the *Resident Evil* series are essentially a combination of Japanese and American representations of other cultures and nationalities, which are seen as savage, backwater regions of the globe where unconstrained science can run amok. Like the parasite virus which features in the games itself, they invade a nation and alter its surface appearance to suit their own ends. Indeed, this Gothic idea of replicating or doubling a past or culture has been something inherent within the Gothic since the eighteenth century novels of Matthew Gregory Lewis or Charles Robert Maturin created a world of die-hard Catholicism to suit their own (admittedly high cultural) Anglican agendas. While *Resident Evil 5* merely contributes to the entertainment aspects of the Gothic without having any high cultural aims of its own, it does succeed in expertly translating this fear and danger of the unknown and the barbaric into the videogame medium. It is graphically breathtaking and works well on repeated playthroughs, as finding all the hidden treasures can become something of an addiction. Also, the extra 'Mercenary Mode' from *Resident Evil 4*, where you play through segments of the game as other characters, is back. Whatever your taste in period Gothic- and whether you're a fan of the series or a Survival Horror fan in general - this is sure to entertain you for a long time to come.

Stuart Lindsay

Resident Evil 5

Graphics: 9

Sound: 9

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 8

Average Score: 8.5

F.E.A.R. 2 (18)

Developer: Monolith Productions, Publisher: Warner Bros Interactive Studios
Platform: Playstation 3, Xbox 360 (review copy), PC

Any game that carries the acronym F.E.A.R. is surely one to watch out for if you're a horror fan. *F.E.A.R.*, the first game in the series, followed an unnamed member of the F.E.A.R. recon squad, who have been sent to retrieve a rogue military commander and his troops. Over the course of the game you discover that in true *Heart of Darkness* fashion the general had been involved in various unpleasant activities including creating a clone army, cannibalism and torturing a young psychic girl called Alma in order to control her powers. Unsurprisingly this didn't end well, with a subsequent nuclear explosion levelling a nearby city.

And this is where *F.E.A.R. 2* comes in.

After the production of two less successful expansion packs for the first game, a true sequel has been produced, taking place slightly before and just after the events at the end of the first game. This time you play Michael Bennet, a member of a Delta Team sent to arrest Genevive Astride, the president of Armacham Technology Corporation, the company responsible for creating Alma and the clone soldiers. During the course of this mission you come under fire from the Company's black op troops and begin to have visions of a little girl with long dark hair leading you through Armacham's headquarters. After tracking down Astride, you witness a massive explosion tear its way across the city you are in, wiping out the majority of the population and leaving the streets the domain of clone soldiers and black op troops.

F.E.A.R. 2 adds a few improvements over the original, with a slightly improved graphics engine and vastly improved AI on enemy NPC's. Now, rather than stand limply in front of you soaking up bullets, they kick over tables for cover, use flanking manoeuvres and, most annoying, throw grenades at you willy-nilly. This adds an extra level of difficulty to the game in that you have to formulate the best tactics to deal with these clever enemies, rather than attack all guns blazing.

As with *F.E.A.R.*, you have the ability to slow time during battles, the result of your being part of the Harbringer project (which you only discover during the course of the game). The ability to slow time is relatively well utilised, with you finding yourself using it almost constantly to get an advantage over the hordes of enemies attacking you.

F.E.A.R. 2 uses as the focal point for its horror elements a scary little girl. Creepy children have always been a common occurrence in horror and gothic texts but it's interesting that over the last decade in particular, thanks to the Japanese horror boom, little girls have gone from being symbols of innocence in the world to being harbingers of doom and terror, much like ravens were in ancient times. Just the sight of a little girl with long black hair is enough these days to send me screaming in the other direction as I just know they're about to do unleash some sort of horrible psychic attack upon me.

In the original game, Alma, the aforementioned scary little girl, was used to great effect, initially appearing as a fleetingly glimpsed figure from the corner of your eye, leading the player across levels to scenes of great bloodshed. A sighting of Alma was generally followed by the vision of a corridor splattered with blood and battle hardened soldiers scattered around the place like rag dolls. Added to this the seemingly endless swarms of clone troopers and the occasional mutant monstrosity all of which meant that *F.E.A.R.* was a game to play with the lights on.

Unfortunately much of the horror is lost in *F.E.A.R. 2* simply because Alma's back-story has already been explored. In addition, rather than build upon the horror elements of the original, *F.E.A.R. 2* just replicates them to no good effect. The majority of scares now come from the sudden attacks of mutant humans, rather than the slow build up from mild trepidation to utter terror at what was around the next corner that made *F.E.A.R.* stand out from other horror/FPS games. To be perfectly honest, after fighting my way through a half dozen levels of the game and facing off against soldiers, mutants and the occasional naked ghost woman I just felt bored with the game, wanting to hurry through it just to get it over and done with.

The in-game environments are surprisingly drab, consisting of a dark palette throughout. At one point I found it necessary to turn up the brightness level just so I could find my way out of a series of rooms. The external environments are not much better, with the nuclear explosion turning the light into a drab grey and making it difficult to pick out enemies from the background. At one point, whilst being attacked by a fourteen foot high mech (that's a two legged robot with large guns, on it to non gamers) I could barely make it out in the haze. Whilst this could be merely included to make the game more realistic (it is set after a nuclear explosion, so a clear summers day it would not be...) in a gameplay context it just means you spend a lot of your time squinting and cursing at the screen as you get shot at seemingly from nowhere.

F.E.A.R. 2 is a relatively good shooter, if a little poorly paced in places with sections of the game dragging along. This could be forgiven, for at times the action does become frenetic, with room to room shoot outs testing your skills. However, the sheer lack of horror in a horror game is unforgivable. There are few scares in this game but the plodding pace of the gameplay and the exposition via email and information dump does nothing to heighten the mood. A similar method is used in *Dead Space* but snappier writing added to its plot rather than slowing the whole thing down as in *F.E.A.R. 2*.

If you want a solid shooter to kill time until *Halo 3: Recon* comes out then you could do worse than *F.E.A.R. 2*. However if you buy games based on their ability to make you want to turn on the lights, than this is best avoided. Invest in *Dead Space* or *Left 4 Dead* and then watch the original version of *Ring* again – it's got all the scary dead girls you need.

Rico Ramirez,
Buenos Aires Correspondent

F.E.A.R. 2
Graphics: 7
Sound: 8
Gameplay: 6
Replay Value: 4
Average Score: 6.25

Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone: The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street

(Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009)

Original Script: Rod Serling

Adaptation: Mark Kneece, Illustration: Rich Ellis

The Twilight Zone was a hugely influential television show, airing 1959-1964, that brought Science Fiction and Horror to the masses. Created and hosted by the ever-present Rod Serling, it produced innumerable classic episodes, often adapted from short stories by writers such as Richard Matheson and Ray Bradbury. The show created a dynamic within television that has been repeated ever since, with the more recent *Masters of Horror* and *Masters of Science Fiction* showcasing the best of directors and writers.

Following a lackluster TV series in the 1980's and a movie that gave the world the immortal line "Wanna see something really scary?" (Trust me, it's traumatic when you're nine) *The Twilight Zone* franchise is now experiencing something of a revival, with classic episodes of the original TV show being reproduced in Graphic Novel form.

One of the first of these to be produced is the classic tale of paranoia run wild *The Monsters are Due on Maple Street*. In the suburbs of an unnamed city, strange lights are seen flashing overhead, causing random power outages, and spreading confusion throughout the gathered residents. When a young boy begins to suggest that aliens are behind it all and that they could be in human form, the story gradually shifts from one of suspicion to outright hysteria as the suburbanites turn on one another to try and root out the alien threat.

The original story is reminiscent of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, with the fear of the enemy within being the main driving force behind it. In the Cold War era when the story was originally written, there was a very real fear amongst Americans that their supposedly safe and secure neighbourhoods could harbour communist sympathisers just waiting for their moment to strike. This trend was particularly prevalent the 1950's and 60's, with a number of science fiction films taking their queue from this fear. For example, the 1953 film *Invaders From Mars* tells the tale of a young boy who believes his parents have been replaced by aliens hiding out in a nearby swamp. After being told he's imagining things (in the best B Movie fashion) it is eventually revealed that David is telling the truth and the only way to protect yourself from the extraterrestrial foe and its malevolent mind control is to wear a metal colander on your head. Good for keeping out mind control rays *and* draining pasta...

The artwork, however, is the biggest let down here. Within this medium it is obviously extremely important that both writing and art work well together but here the art of Rich Ellis fails to have much of an impact. When characters become stressed in the story large sweat droplets appear, in a style reminiscent of Manga more than traditional American style comics, and whilst this should not be a problem, it is used continuously; eventually this device is so overused that it looks as if the graphic novel is set during a rainstorm. The colour palette used is also a tad drab, with muted colours adding little to the thick pencils used to outline characters. With a blocky style to the artwork all round, there is little finesse to the panels and they can be quite static at times. The, at best, average artwork doesn't compare at all to the work of Alex Ross or even the more comic style of Cam Kennedy and detracts from the overall story significantly. It is, of course, possible that the artist was trying to emulate the style of comic book art used

in the 1960's, reflecting the origins of the story. However, a more considered, less rushed, approach to the artwork would have added significantly to the reading experience.

I won't even discuss the reveal at the end: suffice to say, does it have to be Whitley Streiber-style Grey aliens all the time? Surely there's some other form of alien life out there that could be trying to take over the planet?

The Monsters are Due on Maple Street is still able to raise a shudder at the notion that human civilisation is only ever a few steps away from anarchy; all it takes is the loss of electricity and a few unguarded words for hysteria to descend and for neighbour to attack neighbour. This rendition of a classic story does not, in truth, do the original episode justice. With a few tweaks to the plot and improved artwork this could have been an excellent addition to the *Twilight Zone* mythos.

Unfortunately, it just isn't in the Zone...

Eoin Murphy

Freaks of the Heartland

(Dark Horse, 2005)

Writer: Steve Niles

Artist: Greg Ruth

Rural areas always seem to hold some spectre of suspicion for urbanites. In horror films, city folk who go off on a short break to the country invariably find themselves getting the Ebola virus (*Cabin Fever*, 2002), being stalked by feral children (*The Children*, 2008) or getting brutally murdered by cannibals hiding in caves (*The Hills Have Eyes* (1977/2006), *The Descent* (2005), *The Cave* (2005) and at least three other films). This trend has become more and more apparent in horror films over the last few years, and it's interesting that very few horror films are set within cities themselves (although [*Rec*] (2007) and *P2* (2007) do make excellent use of city environments, they again rely upon the isolation of the main characters, replicating rural locations via quarantined apartment blocks and underground parking lots at four in the morning).

This apparent fear of isolated areas, and indeed isolation itself, has of course long been an important trope in horror and gothic literature as well as video games (such as *Silent Hill*).

This trend has continued, with the almost viral like spread of isolation, mutating itself sufficiently to infect the graphic novel medium, with Steven Niles (of *30 Days of Night* fame) once more mining gothic stereotypes for inspiration, delivering a tale of an isolated rural community entitled *Freaks of the Heartland*.

Rather than feature a band of rural cannibals, undead civil war patriots or hordes of vampires, Niles's story (collected in a 6 issue Graphic Novel) follows Trevor, a young boy who lives in a hick town in an unidentified state, spending his days helping out on the farm, playing with friends and, oh yes, feeding his twelve foot tall, six year old brother who's chained up in the hayshed, out of sight of the neighbours. It's just like a typical childhood in Leitrim really...

The result of an unexpected birth, Will has been born different, growing far quicker than any other child and occasionally showing signs of telepathy and other, ungodly, abilities. His only friend is his brother who occasionally breaks him out of the barn and away from their violent father's watchful gaze, so the giant child can have some semblance of a childhood that doesn't involve counting chickens or eating the rotten mush that provides his meals.

As the story progresses it soon becomes apparent that Will isn't the only such child in the small town and soon enough both youths are caught up in a desperate bid to rescue the other freaks and take them somewhere safe, before the reactionary townsfolk coalesce into a pitchfork wielding mob.

Freaks of the Heartland is generally a good read, with Niles providing believable dialogue throughout but for the occasional blip. The artwork is excellent, with Ruth's use of pastel colours and strong lines emphasising the dustbowl countryside in which the story takes place.

There are, however, problems with this work. The graphic novel would have been excellent, with a hint of mystery regarding the birth of the children, the god fearing parents and innocence of the children

working wonderfully as a plot. However, that's when it falls apart. Rather than leave the birth of the mutant offspring a mystery, Niles attempts to explain it, which would have been fine but for his apparent inability to decide on which explanation is best. At one point it's mentioned that things haven't been the same since the bombs fell, suggesting the children are the result of some post nuclear war mutation. This would account for the fear of outsiders and for the near desert that the town sits in. Later, however, it's mentioned that all the women in town fell pregnant in the same week, after strange lights were seen in the sky (as occurred in John Wyndham's 1957 Science Fiction novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos* and the 1960 movie, *Village of the Damned*, based on the novel). This seems more derivative than a tribute, and hints at a certain laziness in Niles's storytelling. Yes, the reason for the children's birth is not in any way central to the story, but an effective back-story, even if only delivered in a few lines of dialogue, would have with added to the depth of the story. Instead, the two divergent explanations serve only to confuse and annoy the reader. Better to have left it a mystery than explain it by liberating the explanation wholesale from a classic science fiction novel. Other narrative excesses soon begin to occur. For example, the mutant children start to exhibit extraordinary abilities (at one point one of them breathes fire...). This dramatically alters the feel of the story. Giant mutant children are one thing, but ones that breath fire are just a tad ridiculous. If Niles had decided to focus on a more basic plot (i.e. children try to escape ruthless parents) the graphic novel would have been far more effective. The additional plot contrivances that Niles adds shifts the somewhat low key story from one that drew you in to the tale to one which you read sceptically.

The artwork is excellent for the most part, but can occasionally become difficult to make out, with multiple images occasionally being used in a single panel which resulting in a somewhat confused morass of visual information.

Some of the characters are also a bit stereotypical, with no real attempt to add depth to characters, instead relying on typecast characters to drive the story forward. For example, Trevor and Will's father is a bitter, hard drinking redneck, who beats his wife and non-mutant child and rules the family home with an iron fist. His mother is meek and repressed, a character that's barely utilised at all within the novel and serving no real purpose in driving the story beyond an again somewhat stereotypical death. A bit more character development could have shifted this graphic novel up a notch in terms of interest for the reader. Instead, the standard characters result in an interesting read but provides nothing to lift it above the mass of other graphic novels and collected works already out there.

The collected works is currently undergoing Development Hell and is due to be made into a film in 2010 with *Pineapple Express* (2008) director, David Gordon Green, adapting it for the big screen. It is too early to say whether the film will improve upon the original material (as was done with the excellent *30 Days of Night* (2007)) or if it will be yet another comic book to movie adaption that fails to spark even the slightest interest (as with Frank Miller's version *The Spirit* (2008)).

Whilst *Freaks of the Heartland* is a distracting read for half an hour, it lacks the impact of similar stories, such as Grant Morrison's excellent *We3*, which does far more to illicit an emotional response from the reader with its cyborg dog, cat and rabbit than a half dozen of Niles' mistreated mutant children.

Rico Ramirez