

# Video Game Review: Gory, Gruesome ‘Dead Island’ is Nearly Great

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 12, 2011 - 9:26pm

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Dead Island](#) [3]
- [Deep Silver](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Left 4 Dead](#) [6]
- [PlayStation 3](#) [7]
- [PS3](#) [8]
- [Techland](#) [9]
- [Video Game Review](#) [10]
- [Xbox 360](#) [11]

CHICAGO – Video games have an amazing way of suppressing critical thought. Like a great action sequence can allow the movie goer to ignore stupid dialogue and cliched characters, if a game can provide adrenaline-pumping, visceral thrills then complaints become easier to forget. Such is the case with “Dead Island,” a clever zombie game with some serious flaws that really don’t matter in light of how damn enjoyable the game can be.



“Dead Island” is one of those games for which a critic stands at a crossroads. Like some, I could take the path that talks about the game’s many disappointments, and we’ll get to a few of those, but critics need to be honest with their reaction, not purely analytical, and I have to say that “Dead Island” is one of the few games this year that had me jonesing to get back to it. Even with some of the other high-profile games on my desk (“Madden,” “Resistance 3,” “Bodycount”...all of which will be reviewed in the coming days), my mind kept wandering to that island of undead waiting to meet the blunt end of my modified paddle. “Dead Island” is a flawed game, but it’s also a fun one, and that’s much more important to its final critical analysis. The problems with the title never overwhelm what works about it.



Dead Island  
Photo credit: Deep Silver

In many ways, the genius of “Dead Island” is in its concept — a resort island overrun by brain-eating maniacs not unlike what you saw in Danny Boyle’s “28 Days Later.” Imagine a Sandals resort in which the staff and tourists are closer to George A. Romero creations than what you’d see on one of those posters at a travel agent’s office. You choose one of four characters, each with distinct strengths (although the complaint that they aren’t unique enough is valid...this is not “Dragon Age”...don’t expect arcs or stories that dissimilar from one another), and wake up after the zombie apocalypse has hit. With only the weapons you find around the island — starting with tools as rough as paddles, wooden planks, and rusty pipes, and eventually progressing not unlike weaponry does in a standard RPG — you must keep yourself alive and, through a series of story and side missions, find your way off the island.





Dead Island  
Photo credit: Deep Silver

Yes, "Dead Island" is an action zombie role-playing game with an emphasis on co-op play. While some elements of the horror genre have successfully been grafted with standard RPG ones like skill upgrades, XP, and a quest-based structure, others didn't quite take as well. There's something annoying about scouring the island for spare change (a few bucks in a garbage can, more in the luggage left by now-zombified guests, etc.) to be used to buy new weapons or upgrades. It's hard to be scared when you're picking through bodies for their wallets. Or shopping. It's little things like these that drop the pace of "Dead Island," which should move like a runaway train instead of allowing for time to open cabinets or fix your weaponry. But when it does move, look out. You're going to want to have some friends in your party to save your ass.

Pacing issues aside, the weaponry functionality of "Dead Island" is one of its greatest successes. As mentioned, you will constantly be scrounging the island for something that looks like it could bash in a zombie's brain. Weapons are a major focus of the gameplay, as they would be in a world where a paddle can save you from death. Paddles, pipes, bats, and dozens more items can be turned into tools to save your life and you'll need to keep stockpiling and upgrading your melee weapons of choice because, in a very clever move, they can take some serious damage. Smash a paddle over a hulking beast's head and said paddle isn't going to be in very good shape. Weapons have what are essentially health meters and as the meter gets lower their effectiveness drops. Leave by the pool or take them back to repair them, how you manage your weapons are up to you but they'll be a major focus of your experience.



Dead Island  
Photo credit: Deep Silver

And you'll even be able to customize them. Through side missions and in some random places throughout the island, you'll find mods, ways to change your weapons like adding nails to the blunt end of a baseball bat. Upgrades, mods — these are the tools of the RPG, brilliantly grafted on to the world of the zombie game. I loved the weapon system in "Dead Island."

And I loved putting those weapons to use. Call me crazy but there's something deeply satisfying about timing your sickle swing in just the right way for the zombie running at you full steam to be parted from his head. Combat is not as simple as button mashing. You'll need to punch zombies off you at just the right time. Kick them out of your way. Time and locate your swing for maximum effect. It's gory, gruesome, and great fun. If you can't find twisted joy in dismembering your brain-eating zombie with a cleaver, "Dead Island" is not for you.

"Dead Island" works either as a single-player game or as a "Left 4 Dead"-esque experience, in which you and three buddies (or strangers if you so choose) can tackle the undead together. It's relatively easy to drop in and out of games and it often comes in handy to have help when you're being assaulted by zombies and all you have left in your arsenal is a wooden plank. You'll have to coordinate as your co-op partners need to be at the same point in the game as you or you can just as easily drop into a stranger's game if they let you. There wasn't a time I turned on the title where I wasn't greeted by someone trying to help me avoid having my brain eaten. Isn't that nice?



Dead Island  
Photo credit: Deep Silver

The combat may be great but the storytelling leaves something to be desired. I SO wanted the missions to be more inventive. A vast majority of them are collection or travel-based — go here and get this. Go there and do that. Very few of them require much brainpower and some are shockingly thin. There's a bizarre inconsistency to the map system. How come sometimes I know exactly where to go with a neat little flag and even a distance meter while other times there's nothing to point me in the right direction? It's these little things that hold the game back from perfection. The first trailer released for "Dead Island" hinted at poignant, captivating storytelling and some critics have been hard on the full game because of the expectations set by it.

There are also a few straight-up glitches, although most of those were fixed by a day one patch. A few of them remain (most annoyingly, zombies dropping in to the path in front of you out of nowhere or disappearing in much the same way, along with the modified weapon stuck in their neck), although the game often looks remarkable. The zombie animations, especially in combat, are very memorable. I do wish more of the island was available to explore. You should be able to enter any cabin or lifeguard post. No wooden door should be locked or unbreakable in a world as chaotic as this one. But these are minor complaints (that some critics have mistakenly blown up into major ones).

We say this a lot over the course of a video game year but what matters the most about "Dead Island" is a simple judgment — it's FUN. It's a game that demands you keep coming back to it — one more mission, one new weapon, one newly-opened area of this massive world. It calls to you and begs you to keep playing in the middle of the night. Despite its flaws, that's what really matters.

Before you practice your zombie-killing skills, check out this excellent launch trailer.

*"Dead Island" was developed by Techland and released by Deep Silver. The version reviewed was for the Xbox 360 but it is also available for the PS3 and PC. It was released on September 6th, 2011.*



[12]

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