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Getting Cozy with the Zombie Apocalypse: The Saferoom as Capitalist Breakroom in *Left 4 Dead* and *Back 4 Blood*

Abstract

This article considers how players experience coziness inside the saferooms of *Left 4 Dead*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, and *Back 4 Blood*, which are otherwise high-demand, fast-paced first-person shooter zombie games. Pairing Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun’s concept of “situational coziness” with James Ash’s “intense space,” this discussion first explores how moments of coziness can occur within competitive and stressful FPS environments, and indeed may be considered cozy specifically in how they afford temporal, spatial, aesthetic, and auidial reprieves from the stress of those environments. I explore how such situational coziness, when produced as both break from and reward for succeeding at stressful zombie apocalypse gameplay, contributes to the zombie genre’s ability to allow players performances of an idealized iteration of capitalism’s work/leisure cycle, as both “work” and “leisure” have come to be defined under and in service to exploitative capitalist labor conditions.

Keywords: capitalism, first-person shooter games, safe zones, situational coziness, work/leisure cycle

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Introduction

The first-person shooter (FPS) genre is not typically associated with coziness. Its signature fast-paced, high-demand, violent gameplay is far more likely to elevate player stress levels than to relax them (Ash, 2013). It is this exact stressful capacity of the FPS genre, however, which allows such games to provide pockets of cozy affect to players, when taking a break from shooting and being shot at. Tanya X. Short et al. describe this phenomenon of coziness in stereotypically non-cozy games as a “cozy sandwich” in which gameplay primarily consists of “meaty moments of action” but is padded by “comforting moments of coziness” (Short et al., 2018). Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun label this type of game design “situational coziness” which “gives the players a moment of break between more challenging parts of the gameplay” (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 233). These moments often occur at save points and safe zones, which serve to mark the player’s progress while providing “refuge in an otherwise intense game” (Short et al., 2018). Examples of such save points include *Resident Evil*’s (Capcom, 1996) iconic typewriter, bonfires and sites of grace in the otherwise notoriously difficult *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), as well as the bonfires/campfires in *Don’t Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013), *Hyper Light Drifter* (Heart Machine, 2016), and *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013). Other such moments of reprieve from action and survival-oriented gameplay occur in safe zones like the bunker in *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017), Sam’s room in *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), and the hamlet in *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios, 2016).

A popular example of videogame safe zones are the saferooms in Valve Corporation’s FPS zombie survival games *Left 4 Dead* and *Left 4 Dead 2* (Valve Corporation, 2008 and 2009), the design of which influenced the saferooms in the series’ more recent spiritual successor, Turtle Rock Studios’ (2021) *Back 4 Blood*. Taking the *Left 4 Dead* series’ (henceforth *L4D*) and *Back 4 Blood*’s (*B4B*) saferooms as a case study, this paper explores how situational coziness is established in these brief moments of respite – despite, but also through, the anxiety-inducing mechanics and aesthetics of the rest of the games. I argue that these cozy moments, as attained through highly-stressful – if also enjoyable – zombie-killing labor, reproduce an idealized version of capitalism’s work/leisure cycle, which adheres to capitalist conceptions of *work*, *leisure*, and *freedom*. Engaging players in their real-world leisure time in a virtual fantasy of a more fulfilling work/leisure cycle may add needed value and respite to players’ individual lives, but in doing so it nonetheless recharges them for the comparably unfulfilling work of contemporary capitalism. Prior to delving into this capitalism-sustaining relationship, however, it is important to examine how one designs a cozy saferoom during the zombie apocalypse, which first requires a discussion of “coziness” itself.

How 2 get cozy

Coziness “denotes a kind of atmosphere characterized by a particularly informal and relaxed spirit of being together, or even being alone” (Bille, 2015, p. 257). Speaking specifically to video games, Short et al. (2018) suggest that “[c]oziness itself refers to how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness,” while Jordan Youngblood highlights the importance of “proximity, warmth, [and] intimacy” (Youngblood, 2022, p. 534) to establishing cozy atmospheres during gameplay. While games which feature intense gameplay do not fall under the typical umbrella of “cozy games,” such games may still evoke situational coziness in a way that echoes how we often pursue or attain our bursts of cozy affect in real life.

However, coziness itself does not have to be entirely divorced from experiences of hardship, trauma, or stress. Pursuing secure moments of cozy affects within such intense relations is common in real-life and can likewise be designed into gaming. David Edery, co-founder of the studio behind *Cozy Grove*, explains how the “past trauma” and “survivor’s guilt” of the game’s characters might not be “a cozy topic, but the friendship you develop, how you help them, how you walk them through what they’re feeling, that became cozy” (Martens, 2021, p. 19). The fact that helping someone else – or oneself – through stressful if not traumatic lived experiences can come to feel cozy or may be best pursued in a cozy environment (Fraimen, 2022), reveals the healing properties of coziness.

“Cozy,” in gaming and in life more broadly, refers not simply to a nice and warm affective feeling, but to the safe space behind that feeling. To be cozy is to be safe, if only momentarily. In the safe space of coziness, one can lick their physical and/or psychological wounds without an immediate threat of those wounds being reopened, whether those are the virtual wounds suffered from zombie hordes, tended to in post-apocalyptic saferooms, or the very real wounds we each carry – to varying degrees – from capitalism, which we tend to in our capitalist-bequeathed leisure time.

Getting cozy with capitalist leisure

Leisure, while certainly a concept predating capitalism in contemporary capitalist society:

[I]s not only dependent upon labor as a defining condition (i.e., leisure is understood as that which is not labor), but it also defers to labor as a justification (one is not entitled to leisure without labor), a model of operation (the pursuit of hobby and leisure is increasingly career-like), and the source of economic resources required to participate in increasingly consumption-oriented leisure activities (Beckham, 2017, p. 95).

J. Nikol Beckham here illustrates how capitalism renders “work time” and “leisure time” as two distinct entities, wherein the latter is a reward for the former, and the latter comes to be conflated with freedom. Under capitalism, feeling “free” often equates to being free from work. As Thomas Raymen highlights, “[t]he traditional positioning of leisure in contradistinction to work has made leisure irretrievably synonymous with ‘freedom’ and agency” (Raymen, 2019, p. 22). It is during our leisure that we feel “free” due to leisure time’s supposed increase of our individual agency, that is, the power to make personal choices. Such a sense of freedom better facilitates the relaxation required to evoke cozy affect.

Yet many do not pursue (or do not pursue exclusively) coziness in their leisure, instead taking this time free from work to partake in other types of work. This phenomenon connects with Robert Fletcher’s observation that leisure is often used to pursue “qualities seen as lacking in everyday work life” (Fletcher, 2011, p. 453). Speaking specifically about gaming, Jane McGonigal explores how video games appeal to players because they give players the chance to take on “more satisfying work” (McGonigal, 2011, p. 55), offering players more personal connections to their virtual labor and a better sense of agency than the comparably “alienating and de-authenticating” labor of capitalist society (Fletcher, 2011, p. 453).

Yet within these fantasies of fulfilling labor, breaks from game labor are still often embedded in game space itself, such as in the form of menu lobbies or in-game saferooms. The fleeting coziness of such safe spaces contributes to a virtual work/leisure cycle that does not reject the capitalist logic structuring that cycle, but instead rehearses an idealized version of capitalism’s cycle, in which one feels connected to and meaningfully agentic in both work time and leisure time. The labor of zombie games, however joyous and liberatory it may feel, is liberating the player not from capitalism itself, but from unfulfilling labor in capitalism, which many players must turn back to once their zombie slaying liberation is done.

Zombie leisure

The potential for zombie games to engage the laborer’s dream of meaningful fulltime employment, liberating them from precarious work into secure work, is elsewhere explored by Michael Epp. As Epp articulates, the zombie apocalypse genre provides players with the opportunity to “enjoy guaranteed full employment. The inexhaustible zombie and its usually slow but always busy world promise... a utopic world in which everyone is required to work, endlessly producing security for themselves and their fellow survivors” (Epp, 2020, p. 72). Epp here indicates how full-time employment is not only a desirable fantasy in capitalism’s current epoch of precarious employment, but that managing zombie hordes is itself a full-time job, if one that many find enjoyably productive.

It can of course also be argued that there is plenty of *unproductive* fun to be had in zombie games. As Kristine Jørgensen highlights, zombie games are appealing because they engage a more competitive, productive, goal- and strategy-oriented “telic” mindset while also allowing for spontaneous, exploratory, and creative “paratelic” mindsets, oriented by immediate gratification (Jørgensen, 2020, pp. 132–133). Yet, according to Jørgensen, the “predictability” of zombies can invite players into a paratelic mindset in such a way that “utilizes the seductive power of playfulness” to create “a precise simulation of how zombie film survivors get killed as a consequence of hubris” (Jørgensen, 2020, p. 134). In other words, the zombie survivor as worker is allowed moments of reprieve within their workspace, so long as they are skilled enough at their job to pivot back to work as soon as they risk being overwhelmed by tasks/zombies.

This threat to the *unproductive* laborer, as only experienced in demarcated *productive* spaces (i.e., zombie-infested areas, where one must be *on the job*) reiterates capitalist concepts of the work/leisure divide. In zombie games, as in capitalism’s standard work/leisure cycle, there are specific spaces in which we are expected to work, and other spaces in which we are expected to be unproductive, to recharge for, and heal from work. These unproductive leisure spaces are both temporal, in what time of day and for how long we may access them (e.g., lunch time, after work, weekends, holidays), and spatial (e.g., home, shopping centres, cinemas, restaurants and bars, etc.). Zombie shooters, such as the *L4D* series and *B4B*, offer the reward of temporal and spatial safe space in the form of saferooms. In the saferoom, players can – if they so choose – recharge in situational post-apocalyptic coziness, to better prepare them for their next work shift in the intense time and space of the zombie apocalypse.

Safe spaces vs stress spaces

Multiplayer FPS games often feature what James Ash identifies as “intense spaces” which are “designed to amplify the potential for contingent encounters to occur between users, and... encourage users to develop highly trained sensorimotor skills to cope with these encounters” (Ash, 2013, p. 31). These intense spaces manifest as battle maps which facilitate player interaction, often featuring cover from enemies, labyrinthine pathways, shortcuts, and hidden areas which allow for various forms of multiplayer engagement, from direct combat to ambushes. While the *L4D* titles and *B4B* also feature single-player gameplay, this gameplay is undertaken in the same maps designed for their multiplayer modes, in which players may form teams and work together against AI enemies or compete against fellow human players acting as the opposing zombie team.¹ Single-player gameplay therefore takes place

¹ While zombies are respectively referred to as “infected” in *L4D* and “ridden” in *B4B*, I will be using the term “zombie” to refer to both throughout this discussion.

in intense spaces, designed for intense user-to-user interactions, which for the solo player is experienced as intense user-to-AI interactions.

Intense spaces generally “require the development of close forms of attention and concentration from users if they are to perform well in the game” (Ash, 2013, p. 33). In *L4D* and *B4B*, as in other FPS games, the player is incentivised to perform productively through the in-game tracking of a player’s kill count via scoreboards; the promise of meta-game achievements to be attributed to the player’s gaming profile, thereby increasing one’s “gaming capital” (Švelch, 2013, p. 199); the interpersonal desire not to hold back one’s team in multiplayer; and, specifically in *B4B*, in-game items collected during or awarded at the end of a level (e.g., cards for a player’s deck which provide various gameplay perks). The display of one’s kill count can be an especially potent incentive for players to increase their skills, given that every player’s number of kills and teammate assists are displayed in ranked order – to all players – at the end of each level. Through the competitive drive to improve, facilitated by an intense space in which one feels “an enemy could creep up and kill the user’s avatar at any moment” (Ash, 2013, p. 41), the FPS player is captivated by gameplay in a way that produces engagingly stressful in-game labor.

The intensity and subsequent player-engagement of *L4D* and *B4B*’s game levels benefit from the former’s AI Director and the latter’s iteration, the Game Director. *L4D* director Mike Booth describes the AI Director as being designed to balance player experience, through both streams of zombies and periodic breaks from the onslaught, to guarantee sessions that are not “either too easy or crushingly hard” (Freeman-Mills, 2018, para. 31). From the time one leaves a saferoom at the start of a level, to the time one reaches and shuts the door in the corresponding saferoom at the end of the level, the Director is constantly spawning various types of zombies, based on the player’s or team’s speed and location. For example, in *L4D*:

[A]ny attempt to slow down the action, or rest, or take time to admire the micronarrative objects littered throughout each level, will almost certainly be punished by the game’s AI Director, which will spawn a horde of zombies, or a “special” class infected enemy to get the player moving again (McKissak & May, 2018, p. 558).

Even after players have defeated one of the game’s hordes, they cannot rest long, otherwise another horde or series of special zombies will descend. The only place players can truly take a break from the zombie onslaught is the saferoom.

Outside the saferoom, players must always be aware of their surroundings, as a decrepit building or toppled bus could hide a dangerous special zombie, ready to pounce. The audio cues during gameplay amplify this anxiety, featuring distinct sound effects for special zombies that have spawned somewhere nearby (e.g., maniacal laughing for a jockey or animalistic growling for a hunter in *L4D*) and

short warning jingles signaling an incoming horde or boss zombie, such as the car-throwing tank (*L4D*) or the massive ogre (*B4B*). *B4B* additionally features constant hissing, spluttering, and monstrous cries, even when no zombies are immediately nearby, setting the player on edge through the sense of constant threat.

In video games, sound effects and music are highly effective in setting atmosphere and mood, and for propelling the player into action whether it be through battle theme music or warning sounds to signal danger (Grimshaw, 2008; Owens, 2022; Stevens, 2020). Speaking to the affective potential of audio, Shusaku Uchiyama, composer on *Resident Evil 2*, states of *Resident Evil*'s iconic saferoom music:

They may be “saferooms”, but that safety is fleeting. You always feel like the moment you step outside the room, you might encounter some nightmare wandering the halls... So it was indeed intentional for the music to be a mixture of peaceful and relaxing elements with a little touch of the uneasy about it (Martin, 2020, para. 3).

By contrast, the music that plays when one completes a level in *L4D* or *B4B* is not ominous but victorious, confirming the player has conquered the level and saved their progress, audially triggering both triumph and relief, as the survivors have finally reached safety and may – for a moment – relax.

Cozy apocalypse

The situational coziness of the saferoom is created by the ever-present threat of zombies and amplified by disturbing audio cues, eerie and decrepit environments, and the mounting stress of completing levels in intense space. As in other games which deploy situational coziness, the saferoom “offers the player brief moments of peace” and “a change of pace to juxtapose more action-packed moments” (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 236). This situational peace is achieved by playing on the core elements of cozy games: safety, softness, and abundance (Short et al., 2018). Players are aware that they have attained “safety” upon entering the saferoom and shutting its door, which creates a safe space in which they are protected from all threats in the level until the door is opened. Meanwhile, players can access abundance in saferooms more so than anywhere else in the games: in *L4D* useful resources spawn in each saferoom, such as guns, med-kits, unlimited ammunition piles, and occasionally other healing or throwable items. *B4B*, on the other hand, features a saferoom shop system which allows players to buy useful items with the copper they collect across levels. These saferoom resource options contrast “the more frequent gameplay experience of... resource scarcity,” creating a sense of abundance (Short et al., 2018).

Softness, the most seemingly unachievable affect in a competitive zombie survival game, manifests in the saferoom through a leveraging of audio, aesthetics, object placement, and intimate space, which provide “comforting feedback and an opportunity of a lowered state of arousal” (Short et al., 2018). From within the saferoom, typically anxiety-inducing audio cues register differently. The sound of zombies clawing at the barricaded saferoom door, with no way inside until the player chooses to leave the saferoom, registers as a post-apocalyptic version of heavy rain outside while one is safe indoors. As Short et al. (2018) articulate, “cold rain against a window emphasizes the warmth of a reading nook without threatening to disrupt it”. Zombies banging against the unbreachable door emphasize – without threatening to disrupt – the security of the saferoom. The threat of zombies/rain is kept at bay until the player chooses to engage (i.e., open the door), thus creating a controllable, secure space that will “fulfil the need of safety and allow for a more reflexive and mindful approach” to gameplay (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, p. 227).

The aesthetics of the saferoom likewise lend themselves to cozy affect. Both games feature saferoom set dressing which evoke contemporary concepts of the work/leisure cycle. For example, in *L4D1* we come upon a bag of dog food next to the weapons stash (Figure 1), while in *L4D2* a water cooler, emblematic of breaktime in workplace culture, appears beside the ammo pile and the survivors’ sleeping bags (Figure 2). In *B4B*, leftover pizza boxes and full trash bags, waiting to be taken to the curb, appear next to bloody drag marks (Figure 3), while elsewhere a coffee machine is set up against peeling and decaying wallpaper (Figure 4). In a videogame set in the present day, the normalcy of a coffee machine juxtaposed by blood splatters and overturned furniture may produce a sense of dread and evoke Sigmund Freud’s uncanny, in how something in the environment has disrupted or mutated the familiar – has rendered the “homely” as *unhomely* (Freud’s, 1919/1976, p. 620). As Steve Spittle highlights, the disruption and decaying of game environments that would otherwise appear normative to players, be it through “unaccountably smeared blood” or “ransacked... and disused” spaces, produces the uncanny when an unknown threat underpins the disruption (Spittle, 2011, p. 317).

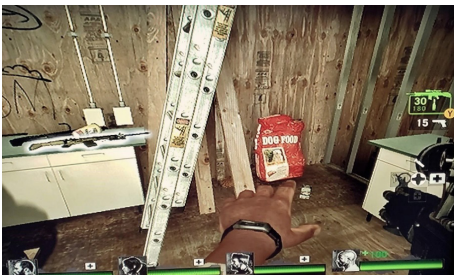


Figure 1 and 2. Inside *L4D1* (left) and *L4D2* (right) saferooms.



Figure 3 and 4. Inside *B4B* saferooms.

However, in a zombie apocalypse game, such callbacks to normalcy alongside apocalyptic carnage and decay, as encountered in a designated zombie-free safe space, can produce an uncanny coziness rather than an uncanny discomfort. The zombie threat may be present outside the saferoom, but it is a known threat. Within the saferoom, uncanny reminders of the safe machinations of contemporary home spaces are situated to evoke not a discomfort towards the unknown source of disruption, but a comforting reminder of aspects of home that have survived a known disruption. A cup of coffee on break in the saferoom, before grabbing one's blood-crusting baseball bat and charging back into the horde, may be uncanny in the juxtaposition between contemporary normalcy and post-apocalyptic chaos, but it is also the coziest a player – or a team – can get in the general uncanniness of the zombie apocalypse.

In multiplayer mode, saferooms fulfill an additional cozy function. Here, players can take a moment to relax and socialize; they can plan for the upcoming level, discuss the level they just completed, or simply chat and joke around. While such social interactions are not impossible during a level, the AI/Game Director typically interrupts attempts at social breaks of prolonged length – unless all players are skilled enough to hold a casual conversation while decimating undead hordes. Even then, these conversations occur while one is simultaneously undertaking the mental task of successfully navigating intense game space. Such mid-level socialization, while pivotal to working as a team and certainly enjoyable to many players, is therefore always underwritten by – if not specifically focused on – the player's goal of successfully completing the level and dominating the foes that stand between them and the saferoom. In other words, stress is added to socialization beyond the saferoom, which by contrast affords socialization within the saferoom a calmer atmosphere, contributing to the saferoom's situational coziness.

However, saferoom coziness can be just as easily disrupted through multiplayer interactions as it can be increased. For instance, in *L4D*, a player may open the saferoom door at any time, exposing all within to potential zombie attacks, whether each player is ready to begin the level or not. There are moments when

players on slower internet connections have not yet loaded into the next level, only to find upon loading that they have been abandoned by teammates anxious to progress gameplay, left vulnerable – if not immediately under attack – in the opened saferoom. While saferoom coziness may in this way be disrupted by players who are in a rush irrespective of their teammates, coziness may also be compromised for players who are frustrated by teammates who take too long in the saferoom.

In *B4B*, for example, players must wait a mandatory 180 seconds in the saferoom between levels, unless all players agree to opt out of breaktime and begin the level early (for examples of player discord over this wait time, see the following Reddit discussion threads: CharityDiary, 2021; Cremacious, 2021). When such team dynamics arise, in which people are either forced to rush or to wait, anxiety and frustration can seep into the otherwise cozy refuge of the saferoom. Team disparity, and indeed the concept of coziness as a reward for a cohesive team, are additional indicators of the saferoom's mirroring of the leisure side of capitalism's work/leisure cycle. Discontent teammates, be they coworkers during lunchtime, family members on the weekend, or fellow survivors in the saferoom, can disrupt the coziness and the freedom of one's limited and cherished capitalist leisure time.

Conclusion: The breakroom

The zombie apocalypse, as coded for gameplay, positions fighting the zombies as a meaningful (if playful) and conquerable work task for the laborer-player. As Jaroslav Švelch explores, in video games, “the strategizing player sees [zombies] as challenges – as targets that follow certain rules, and that can be taken apart using a suitable method” (Švelch, 2013, p. 194). While one may certainly employ such strategizing skills to their real-life employment, that real-life employment is still vulnerable to unpredictable, unknowable life circumstances. The joy of zombie employment, in the zombie game's work/leisure cycle, is that its challenges are knowable, manageable, and will only alter at a pace controlled by the player-laborer (i.e., different difficulty or game modes).

Even in the case of *L4D* and *B4B*'s emergent play, which arises from their AIs' ostensibly unpredictable deployment of zombies, this emergence has been “designed for the joy of control and agency” (Švelch, 2013, p. 200), in which there is enough supposed unpredictability to give the player a fulfilling sense of agency in the apocalypse. In this way, zombie games become “allegories of the societies of control,” including capitalist society, and “in many respects mirror [such societies'] all-encompassing logic, under which the unknown must be conquered” (Švelch, 2013, p. 203). The player finds fulfilment in their zombie labor here not because it is free from capitalist logic, but because it places the player in a more advantageous

position within those logics; one in which the player can control the means and mode of their (post-apocalyptic) work time.

The coziness of the saferoom in *L4D* and *B4B* is therefore situated as a reward for the players who have succeeded at productive, playful labor within intense yet conquerable capitalist work time. This is not to say zombie games are entirely void of gameplay which challenges capitalism (Kempner, 2020), but even while engaging those challenges we ought to consider what labor we are undertaking, in service to what, and what rewards the game offers for that labor. When leisure remains a reward for “getting the job done,” registers as distinct from that “job,” and can only allow access to cozy affect when one’s job was “done well,” capitalist logic remains somewhere within our interpretation and enjoyment of leisure, however discontent real capitalist work time may make us beyond our leisurely reprieves.

To summarize, in this article, I have explored how the cozy affect of the zombie survival game’s saferoom is grounded in real-world acceptance of capitalism’s self-sustaining work/leisure cycle. Even in the zombie apocalypse, it seems, cozy leisure time is only for laborers who have earned it.

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