It has been roughly six weeks since Valve Software released the first DLC for the Xbox 360/Windows PC's LEFT 4 DEAD 2 (titled THE PASSING), giving players a chance to experience the "Weekly Mutations." These are a new flavor of on-line game play added every Friday, and only available for a week at a time. The have proven pretty popular at the outset and provided great potential for replay value down the road, so I thought I'd share my thoughts about what has been put on the table to date.

Realism Versus (Invisible Survivors)

This first outing under the Mutation feature gives new definition to the phrase "out of sight, out of mind." Players slog through a versus battle with no knowledge of where their compadres are on the map once they go off screen, as the blue aural indicators have been disabled. In a realm where teamwork is more than encouraged, this gimmick truly proves crippling when survivors must split up to complete the "scavenge" challenge, or if someone's pinned down and needs a helping hand. Regardless, good headset chatter between a team of map-savvy players can overcome this device.

Follow the Liter

A variation on the “scavenge” mode, this Mutation only spawns one gas can at a time. Not terribly exciting, it just drags out the tediousness of filling the generator or car while adding dozens to the body count.

Bleed Out

This entry presented the first real challenge, as players start the campaign with a dwindling health bar, and only pills to provide temporary boosts. Med kits, defib units and adrenaline shots have all disappeared, leaving players on a constant run in between safe rooms with little (read: no) time to search for the usual beneficial sundries or deep entanglements with the Horde.

This Mutation was a lot of fun to play at first, as the lack of any real health creates a sort of frenzy that hinders your personally crafted method of play. It’s far too easy to lose sight of oncoming zombies, destination points, etc. when you’re frantically watching your health meter to perfectly time your pill-popping boosts. After a couple of run-throughs, though, Bleed Out becomes nothing but frustrating, as you realize there are no pills anywhere. In your normal campaigns, there are health kits, shots and pills aplenty. Bleed Out doesn’t simply replace these items; it renders them near-obsolete, so restocking your party of four becomes next to impossible.

Last Gnome on Earth (ran two weeks due to fan demand)

Anyone who has spent countless hours dragging Gnome Chompski through the Dark Carnival campaign to get the related achievement will have some familiarity with the nuisance that accompanies adding this fifth member to your party. At the onset of a campaign, you’re given the Gnome, and the group must carry him through each level. The player holding the Gnome cannot use weapons, and the Horde will swarm him or her like a pancake buffet after church. At least one player has to make it to the rescue vehicle with the Gnome to complete the level.

A variation on the original achievement, this Mutation is always a fun play, and adding the swarming element only increases the intensity. One drawback: You can’t throw the Gnome, as you could in the original Dark Carnival campaign. With the swarming, that could make for some

fun zombie-baiting bloodbaths.

Last Man Standing

Ever want to be Robert Neville? The first Mutation strictly for the single-player portion of the game, Last Man Standing pits one survivor against a campaign to fend for himself against the Horde. With every move calculated and every decision scrutinized, trudging through the Horde attacks by yourself proves an extremely daunting task. Luckily, you don't have to ration any health or supplies, but the Specials take some extra handling, as you have no backup to free you from their weapon-inhibiting attacks.

This Mutation isn't without its charm, but ultimately, the aggravation of not having backup makes it a less than enjoyable challenge. L4D2 has always been about teamwork, and Last Man Standing strips the game of this calling card—though much like drinking alone, it is fun seeing just how long you can last.

Chainsaw Massacre

By far the absolute goriest and most entertaining Mutation yet. Chainsaw Massacre pits the survivors against the Horde in a campaign armed with nothing but the titular weapons (with magical infinite gasoline). Truthfully, players could refuse to pick up a saw at the start, keeping their default pistol and possibly snagging one of their comrades'…but who would want to? Anyone familiar with the flesh-crazed Horde knows they bum-rush you like a $20 iPad on Black Friday. Hold down the trigger and watch the blood and body parts fly as their blitz is stopped 2 feet short by the whirring blade. Back yourself into a corner so they can only attack head-on, and your screen will literally be painted in splatter. Visibility becomes an afterthought, and the survivors don't seem to mind too much, as shouts of "Time to die, my pretties" and "Die, you f**ks" echo after laying waste to the rushing infected onslaught.

Chainsaw Massacre does have its drawbacks, but those fall quietly under the shadow of the gas-powered motor and its blood-spewing end result. This Mutation is best played with three living warm-blooded amigos, as the AI compadres work their saws like monkeys trying to eat with flatware. Instead of laying down on the throttle, they hack at the Horde with short bursts of buzz, generally causing them to lag behind and forcing you to do the dirty work. Ultimately, this

results in you getting caught up with a Special and no one coming to your rescue.

The Specials present their own array of problems, as several either move quick, hit hard or attack from afar, presenting more work than a melee weapon can conquer. The Tanks, for example, require solid teamwork to get all four blades implanted before the big boy gets a swing at anyone. The close-quarters combat also presents a multitude of friendly-fire mishaps, best avoided by active communication.

I hope Valve continues to churn out these Mutations with this level of variety on a weekly basis, and I'm sure I'm not the lone zombie-hunter wanting Chainsaw Massacre to become a permanent mode of game play. If you haven't tried, hit up Xbox LIVE or Steam and give these Mutations a whirl. Just be sure to bring a couple of friends.

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