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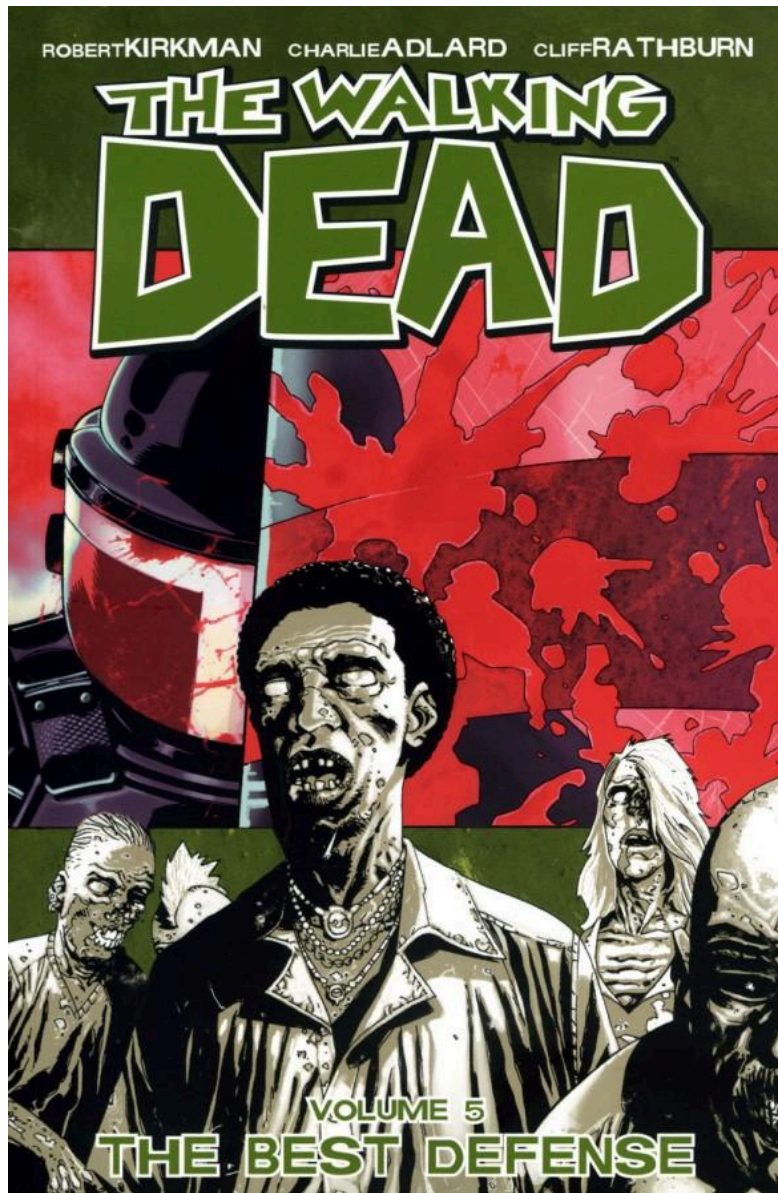
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What makes The Last of Us zombie designs so unique?

Video games are a big staple in pop culture, from Pong to Red Dead Redemption 2, there are constant advancements in the gaming industry and a continuous influx of new and unique video games. In 2025, 27 games have already been released, including the well anticipated The Last of Us 2 remaster. The Last of Us has been a popular franchise ever since the first game's release back in 2013, then in 2020 the sequel was released which garnered 2.8 million worldwide sales units "making it one of the best-selling PlayStation exclusive launches of all time"(Clement, 2023). The franchise also has a show adaptation starring Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey, accumulating a larger fandom. There is no definite answer to why the franchise is such a staple in the gaming world, it could be thanks to the dense lore, diverse characters and their backstories, the groundbreaking motion capture; or possibly the franchise's unsettling zombie designs.

Zombies, originally referred to as zombi, have Haitian origins and has a narrative deeply rooted in the harrowing Carribean slave trade history. The concept of zombi derived during the emergence of Haitian Vodou - a deceased Haitian slave is summoned from the dead by a 'bokor'(sorcerer), stripped of free will, no autonomy, and forced to work again. Because of this, people found "the bokor far more frightening than the zombie"(Lin, 2016). The majority of bokors committed murder just to have someone binded to them as a zombie - "Haitians find the prospect of such servitude terrifying"(Lin, 2016). Whilst it is argued that the first mention of zombies in western media was Mary Shelley's gothic novel 'Frankenstein', White Zombie, a 1932 movie, was influenced by the original idea of zombies being mind-controlled walking corpses. However this concept was refined in 1968 when cult classic Night of the Living Dead hit the screens, displaying the creatures as slow, pale, and devoid of any rational thoughts besides getting their hands on human flesh. These cannibalistic monsters set the scene for years to come and inspired both movies and TV shows alike. In The Walking Dead series, humans are

reanimated as zombies by a virus and are also depicted as slow and driven by hunger for human flesh; they appear rotten, similar to many zombie concepts in media from the early 2000s. In later seasons the undead appear more decayed, hinting that the zombies in that universe are decomposing as dead flesh does. The zombie lore and imagery was directly inspired by The Walking Dead comics.



Moore, 2006, The Walking Dead Vol. 5: The Best Defense.

Night of the Living Dead's refinement of the zombie notion also inspired video games. In the mobile game Plants vs Zombies, the heavily stylised zombies have a gray, almost green, tint and the cartoony designs make the creatures look the furthest from humans. Other games have taken a similar approach, whilst sticking to a more surrealist style, they have also made their zombie designs more monster-like rather than giving them a decayed human look; including Resident Evil, Back 4

Blood, and The Last of Us, which has been credited for having a more contemporary take on zombies.

The Last of Us franchise is set in a world plagued by a sudden outbreak of a mutated *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis*, aka Cordyceps, fungus enabling the parasite to claim a human host, the fungi kills brain cells and hijacks motor functions. In the real world, Cordyceps are “largely pantropical”(Petruzzello, 2023) and target ants which gave the fungus the nickname “zombie ant fungus”(Petruzzello, 2023) which that alone is ironic. The game’s approach to a zombie concept is far more realistic compared to the usual coming back from the dead notion, the game’s concept is frightening as the possibility of the Cordyceps fungus mutating to infect humans isn’t far fetched and bizarre. The concept of a virus being manmade and escaping a lab is also equally realistic and frightening. In the game, a player encounters several different types of zombies - a host of the Cordyceps fungus goes through different stages depending on how long they have been infected. Each stage has unique appearances, all designed by Hyoung Taek Nam.

Hyoung Taek Nam has been working in the industry for over 20 years, he has worked on book covers, comic and storytelling illustrations, and character costumes, along with character concept art. His inspiration derives from both fantasy and history, and hyper realism which is prevalent in his work, he mainly works digitally and uses techniques that make his content look traditional - implementing prominent strokes as if done with analogue brushes.



Nam, 2019, Red Alter.

Nam's skills are high end, he is able to bring a character to life thanks to his abilities to effortlessly delineate photorealistic portraits. Ever since 2009, Nam has worked as senior character concept artist at Naughty Dog Studios, the creators of the Last of Us franchise as well as other nostalgic games. He has designed iconic characters for Uncharted 4, but more importantly is the mastermind behind the Last of Us zombie designs. He illustrated several designs for the different infection stages before narrowing them down, each having drastic appearances and becoming progressively more fungal-like; visualising the human form being consumed and overtaken by the cordyceps infection.

During the first stage of infection, a host's appearance has not drastically changed yet. They are called 'runners' and appear similar to other zombies in media - they are foaming at the mouth, have prominent veins and bloodshot eyes. Since a host has only started their transformation during this stage, they are considered the weakest however they are fast, hence the nickname they are given. It is not until the 3rd stage that a host's appearance has significantly changed from their original

human look, they are referred to as a 'clicker' because they rely on echolocation to manoeuvre the environment due to the infection making a host blind.



Nam, 2013, Clicker: Last of Us.

At this point, a host's face becomes disfigured and a fungal structure (sporocarp) has emerged, this design aspect being influenced directly by the appearance of the Cordyceps when it releases sporocarps from a host's (an ant) corpse. The body is covered by crevices which shows the infection is trying to pierce the skin in other areas and therefore claim more hosts by making the infection airborne through spores. Nam incorporates flies in his designs to portray the zombie's rotten state, similar to other zombie concepts and designs in media. These aspects visibly worsen as later stages develop which has been illustrated in other concept art.



Nam, 2013, Bloater(3)

After a few years of being infected, a host develops thick fungal armour and is very dangerous, they are called 'bloaters' and were originally the final infection stage. In the second game, 'shamblers' were introduced which are no different to bloaters besides they are much more aggressive and are found in areas with water. Also in the sequel, 'rat king' was implemented which is inspired by the real life phenomenon where "several rats in a confined space will get their tails inexorably entwined and move together as one to survive"(Anderson, 2025). Bloaters are mostly covered from head to toe in fungi, as previously mentioned it acts as armour, but they are also covered in spores which emit gas on command and when it is killed which is deadly; imitating a Cordyceps releasing spores to infect more ants. These later designs make hosts appear supernatural and dehumanizes them - however, they lose their sense of humanity very early in the first stage of infection; at this point they are completely unrecognisable. Nam's surrealistic style helps make elements of his designs repulsive, particularly the designs for the later stages, and elevate the unsettling designs for each infection stage; his direct influence from the Cordyceps fungi to help with his designs adds to the eeriness. Naughty Dog Studios did a perfect job at capturing Nam's sinister designs in both video games, with the post apocalyptic environment and the motion capture technology, players are constantly on edge when navigating the world beyond a safe haven.

To summarise, there are several characteristics that make the Last of Us zombie designs distinctive from other zombies in popular media. Inspiration from the Cordyceps fungus plays a big part in the uniqueness, not only when it comes to the behaviour of the infected but also when it comes to the appearances. Zombies in other media don't have different infection stages unlike the Last of Us zombies which adds to their distinctiveness. There are some similarities to other zombie concepts, for example Last of Us zombies have a hunger for flesh and that their skin becomes rotten as well as covered in fungal structures. Yet, overall Last of Us zombie concepts are one of a kind.

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