

MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

Crossed

Writer: Garth Ennis,
Artist: Jacen Burrows
Publisher: Avatar Press

Zombies are everywhere, especially in this edition of the Journal (see below for a review of the *Walking Dead* video game). Garth Ennis is well known as the creator of series such as the extraordinary *Preacher* and has also worked for *DC*, *Marvel* and *2000AD*. In *Crossed*, Ennis finally gives us his take on the Zombie.

Or in this case, rather, “The Crossed”. Actually, forget I mentioned zombies at all. These aren’t zombies. I mean, sure, they travel in large packs, violently attack other humans and turn others into ‘Crossed’ through direct fluid transfer (more on that later. Blagh, by the way). But still, these aren’t zombies, they’re Crossed.

The graphic novel is told mostly in flashback, with a group of survivors travelling across a ravaged USA trying to reach Canada, their reasoning being that there’s less people in Canada and therefore less people who have become Crossed.

The Crossed get their name from a cross shaped rash that spreads across their face, with those effected becoming incredibly violent and acting without inhibitions. In the comic book this involves various unpleasant acts including raping corpses (there’s a lot of this), killing other Crossed and hunting down the uninfected to try and turn them (in one incident this is done by firing bullets at them that have been covered in fluids from the Crossed. I’m not going to say here exactly what the fluid is but suffice to say it’s not something you want in a bullet wound, infectious or not).

As to be expected from Ennis the writing is tight and well paced, with internal and external tension running through the story, driving it on. The artwork by Jacen Burrows is excellent, and his style lends itself well to the mature content of the story.

The Crossed act like a mix between the victims of the Rage virus in *28 Days Later*, the infected townsfolk in Romero’s *The Crazies* and the Haters from David Moody’s series of the same name. So they are not zombies in the traditional, Romero-esque sense, just humans transformed into near human monsters that display remarkably similar behaviour to the undead.

You may be sensing some sarcasm at this point. I really don’t know what you mean.

The story follows most, if not all, of the tropes found in zombie stories. A rag tag group of survivors, a desperate attempt to get to a possible safe zone and the disparate personalities of the group resulting in falling-outs and conflict. It even has a cute kid.

And this is where the disappointment comes in. Garth Ennis is one of the most prolific writers and creators of comic books out there and in *Crossed* I expected him to add something new and interesting to the genre. Unfortunately, he effectively regurgitates every single hackneyed idea that has been done on the zombie story to date. There is simply nothing new in this story. Indeed, other than the extreme

violence used in the title it has little to differentiate it from any other zombie/zombie like comic, novel, film or video game.

To be clear here: I have nothing per se against a bit of sex and violence in my entertainment, but Ennis seems to rely on it far too much in *Crossed*, with the lack of originality inherent in the concept made up for with the depiction of violent sexual assaults on what seems like every other page. *Crossed* reads like it was written for the kind of reader who thoroughly enjoyed the more gruesome bits of Eli Roth's *Hostel 2*, in which young women are horribly tortured and murdered every five minutes or so.

Essentially then, what Ennis has done here is written the graphic novel equivalent of something you would expect to see on the Horror Channel at 4 in the morning. *Crossed* is all about sex and violence and little more. It lacks the subtlety of *Dawn of the Dead*, or the domestic horror of *Haters* and in general, reads like something the *Daily Mail* would love to rant about. The real surprise for me in reading this title was that Ennis had written it. With the likes of *Preacher*, *Hellblazer* and some of the all time classic *2000AD* stories (*Emerald Isle* anyone?) under his belt Ennis is much better than a title like this, which appeals purely to the lowest common denominator.

When I first saw that Ennis had written a zombie story I was excited at the prospect, hoping for the same approach to writing that made *Preacher* a game changer in the comic world. Instead, I came away disappointed and worst of all wary of reading anymore work by him.

I'll continue to read Ennis, but for now I think I'll go read *Judgement Day* again and try to remember the good old days.

Eoin Murphy

Amnesia: The Dark Descent
 Developer & Publisher: Frictional Games
 (Reviewed on PC)

Adorno argues that art which gives pleasure is meaningless – instead, we need art forms that are commensurate with the anxieties and terrors of modern life. While he might find many problems with *Amnesia*, he could certainly not fault it for being pleasurable. It's a rebarbative nightmare that suspends players in relentless fear, making the entire experience deeply uncomfortable.

While other survival horror series have drifted more and more in action-horror directions, *Amnesia* runs counter to this trend. At no point do players have access to the numerous shotguns and flame-throwers that seem to litter every other zombie infested town or haunted castle – in fact, you have no access to any weapons whatsoever.

As the title would suggest, our protagonist, Daniel, wakes with no memory of who he is or why he has found himself in a seemingly deserted Prussian castle. He finds a note from his past self, instructing him to descend to the basement of the castle and kill the person who waits there. As you explore, it becomes apparent that Daniel is not alone in the castle, but is being pursued by some monster against which he has no defence. From the notes and diary entries you find scattered throughout, you realise that what's stalking you is a curse from an ancient artefact recovered from an archaeological dig. Daniel's memory is constantly inundated with more information, as increasingly ill-omened objects provoke flashbacks that distressingly impede players' control.

Instead of weapons, players find tinderboxes to light candles and an oil lantern for exploring the shadows. When encountered with the enemy your only option is to flee and hide. Safe as staying in the light may feel, monsters can see you all too well so players must take cover in darkened rooms or closets. However, lingering for too long in the dark or looking directly at the monsters lowers Daniel's sanity meter, causing your vision to blur and distort, the walls to pulsate, and your body to slacken, rendering him temporarily immobile. Control is taken from players on many levels. Though you are often made aware of your powerlessness against dark forces that hunt you, the prison of your own mind is an even more constant threat.

Play is split between anxiously creeping and running in terror, while you desperately try to remember the route to relative safety, extinguishing candles on your way. Once hidden, Daniel's waning sanity makes it difficult to discern between noises that come from the monster and those that are the product of his deteriorating mental state.

True to its Lovecraftian influences, the unknown is a perpetual threat, as actual contact with the monsters is rare. Though their appearances are infrequent, the decrepit castle and malfunctioning machinery maintain an atmosphere of constant menace. The feeling of helplessness induces relentless terror, making every movement cautious, and flight the instant reaction to any encounter.

Although *Amnesia* has a relatively low-tech feel that heightens the disconnection with movements and sensory perceptions, the aesthetic generates a finely tuned anxiety. You're forced to play relatively slowly as glimmers and shapes are sometimes not easily distinguishable from actual dangers. There is no map and, as players descend further into the chasms of the castle, increasing levels of concentration are required to navigate the oppressive underground mazes of dark grisly caverns and dimly lit sewers.

Silence retreats when danger is near or simply when you've spent too long in the dark and your sanity is low, replaced with an impressive layering of truly unnerving sounds – human and otherwise. These are punctuated with unpleasantly meaty sounds if you are harmed, drawing players' attention to the visceral in preparation for the fairly unexpected gore towards the climax of the game. Though there are many moments of appalling realisation, a standout instance is when players must use a hand drill to bore into a corpse's head, wedging in a copper cylinder to collect their blood.

There are no real moments of respite. Even in rooms that we immediately sense are “safe”, the atmosphere and music are melancholy and the colours muted, emphasising *Amnesia's* cinematic quality.

The game is fixed within the gothic tradition – we uncover Daniel's tortured past, replete with Orientalist Victorian obsessions with ancient cultures, mystic ritual, and frontier science. Daniel follows trails of fresh blood through rooms haunted by forgotten grandeur and into cellars that house decaying steam punk-esque machinery. There develops a real sense that the environment harbours some malicious intent. The castle is not simply disintegrating: it is diseased. As you progress, weirdly organic crimson viscera grows and pulsates from the walls and floor. Players cannot ignore the encroaching gore – whenever you get too close it splatters unpleasantly.

The central story is well expressed through Daniel's past narratives, lessened only slightly by the over-acted storytelling voice. The calibre of the writing, though, is unusually high for survival horror, especially when considering that the most spoken about survival horror dialogue is industry joke *Resident Evil*.

Amnesia's first-person perspective gives the action immediate and personal feeling. The lack of an on-screen avatar forces a deep immersion; there is no other body to act as a mental barrier between you and the danger. Horror is given more room in which to work when it feels as if you are involved to such depth, however, in this case, deep immersion indicates weakness more than power.

Amnesia is not really about “survival”. You are impelled to continue, travelling towards ominous understanding instead of any kind of happy ending. This is another element that adds to *Amnesia's* gothic power, the sense of fate and haunting dictating our actions.

Continuing to play when the feeling of unease is so great is a fantastic expression of the death drive. It doesn't make sense to continue to self-inflict such intense discomfort. You'll want to stop playing. Your pulse will race, your palms will sweat, you'll jump, you'll scream. You'll keep playing.

Zoë Jellicoe

Amnesia: The Dark Descent

Graphics: 7

Gameplay: 10

Sound: 10

Replay Value: 9

Overall Score: 9

The Walking Dead: A New Day
 Developer & Publisher: Telltale Games
 (Reviewed on the Xbox 360 – Downloadable content)

The Walking Dead is a prime example of the power of a good story. Starting off in Robert Kirkman's comic books of the same name, then evolving into to an award winning TV show and now transformed into the inevitable video game, *The Walking Dead* has successfully permeated multiple media platforms, and remains notable for its sustained focus on character over action (although action plays a significant role).

Despite the success of *The Walking Dead* in other formats, though a question always hangs over any video game tie-in- "will it actually be any good?". They seem to be cursed, with most being terrible (*Superman Returns* and *ET the Extra Terrestrial* are deemed two of the worst games ever made, *ET* being so bad apparently there's thousands of copies of the game buried somewhere in the Arizona desert) and only a few ever being anything other than just ok. So can *The Walking Dead: A New Day* even be considered a decent tie-in, let alone a good one?

You play the game as Lee (a new character, although familiar figures from the comic book and TV show do turn up), who is on his way to jail as the zombie outbreak begins. Caught up in a car accident as the patrol car he's being transported in runs over a wandering member of the legion of the undead, Lee must first escape the initial zombie attack and then help a young girl (Clementine) survive the plague.

Lee and Clementine soon find themselves falling in with the usual rag-tag group of survivors, with egos, secrets and zombies all adding to the tension.

A New Day is the first in a number of 'chapters' to be released in the series, each adding another instalment to the story of Lee and Clementine. They are available for download via Xbox Live for a reasonable 400 Microsoft Points (around £3.40/€5.00).

Unlike most other current zombie games, *A New Day* does not rely on blood and gore to get by (in contrast to the likes of *Dead Island*, *Dead Rising* and the excellent but practically plotless *Left for Dead*). Rather, story is king here, and large strands of plot and character development interspersed with action sequences. Indeed, this first chapter of the game series is highly reminiscent of Kirkman's comics in that the walking dead, whilst an integral part of the story, are not in themselves the main focus. Isn't that often the way in traditional (i.e. Romero influenced) zombie stories though? They're often, as here, more about how people behave in times of extremity than the Living Dead themselves (who are really just a metaphor for any kind of terrible disaster or catastrophe you can think of – a supernatural natural disaster, in fact).

The game itself is played as an advanced point and click adventure (including slightly obscure puzzles), with new areas loaded as the character moves around and objects highlighted by a targeting reticule and interacted with by different on screen prompts. This is relatively effective although it can be somewhat awkward when you're being attacked by a zombie and you're trying to stick a screwdriver in its ear. This could, however, be a deliberate choice on the behalf of the developers as it raises the tension significantly.

Tension is your constant companion in this game. Even the initial ride in a cop car helps raise the ante, with Lee and the Police Officer chatting about why he's on his way to jail, occasionally interrupted by warnings over the radio of something bad happening and cop cars zipping down the other side of the highway.

This tension is the source of staying power for the game and is further added to by the choices you must make during gameplay. These come relatively often and vary from relatively minor dilemmas (you must decide what questions to ask someone) to choosing who lives and who dies.

Like a number of other games out there, player dialogue is determined by a dialogue tree with comments controlled via the D pad. The choices you make here can have a direct effect on how individuals react to you. For example throughout the game you can choose to tell people you were on your way to jail when the outbreak began or not. If they figure out you're lying however this can have repercussions for later on, when trust becomes vitally important for your survival. Cleverly, the game doesn't give you much time to respond to questions during these moments. A time bar rapidly drops, giving you just enough time to read the four speech options and respond. As a result you can find yourself giving instinctive answers rather than thought out responses where you've had time to consider the possible impact on the game (as in games that use a similar mechanic such as the *Mass Effect* series). This again adds to the tension as you don't know what effect your panicked response will have (such as whether or not it will lead to a child having his head bashed in...).

Like its more basic point and click predecessors (such as the classic Lucas Arts game *Escape From Monkey Island*), *A New Day* progresses through problem solving – finding items lying around and using them to solve puzzles, although these riddles are more practical in nature than in similar games. Some of the puzzles can be a tad obscure, but hints and clues are generated through conversation with NPCs (Non Playable Characters) and it feels quite rewarding to have to figure them out, especially as they rely on real world logic.

The graphics themselves are designed to reflect the art of the comic book and do a decent enough job (It's a good looking game for downloaded content, which can be graphically limited), although character movement in the game is stiff and further highlights the fact that this isn't your standard "Let's blast zombies" game. There is however some rather obvious repetition of NPC's especially with the undead (I'm pretty sure I saw the same one in two different towns, and zombies don't move that fast...)

There are also some problems with sound as well: snatches of dialogue are missing and voices seem to fade a touch here and there. This, of course, may be a result of sudden poor hearing on my part, but as my spouse also had the same difficulty I'm going to assume it's the game's fault...

Ultimately, *A New Day* is a good introduction to the game world of *The Walking Dead*. As noted, a few problems are apparent, but all of this can be put aside when you find yourself caught up in the story. For a mere 400 Microsoft points on Xbox Live Arcade and with around 2-3 hours of gameplay, this is one worth checking out, especially if you're a fan of the series or comic book.

Eoin Murphy

The Walking Dead: A New Day

Graphics: 8

Gameplay: 8

Sound: 7

Replay Value: 8

Overall Score: 8