

GameDiscoverCo Q&A - answers by Will Porter (creative director, Project Zomboid.)

Q: Since you went co-op, do you get a sense of what the main 'continuing sales' drive is? Is it simply because you get more streams because more people like playing the game co-op? Do you feel like there are new streamers you keep unlocking or are there just a set of real popular diehards? Have particular new game features had a strong hook?

This is a very complex picture really. The truth is that we have a wide network of different reasons that people continue to buy the game. As such, the answer to this question will be long and involved!

It should be mentioned though that, overall, the continued trend doesn't come as a huge surprise to us – as in truth it was also present in the eight years that built up to the release of Build 41 at the end of 2021.

That version hit the heights as we had lots of different long-in-dev elements come together at once (better MP, full animation and models revamp, in-game player map etc) but even before then we had a steady and unfaltering amount of sales that we called 'the drip'. Steam sales were clearly where the big influxes of income came in, but 'the drip' was what gave us faith that interest was steady, robust and unlikely to fade.

Anyway, here's some thoughts on what causes the drip – although I guess now it should be retermed as 'the flow'.

- Play it your way.

We are, overall, a sandbox game – and since the very beginning we have put literally everything we can in terms of both gameplay and game option on a toggle.

If people don't like something they can turn it off, and if people get bored they can change the world to something that feels a little different or more challenging.

We have game modes to guide new players, showing the ways we feel the majority of players would probably enjoy, but to the smallest or largest detail we are very much 'Choose Your Own Zombie Survival Adventure'. This clearly is of great appeal to the zombie survival audience, within which are a range of very specific personal tastes. So we cater for a wide slice of a very passionate part of gaming/horror.

- Mods.

The second part of the above is our amazing mod scene. The Project Zomboid workshop is vast. If we haven't catered for what a section of our audience wants to change up the game with, then you can guarantee that a modder will have. This widens our appeal.

Mods convert our game from being finite, if sandbox, authored content and turn it into a platform amongst itself. They create micro communities, and also bursts of fantastic and

unexpected excitement when, say, the amazing recent horse mod comes out – or anything made by this amazing chap called Slayer appears who's a total mod magician.

Modding limits any exhaustion our players might feel with the game itself, and as such moddability and accessibility is a big part of what we do. It is, in effect, a core game feature in-and-of-itself that takes time, continuing resources and tech support/QA bandwidth.

The payoff to this is the vibrant and amazing mod community we have, long term replayability for players, inspiration for the team, as well as surfacing a great talent pool for recruiting. About half the team at this point, I'd say, are ex-modders.

This all said, however, through Build 42 development it has become ever more apparent where we could, should and must provide our modding community with added support and resources. A big part of a massive reorganisation we've had on the team over the past year or has focussed on how to improve the modder's lot once B42 is out, and then in the builds beyond.

- Age agnostic

We always assumed that PZ was an oldie's game – which I guess in the modern parlance would be 'a game for uncs'. The look, the tone and the gameplay is as much Ultima Online, The Sims 1 and X-Com as anything else – but for whatever reason generations younger than us keep picking us up, hanging out with their friends in it (this is a big part of it) and streaming.

We also see a lot of parents who've been with us since the beginning playing with their kids, husbands and wives surviving together etc. There's quite a lot of wholesome going on if you peer beneath the surface of the death and fighting.

- People who (one assumes) play nothing else but Project Zomboid.

Once upon a time players who'd played 1000 hours would be an amazing curio passed around the team. Now it feels like the majority of people who directly talk to us with warranted praise, warranted criticism and (lots of) warranted bug reports have between 1000 and 5000 hours in-game.

I personally have never played a game for more than 150 or so hours, so my mind is perma-boggled by this. When you're looking at our unwavering CCUs then folk like these take up a sizable chunk I'd wager.

- Watchability

Project Zomboid content is incredibly legible as a piece of watchable and consumable media. There is very little abstraction or cost of entry for viewers, and it can be easily narrated over by Youtubers and streamers.

Beyond zombie hordes, there's spread of fire, sickness, flashlights running out of batteries, vehicles running out of gas all at critical moments are all easily super relatable. Permadeath raises the stakes making zombie near misses, falling/jumping from second floors, and vehicle crashes immediate tension spikes.

The game's long progression continues to add to this, giving the character name weight in the story generated from long running playthroughs – then when this is compounded with multiplayer, social betrayal and cooperation and you have an enticing mix for content creators. All of this generates very anecdote-worthy situations and highly personalized stories, which in turn make for great social talking points.

- We're cheap

From the very beginning in 2011, when we were available for five pounds, we have very deliberately made Project Zomboid cheaper than what it's actually worth. We are good value for money. In terms of hours/investment then for most players Project Zomboid is an amazing deal – and we like it that way.

It makes people feel good about their purchase and the fun they're having, and it makes them far more likely to recommend us to their friends. In fact, another familiar refrain is that of players who have bought us for their friends so they can play together. Then those friends buy it for other friends and so on, and so on.

In general I think people see our game priced \$20 or so, and then see folks talking about it who have hundreds or thousands of hours playing. Compared to a \$70 title with an 8 hour campaign that comes out once a year; then it's easy for a gamer of any stripe to see that as value for their hard-earned money.

Overall, I also think it's an easy trap for many game developers and publishers to come to game pricing through their own personal lens – whether that's the economy of the place they live, the age in life they're at, or simply the amount of money that's in their own personal pocket. By deliberately pricing ourselves below the actual physical 'worth' of the game, we appeal to a wider global group of people by very definition – and a lot of players appreciate it too.

They also appreciate that we don't have a history of microtransactions, pay-to-win, spurious DLC and such. People know when they are being nickel-and-dimed and they don't like it, so knowing that they can plunk down a twenty and be sure to get their value out of a title (and refund if they need to) makes them more likely to try it out, especially when put up against something they suspect might push them into a subscription or constantly badger them for more.

On top of this, we are a big word-of-mouth game. While it's a feeling of mine vs. an actual fact, the fact that we have never marketed or advertised Project Zomboid gives people a sense of discovery and engagement that gives purchasers a puff of endorphins too. We

undeniably have some edges we need to smoothen out, and still some ambitious goals ahead, but there's also not much else quite like Project Zomboid on the market.

Players also understand that when they buy into Project Zomboid they are buying into something that continues to evolve over time, and that helps the player and communities invest in the game long-term.

Oh, and finally finally: we are lucky in that many of the rules of the present day games industry do not apply to us. You have to remember that we began in 2011 – Project Zomboid is positively Jurassic.

I would be interested to know whether your own experience reflects this Simon, but I feel games born in earlier Steam eras have benefitted from slower discovery cycles, a stronger forum and community culture, and less saturation. We have noticed that older games like us have had more opportunity over time to accumulate long-term social capital, and mod ecosystems.

We still benefit from how it was in the past, and are buffeted by the same winds that carried the game in less crowded and more optimistic times. If we were new on the circuit today, it would perhaps be a very different story.

Q: You seem to have (from my understanding!) gone VERY chunky with the major update you're working on, rather than shipping it piecemeal. Can you explain both the pros and cons of that? Though I was looking at patch videos - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GulL15a5odQ> - and you are putting a TON of granular updates into the beta of course.

After Build 41 was such a long-in-dev success I suppose it was natural to continue in that vein, although truth be told Build 42 has taken longer than we would have liked – and certainly longer than players would have liked. That said the content overall is pretty good, and will be improved further post-release and in future builds.

To an extent the chunky releases have been more by necessity, as that's how we had built ourselves and we hadn't done the work required to restructure the game to facilitate smaller, more incremental, stable updates.

This is something, now that we have a larger development team and restructured leadership, that are in the process of addressing. The team has changed a lot during the course of Build 42 (we have a new Design Director and Production Director, while our Technical Director and Art Director were also deservedly promoted from the ranks) and a lot of their conversation is currently revolving around how best to keep the community fed and watered post-42, while also catering for more blockbuster versions with hopefully lessened wait times.

The pros and cons are basically that it's a balancing act, and we've been swaying on the tightrope a few times, but the fresh troupe of acrobats are working out really well.

Q: What percentage of players are playing on Build 42 vs 41 right now? (in terms of hours played or numbers of players in any given week!)

Basically, nearly all of our very most visible players are on Build 42

https://www.reddit.com/r/projectzomboid/comments/1t78vqr/how_do_you_play_project_zomboid_when_playing_solo/ although there are some who prefer 41, and some who prefer 41's more stable set-up for saves/servers/mods as Unstable beta patches can be a danger to all three.

(Which is a big 'con' for our extended release and Unstable period – people's savegames are in constant danger, and modders are always playing catch-up.)

The beta take-up percentage has always generally been around 5%, and grew to around 8% when Build 42 MP came out at the tail end of last year – and now we sit anywhere between 10% and 20% of players on Unstable. This all said, the numbers fluctuate too wide from week to week to give an accurate reading. So please take this as an indicator rather than a statement of fact!

So that's the die-hards covered, and likewise the drivers of most online conversation. However there's still clearly a vast majority still on B41, who are generally the people we *don't* hear from. There are countless people who play PZ 'as is' without posting about it or checking the news about it, and legions more who have bought the game and will definitely be checking in with us when they notice something stirring. There will be many, many people who own Project Zomboid but don't have it installed, and won't be registered in our beta Steam back-end.

Q: What kind of structures of play do people have with the game? Is there a lot of serious roleplay, vs. messing around in voicechat? Just curious as to how you see people playing?

Just... a bit of everything really?

Everything about PZ makes it readily personalised to the zombie survival adventure that you want to go on – you can go action or you can go prepper-steath, you can play it in a forgiving landscape or in something akin to our NIGHTMARISH Extinction mode. You can use it as a base-decorating kit or you can be a looting nomad, you can use it as a dosshouse with your mates or you can do some ultra-serious roleplay with highly detailed characters and interactions.

Q: How are you trying to deal with the learning curve issues in the game? (Presuming you think you have them!)

PZ is a brick wall, but people love the feeling of colliding with it.

The time at which you are repeatedly dying and (very slowly) gaining a feeling of mastery over the game is often hailed by people in the community as their 'golden period' with PZ that they'd love to be able to experience again.

As such, while our tutorial could certainly do with some attention in future, the learning curve isn't something we're too concerned about beyond what we've done in Build 42 making our in-game Survivor's Guide more easily digestible and more explanatory.