

# Where are all the Vampire Games?

Vampires are the campiest of the silver screen monsters. There's no question about that.

But they've also been filtered through centuries of representations and iterations, now exhibiting close to none of the features they started out with. I love vampires wholeheartedly (Call me emo, I dare you!) and have always wanted an excuse to yap about them, so here's the question of the day: *Where are all the vampire horror games?* Spoilers for the rest of the essay-- I can't actually tell you. But I can guess: Because vampires weren't very scary in their classic Bela Lugosi era, other monsters stole their thunder, and their games career never took off. In this essay I'll make the argument for why I think they're still effective as monsters, despite how recent iterations have lost the appeal of their progenitors. Then, I'll pitch what I think could be a good (If idealized) v-horror game.

**But to understand the scarcity of vampires in video games, we must first consider the overindulgence of another monster that took their place in the spotlight: zombies.**

## Rise of the Zombie

If you've been aware of games in the 2000s, you've witnessed the rise and fall of zombies. Pretty much every gamer has some kind of a zombie vehicle close to their heart, from a variety of genres. Between all the genres, it's first-person shooters which take the trophy for "Most Zombies en Totale." *In my lifetime I've killed an uncountable amount of zombies, "walkers," and "freakers."* Despite being so closely tied with the FPS, it may come as a surprise to learn this: Zombies first emerged in survival horror (If you're my age, it might also surprise you to know that zombies used to be scary). But how?

***Resident Evil 1* released in 1996 and put zombies in the gaming mainstream.**

Also in 1996, RE 1 sold a million copies in Japan, a million in the U.S., and hundreds of thousands more in Europe. Also in 1996, it made its mark on horror games and changed the genre forever, its ripples still felt today. And in the nearly 30 years since, Capcom would refine and develop the series to do that same feat again and again: From the original, to the "classic" fixed-camera era, to making the action-horror breakthrough *Resident Evil 4*, all the way into the recent years, updating old entries and spawning new, first-person titles *Biohazard* and *Village*. I could ramble for hours about the series' legacy, but that's a well-worn subject (I bet you could find a hundred essays that too begin with: "*Resident Evil* released in 1996, etc").

What's important is this: Many developers were looking to score some *Biohazard Bucks*.

Here's how the landscape looked: Knockoffs coming out included *Nightmare Creatures*, *Carrier*, and *Deep Fear*. Resident Evil's influence was deeply palpable, and fans of survival horror had

never eaten so well before-- or since! Although zombies were still king, some games branched out to having players fight werewolves, or sexual repression monsters, or dinosaurs, or the mitochondria. Safe to say it was a really good time for horror.

While zombies have had many ups and downs in the gaming world, they've always been present. Recently, advancing technology has allowed video games to render hordes of enemies better than ever before. Zombie games slipping through the cracks of the 2010s have capitalized on that: Strange as it was, *Dead Island 2* came out just a couple years ago. As did *Dying Light 2*. As belated (And underperforming) as those games were, they illustrate how zombies still cling to life. *Their reputation, on the other hand...* Its decline can be attributed to the surplus of forgettable zombie shooters released over the years.

**But, do you know what monsters don't share that poor reputation, because they never really had their time in the gaming spotlight? VAMPIRES! BLEGH!**

## Fall of the Vampire

Okay, so some vampire games exist. If you dig around, you can actually find a fair few. Here are some vampire series I've played, watched, or otherwise know well: *Castlevania*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Bloodrayne*, *Legacy of Kain*, *Skyrim: Dawnguard*, *Redfall*, and *Vampire Rain* (This one is genuinely *insane*). These cover a good range of years and genres-- although none are capital-H horror, you'll notice. Compared to this handful, the list of zombie games I've played would stretch out for nearly a whole page.

Don't get me wrong, pitting two baddies against each other isn't my goal. The two monsters apply best to different genres, and that's thanks to their different mythologies: Zombies, with roots in Afro-Caribbean folklore, were reinvented in 1968 for *Night of the Living Dead*. In their new, Western iteration, they represented the horrors of consumerism and rapidly inflating global populations. But with our violence-oriented American Imagination, they quickly turned into target practice in our culture: They became excuses to mow down masses of people, reduced to sacks of meat that move and grunt. Everyone got into this new *Walking Dead* approach, because, well, it's pretty striking horror imagery. *And they are damn fun to shoot.*

The story of vampires isn't all that unlike zombies': They also had two main eras, reinvented by a great piece of modern fiction in 1897 (A bit older than 1968, but still modern). In old European myths they actually resembled zombies, being undead corpses which ate and ate and ate till bursting with blood. *Dracula* took a wild leap in mythos by painting them as psychosexual wizards which could represent homosexuality, disease, repression, and much more. Now that I'm thinking about it, it's kind of a miracle this depiction caught on as strongly as it did.

**But over the long years, vampires have been "defanged."**

Consider how some of those vampire games I mentioned previously portray their monsters: In the *Legacy of Kain* and *Bloodrayne* series, players take control of the vampire to play as semi-typical action-RPG characters. Double jumps and weapons and that sort of thing. While I don't

mean to say these games have no respect for the vampire mythology (Sometimes they still suck blood at least), many of the vampiric themes appear to be absent. Bloodrayne still made its vampire hero sexual in nature, but in more of an early 2000s Lara Croft way. No thanks! I like my vampires weird and old.

Two of the other titles, Redfall and Vampire Rain, have portrayals which don't just feel uninspired from vampire myths-- They actively go and turn their enemies into something they're not. They're just hordes of hurtboxes to shoot at, attacking you in great numbers, and infected with vampire-diseases. These iterations of the monster are not only defanged-- they are hardly recognizable as vampires. *But without all of their iconic themes, powers, and mysteries, why even use the "V" word?*

I've never played Vampire: The Masquerade- Bloodlines (An impressively long title!) but I do appreciate its respect for the monsters. Being a heavily narrative-based RPG, it fleshes out its many vampire characters in a nearly literary way. Of course, it does help when you have an expansive, pre-existing TTRPG to build off of. Also, much credit to this game for making some of its vampires hot, and some of them weird and old. And many of them horny. That's just how Bram St(r)oker would've wanted it.

Of course, the gothic horror *Resident Evil Village* also takes some notes from vampire folklore as well. The blood-sucking, castle-dwelling, man-thing-killing Dimitrescu family is unequivocally vampire coded. But, because it's Resident Evil, they're also genetic hybrids between humans and insects that can transform into giant monsters. So, well, I wouldn't say it's the MOST faithful representation (Although they definitely got the vampire sexy factor down). I'm also wary of calling it a "vampire game" because the Dimitrescus are just one fourth of the game's enemies. It's as much a "vampire game" as it is a "baby game," iykyk.

**Before we continue, take a moment to ponder this: Can vampires be scary? Has a vampire even personally scared you?**

I would say yes to both. If you said otherwise, I can't blame you... Much of the scariest vampire stuff is out of popular discussions. Some of it is also unorthodox, like the grim *Near Dark*, and *30 Days of Night*. The Stephen King *Salem's Lot* TV adaptation thoroughly scared a young Jude, but in the approachable way which King is so gifted for. This show's vampire is mighty scary, (What with glowing eyes and big teeth) but is relegated to a handful of "Boo!" scenes and doesn't get much characterization. For all my life, Mr. Barlow was so associated with this creepy, baldheaded image. But if you asked a *Salem's Lot* reader what they thought of him, you'd receive a totally different answer.

Mr. Barlow has a very different presence in the book, getting more screen time (Page time?) and more characterization. He even talks! That's probably unsurprising, as it highlights one of the undeniable truths about vampires: Their horror is less visual than it is conceptual and thematic. Bram Stoker created the modern vampire for his novel *Dracula*, and no movie, show, or video

game has ever matched the horrific atmosphere of his writing. Call me old-fashioned, but I really think they're at their best in books.

Many things about vampires scare me, and all of them are scarier in word than image: Their manipulation. Their animalism. Their extraction of blood. Their hypnotism and otherworldly magic. Their undeath. And most importantly, their olde barbarism. Dracula was reportedly conceived from Vlad the Impaler and other ancient tyrants. With centuries of extended life, the Dracula Stoker writes is like an old, bitter warmonger who never got over his ancient bloodthirst. One can only picture what barbaric acts he committed in his prime. I can just imagine the blood-curdling stench of him. Like a decaying corpse, engorged on virgin blood and bathed in dirt. The concept just makes my skin crawl.

**With the potential for scares, isn't it odd there hasn't been a mainstream v-horror game? Maybe the public just isn't ready for that... But I am.**

## The Vampiric Ideal

If you'll allow me, I'm going to conduct a little NakeyJakey-esque hypothetical game exercise. *The concept:* My ideal vampire horror game, utilizing the monster as a stalking threat. The Xenomorph and original Nemesis are some of my favorite horror game stalkers, and I'd love a similar take on a vampire. *The setting:* A fog-choked, gothic London with towering spires, shadowy alleys, and damp cobblestones not unlike *Bloodborne's* Yharnam. The inspiration: Classic survival horror, along the likes of RE 1 through 3 and Silent Hill.

Your enemy is THE Vampire, with a little inspiration from the monster's many iterations. Like the boiled-down concept of a vampire: Dark, foreboding, ghastly. The naked and squirmy Nosferatu-style vampires are especially terrifying to me. This ideal enemy could be a constantly following force to induce maximum tension. While I do love the big scary Nemesis, I think his size would be inappropriate for this character-- A human-sized opponent would be best. But most importantly, this creature should be plain old scary.

To highlight the animalistic aspect of vampire legends, it should be hard to predict. Shrouded in shadow and mist, the vampire might remain unnoticed until it's too late. To add to the unpredictability factor there could be different "moods," resulting in the vampire sometimes being a persistent, doggish threat, or a quiet and squirrely one (Not unlike the Xenomorphs "Two Brain" design, albeit more scripted).

I've always appreciated survival horror games which take a more directed, level-based approach. *Siren's* Link Navigator and the chronological days of *Parasite Eve* are especially cool. Bringing them to this project also would make a good fit: Remember that *Dracula* was semi-epistolary, with chapters dated to show the chronological timeline of the count's reign. A day-by-day storytelling approach also benefits a tighter story. I dig it.

**Resident Evil 1 Remake is consistently the tensest game I've ever played.**

It holds me at knife's edge and demands my damndest. The tight design is key, as the game tracks your progress in the mansion and consistently throws you new hurdles. One design choice I adore is the use of zombies not as enemies, but obstacles. It's like that game from P.E. where you'd have to run by people standing in place without getting tagged. Did anyone else do that? Idk, but the game rewards crafty movement and outsmarting problems over mowing down zombies-- In fact, it discourages that. This was such a brilliant choice that many (If not most) horror games still use enemies as obstacles.

Another element of the game that'd become a hallmark for Resident Evil going forward is the two-character approach. Chris and Jill have slightly diverging playstyles and experiences, while also getting different stories. It's such a cool narrative device, and also allows you to see a fuller world from multiple perspectives. *So why not borrow it for this idealized game?* Having male and female protagonists could also play into the role sex and gender have in classic vampire stories.

But a horror game protagonist is only as effective as her antagonist. My vision for The Vampire is cloaked in black, maybe shedding it to reveal its decrepit old body. Experimenting with how vampiric powers could interact with the tropes of the genre sounds amazingly fun. For instance, being grabbed by him could lead you to lose some of your blood, of which there's a finite quantity (Duh). As you begin to lose it, you wane in strength and ability. But in the spirit of the classic survival horror trope "Hinder yourself for benefits," ingesting a blood-poison could cause harm to him after being caught.

Dogs are another staple of survival horror, especially in the "Big Two" series: Resident Evil and Silent Hill. Dracula's ability to transform into a dog is something of a no-brainer for this character IMO. In RE Remake, when you are bitten by a dog, you have to waggle your character around until you're free. This mechanic is divisive (Not unlike button mashing), but you can't argue that it heightens the state of panic.

Running down that first floor "L" hallway from the dogs, I've had many experiences which go like this: I make it all the way to the door into the lobby, *safety*, and then, just before I open it, there's a mutt chewing on my leg and I jump out of my seat and I have to furiously shake my fucking joystick around until its practically gonna fall off and then a *second* dog catches up and it makes me want to cry because I haven't saved in like two hours. Ugh.

Anyways this mechanic is awesome. I would want it in my vampire game.

**Also on the topic of scary personal experiences, here's a story from a couple of years ago. I promise it's relevant!**

It was a quiet, early springtime-- That transition between seasons when the sun stops going down at four o'clock, but it's still cold enough to see your breath. People only shuffled around outside when it was absolutely necessary, as there were no pleasures to be had under that cold sky. Maybe that's why, when I inquired if any of my friends wanted to see a movie, the overwhelming answer was "In this weather?"

So in the evening, just after dinner, I set off alone downtown. Hindsight Jude knows that I should've taken a car. And I would've taken mine if I had company, but I'm perfectly fine with self-imposed struggle. The walk was nigh half an hour across my mid-sized town's most urban streets. The sun still felt young when I departed.

After leaving the theater, it was a different story. Of course the sun went down-- I had expected that-- But to be honest I didn't foresee the darkness. The movie must've been three hours, so it was around ten o'clock. Or, so I think. You couldn't tell out in the parking lot, under that sky so bereft of light. And you couldn't tell on the sidewalk, so empty of people. You couldn't even tell when crossing the street, abandoned of cars.

### **No, you couldn't tell if it was 10 PM or 3 in the morning.**

I really must emphasize it-- *There was no one out.* The still air was absent of sound. My town isn't remotely scary, but the walk home is always unnerving when performed alone in the dark (Like running to bed after shutting the lamp off). There were many looks over the shoulder, many street crossings when I got a thought of a glimpse of a figure ahead of me... *Nonetheless, I didn't expect that my fears would actually manifest.*

I took a strange route which put me by a tall, brown brick church with looming spires. It was so dark I could hardly see the top. Approaching the place, I recognized its long courtyard-garden which I had passed by before. It wasn't fenced in, even though it was directly on the street (Ripe for vandalism). Walking past the garden, I suddenly heard something-- It was the rustling of bushes, like wind in treetops. Except, it was a windless night-- And the bushes were about ten feet to my right. While a weird occurrence, it wasn't enough to make me stop. No, what made me stop was the echoing rattle of chains-- I've never walked that way after dark again.

To this day, I have no clue what I heard. Passing by the church since then, I've examined the garden, and it certainly holds no chains. No fences, and no prisoners. But I remember the trembling chains so clearly, as if they were being dragged across the ground. The image conjured in my head was a man tied in chains, groveling around in the garden. Or the village leper, bound with a chain 'round his neck to signal everyone "Stay away!" Nonetheless, it's still something which keeps me up at night. Just wondering.

### **Sounds can make the mundane terrifying, communicating so much to players and heightening suspense.**

They serve horror especially well, creating atmosphere and tension to string players along. They can make you think something's there when there's really nothing, or make you think there's nothing when there's really something there. A good survival horror game depends on good sounds, and the atmosphere of a windy night on damp cobble streets is exactly what I'd want for my ideal v-horror game.

## What's Real

As you've surely realized, my perfect vampire game probably couldn't exist. *An ideal is just an ideal, it doesn't mean it should be real.* The games I love most are those ones which surprise me. During the writing process for this essay, I learned about many more vampire games which surprised me-- Did you know that Hideo Kojima made a vampire game in which you use real, actual sunlight? Or that there's an anime soulslike which is explicitly about vampires? Or that many of the biggest open world games of late (RDR2, Skyrim, The Witcher 3 and more) include some nod to the creature? Maybe you did, or maybe you didn't!

*Vampires do love sticking to the shadows after all... Perhaps that's why I have yet to find my perfect v-horror game.*

While it may be a fool's errand to hold out for that classic vampire survival horror, there's plenty of good vampiric things to consume already. If you enjoyed the idea I pitched, you really must try *Resident Evil Remake*. It's consistently on sale and has aged like fine wine over 20+ years. If you like the themes and aesthetics of vampires, *Bloodborne* is also a great choice. It never uses the "V" word, but pays much homage to the legend.

Vampire cinema is in no short supply, with my favorites being *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), *Nosferatu the Vampyre*, and its recent adaptation. In terms of literature, I enjoyed GRRM's *Fevre Dream*, and probably the earliest queer take on the myth, *Carmilla* (1872).

Oh, and *Dracula* too.

Notice how old most of those things are? They don't make vampire stories like they used to. Hell, they hardly make original vampire stories at all. Most are in books, familiar territory for the creatures. Less so, in movies. And in video games, even less. The reasons for this scarcity I can't precisely articulate, but I suspect the zombie craze had something to do with it. And the middling-quality of vampire games which do exist is hard to ignore. Besides, why not leave vampires in that territory which so fits their legends? It's not so often that a creature finds a medium which fits it so perfectly!

**Written word will never die, and the vampiric myth too will continue to evolve many years into the future-- Like Dracula, twisted in form through its prolonged life, but never losing that olde, unholy bloodthirst.**

Thanks for reading all this. No references-- But follow this link if you want a small glimpse of *Resident Evil 1*'s horror in all its bloody glory: [https://youtu.be/Stdg\\_gCnoBM](https://youtu.be/Stdg_gCnoBM)