

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

Volume 3, Issue 7 - July 2016



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KAITLIN TREMBLAY • SARAH STANG • DOMINIC PRESTON • MATT SAYER**



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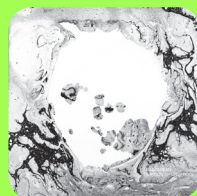
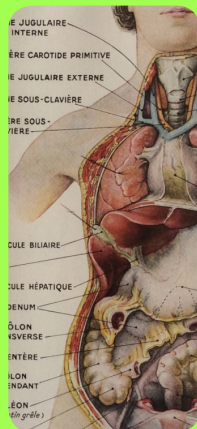
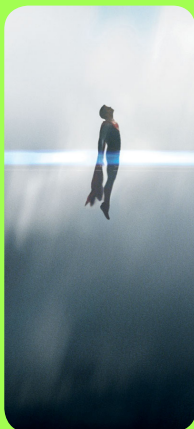
Monthly

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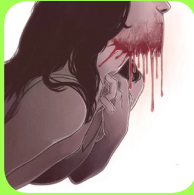
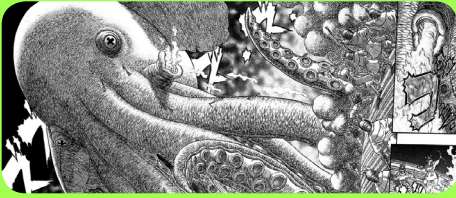
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{ Thoughts }



Summer Reading

This year is turning into a banner one for horror novels, which is strange, because horror novels tend to not be very good at scaring people.

Yeah, yeah, you love Stephen King, I know, but hear me out.

When Edgar Allen Poe reviewed Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection *Twice-Told Tales*, he laid out his ideas about the short story, a bit of literary theory that gets drilled into every high school student's head. Namely, that the point of the short story is "unity of effect." Every word the writer chooses must contribute to the delivery of a preconceived emotional payload. Poe believed the short story is the perfect literary form primarily because the constraint of its length forces writers to be concise. In other words, there's no room for bullshit.

This makes short stories a particularly effective form for horror, a fact Poe proved many times. The feelings we seek out in horror – dread, disquiet, the numinous – are fleeting sensations. The longer such things confront us, the

One of those moments in history that always seemed to me like a kind of cosmic fan fiction, like Nikola Tesla and Mark Twain being friends.

more we acclimate. No matter how dark the terror, the dawn eventually drives it away.

Therefore, the horror short story functions as a surgical strike, punching through our built-up tolerance and making its impact before the unease dissipates from exposure.

Taking both his thoughts on the short story and his body of work, Poe makes a case that horror is at its best at under 7,500 words. This lines up with my personal experience – my favorite horror stories are all short.

Horror novels tend to disappoint because a story can't stay tightly coiled over the course of 300 pages. This is a function of medium – novels aren't built for scares, the same way TV shows aren't built for subtlety and movies struggle with intricate plots. They're long, usually requiring several sittings. They meander. They digress. That's why I love novels – they have all that extra headroom – but fear dissipates in there, like an apartment air conditioner trying to cool off a warehouse.

That's why these novels (and one novella) are so surprising: they manage to cool the warehouse. You should read them right now so we can talk about them.

Experimental Film, by Gemma Files

Experimental Film is a miracle of structure. It is a novel written by a former film historian with a son who is on the autism spectrum, about a former film historian whose son is on the autism spectrum who discovers an early Canadian film pioneer whose son was on the autism spectrum. It involves a supernatural entity that comes with the glaring heat of the noonday sun, that is obsessed with mirrors, that can strike a person blind, that desires to be *seen*. What a perfect mix of themes for a novel about film and self-reflection, no? Ultimately, Files' real life experiences give the proceedings a powerfully frank emotional weight that forms up the core of the novel. More than anything, the protagonist struggles with her role as a mother - the specter that haunts her is very much her maternal fears and inadequacies given deadly form. *Experimental Film* is an elaborate machine constructed to instill within the reader those complicated emotions.

Recommended for: film buffs, parents, Canadians

This is probably built directly in to our DNA – the early humans who could shake off fear to act decisively probably had a better survival rate than those ruled by fear.

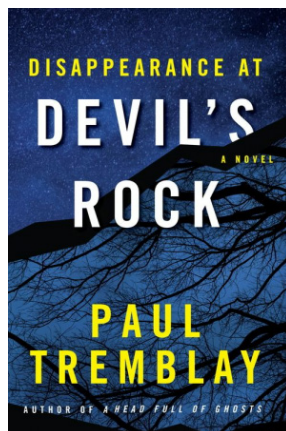
A brief note: I am friendly with most of the writers I discuss here, which means if they write something I don't like, in turn, I am probably not going to write about how much it sucks. But then, I don't often bother writing about things I think suck anyway. If you think this is biased, fair enough.



Disappearance at Devil's Rock, by Paul Tremblay

Tremblay is a writer preoccupied with the aftermaths of traumatic events. *Disappearance at Devil's Rock* examines the effects of a teenage boy's strange disappearance on his mother, his sister, his friends and his community. While those effects are sometimes harrowing and play on paternal fears – *where is my kid and what kind of trouble is he getting into?* – the real heart of the book is exhaustion. Worry, tears, lack of sleep, alcohol, people's concern – you name it, it wears down these characters. Sometimes they are zombie-like. Sometimes they get bursts of manic energy. Always, they weigh their perceived lack of action against the fact that there is nothing to do but wait. It's gut-wrenching stuff, rooted in uncertainty – not just for the stories central mystery, but for the true, secret lives of our loved ones.

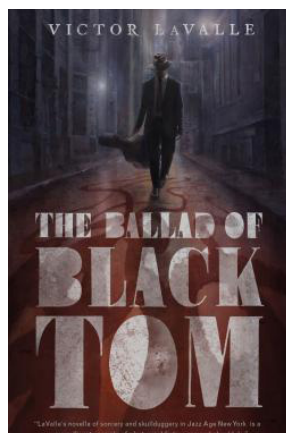
Recommended for: parents who live near woods, people who thought *Stranger Things* wasn't depressing enough



The Ballad of Black Tom, by Victor LaValle

The novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* is a retelling of H. P. Lovecraft's story "The Horror at Red Hook" – arguably his most repellantly racist piece of fiction – from the perspective of a black man (both the protagonist, and LaValle himself). In many ways, it is a reclamation, a way for LaValle to square his love of Lovecraft's work with his racism. He takes themes used by Lovecraft – cosmic meaninglessness, helplessness, the incomprehensible – and repurposes them. The vast monster here isn't some creature under the ocean, it is a cop, a rich white man, the looks you get on a train going through a white neighborhood. Through cosmic horror, LaValle conveys something like the experience of living in a racist society. It hits with the same sick angry despair that came with Ferguson, which comes with every news story about black people being shot, beaten or otherwise mistreated by police.

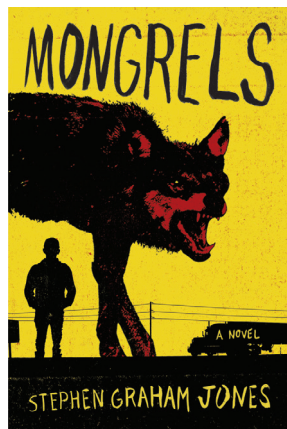
Recommended for: Anyone who says "Yea, but..." when someone points out that Lovecraft was a virulent racist



Mongrels, by Stephen Graham Jones

Mongrels is about a lot of things – life as an outsider, poverty, shitty cars. It is also about werewolves. *Mongrels* is the best werewolf novel I have read. Jones re-imagines the mythology so casually and so brilliantly, it is borderline infuriating (see Jones's explanation for why werewolves don't wear pantyhose or spandex). The unnamed narrator is a boy in the care of his aunt and uncle, who happen to be werewolves. He might be a werewolf, too, but there's no way to know until his first transformation in his teens. Told as an episodic travelogue (werewolves don't stay in one place too long), the novel is a coming of age story and an oral history of werewolf lore. The boy collects stories – his aunt and uncle's, his late grandfather's, the ones he makes up himself – and there's no telling what's true and what's bullshit. Which, come to think of it, is the very definition of growing up.

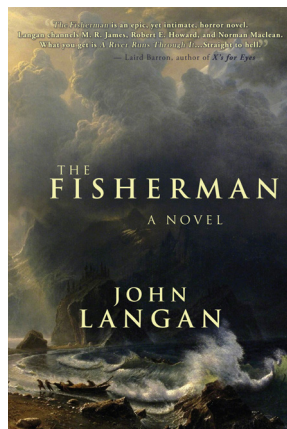
Recommended for: werewolf fans, anyone who was an awkward teenager



The Fisherman, by John Langan

I don't honestly know where to start with *The Fisherman*. I had no expectations going in, other than I enjoy Langan's short work and had trouble with his previous novel. I wound up reading *The Fisherman* essentially in a single sitting – I couldn't stop because it felt as though it was literally being told *to me* by the narrator. It is the tale of a particular fishing creek in upstate New York, how it came to be and of the strange things that happen there. The book slips effortlessly from the mundane to the staggeringly cosmic. Perhaps most surprising is that Langan deals with his supernatural elements with a matter-of-factness that ends up being far more disturbing than hiding behind exhortations of indescribability. I am loathe to say more, except that *The Fisherman* is one of the most compelling books I've read in several years.

Recommended for: fishermen, naturally



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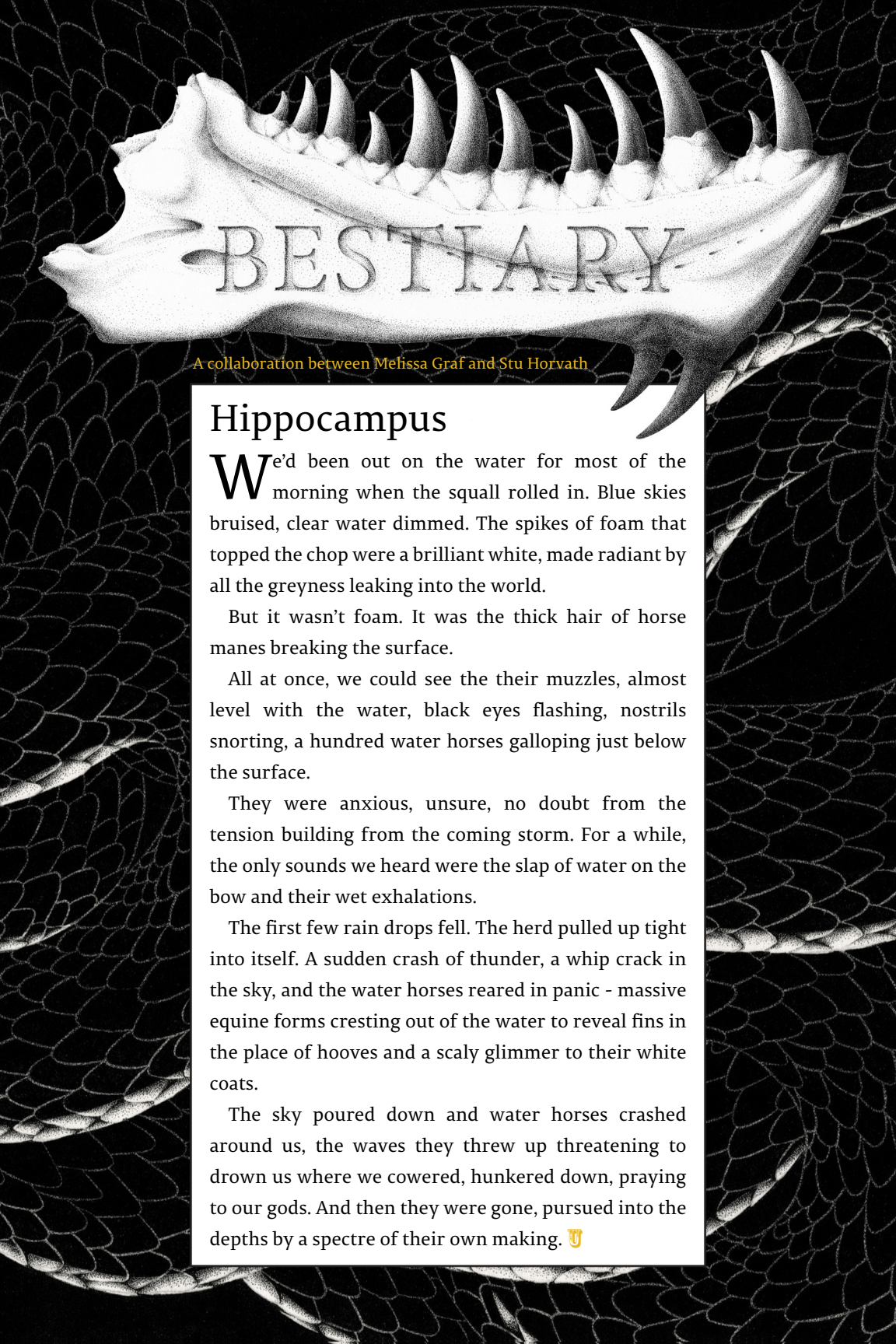
There. Now you have the rest of your summer reading. Well, after you read the rest of this month's issue!

The theme this month is body horror, so don't read it while eating your lunch. We're still releasing a bit later in the month than I'd like, but we're back to full strength with the return of Bestiary, Throwing the First Brick and Unsolvable.

That's it. There is a lot of extra space on this page, so enjoy the vintage Dragon Magazine cover I put in to fill it up. See you in August!

Stu Horvath
Jersey City, New Jersey
July 28, 2016





BESTIARY

A collaboration between Melissa Graf and Stu Horvath

Hippocampus


We'd been out on the water for most of the morning when the squall rolled in. Blue skies bruised, clear water dimmed. The spikes of foam that topped the chop were a brilliant white, made radiant by all the greyness leaking into the world.

But it wasn't foam. It was the thick hair of horse manes breaking the surface.

All at once, we could see the their muzzles, almost level with the water, black eyes flashing, nostrils snorting, a hundred water horses galloping just below the surface.

They were anxious, unsure, no doubt from the tension building from the coming storm. For a while, the only sounds we heard were the slap of water on the bow and their wet exhalations.

The first few rain drops fell. The herd pulled up tight into itself. A sudden crash of thunder, a whip crack in the sky, and the water horses reared in panic - massive equine forms cresting out of the water to reveal fins in the place of hooves and a scaly glimmer to their white coats.

The sky poured down and water horses crashed around us, the waves they threw up threatening to drown us where we cowered, hunkered down, praying to our gods. And then they were gone, pursued into the depths by a spectre of their own making. 





In Defense of the Movie Trailer Reaction Video

A few months ago, my friend Jeff showed me this [YouTube video](#). The video – by ralphthemoviemaker, titled “BATMAN V SUPERMAN - FINAL TRAILER REACTION!!” – is a satirical take on a phenomenon I was only vaguely aware of: the YouTube Movie Trailer Reaction Video.

Of course, there are YouTubers who film themselves or their friends reacting live to seeing, hearing or touching something for the first time. “Two Girls, One Cup” react vids were ubiquitous, and later there were the more polished Kids React (or Old People React) clips, where children (or the elderly) would be introduced to various bits of old or new technology, music, what have you, and hilarity would ensue – or otherwise; there’s a particularly poignant clip of old folks watching David Bowie’s “Lazarus” that sprung up shortly after his death earlier this year. More recently, *gay man sees a vagina for the first time* and *lesbian touches a penis* spun through a social media cycle or two, too.

So reacting live to movie trailers was inevitable. It's a trend [ralphthemoviemaker](#) hilariously skewers, turning his review from an ostensible exercise in restraint into a rant over the futility of filming yourself watching a trailer for yet another dumb comic book flick; he had me hook, line and sinker. He makes a solid point – it's a stupid trailer for a stupid movie, and don't you have anything better to do, perhaps something more creative or productive than to make or watch reactions to it? Even making your own dumb comic book movie would be a great leap forward – while expertly lambasting a film I know I would hate, so I was content to laugh out loud and think mean, judgmental thoughts.

Then the new Radiohead album, *A Moon Shaped Pool*, came out. I had it on repeat for at least a solid month. Soon, just listening to it wasn't enough anymore. I wanted to read analysis of the lyrics on Genius, peruse reviews across the Internet, post about it on Facebook and write columns [like this one](#) for Unwinnable.



The day Radiohead's *Kid A* was released – Oct. 2, 2000 – I picked up my little sister Becca at the bus stop and we drove around the neighborhood listening to it, sharing the electricity of those opening notes of “Everything In Its Right Place,” the haunted, cyborg voice in the title track singing of heads on sticks, the sharp synth samples of “Idioteque” underscoring the surreality of the coming doom, the harps and angel choir that can't lift the pain of believing those little white lies of “Motion Picture Soundtrack.” Sixteen years later, *Kid A* ranks among the best records of my lifetime, but even after countless listens over multiple devices and cars and homes and circumstances, there are times I find myself right back in that moment, driving in circles on that October afternoon, feeling that same awe.

So I went back to YouTube. I started with a few traditional reviews of *A Moon Shaped Pool*, which were lackluster. Then I stumbled across [this](#).

“Daydreaming” is a brilliant, slow-building, brooding track on an album that keeps to that basic theme throughout – a summer anthem it is not. And the dude loves the song. I watched him get blown away by the progressions – and even play air-piano as he listens, and asks, awestruck, “Why did they do that?! Wow.” – and my face cracked into a smile.

This guy gets it. Not only that, *he gets it like I get it*.

I don’t take music-immersion car rides with my little sister anymore – we now have four young sons between us, to start with – and even though the Wife of the Year is a Radiohead fan, it was hard to find the right moment to play the new “True Love Waits” for her. I tend to put too much pressure on the moment. Alas, I convinced myself, when I finally do play it for her, it won’t be enough for me; in this case, I was glad to be wrong, but often the geekier bits of my life have been a series of desperate and unrealistic attempts to share, to connect – some of them successful, most of them not.

That’s when I put two and two together. Even if I find *ralphthemoviemaker*’s cynicism so appealing – even if I laugh along at the low-hanging-fruit ridiculousness of it all – there is value to the shared experience.

So what if I don’t give two shits about comic book movies or comic book movie trailers or comic book movie trailer reviews? It’s good that they’re out there, seeking someone, just as it was good that a parody of them found me. In a lifetime of searching for the right connections, it’s enough to know that the YouTube Movie Trailer Reaction Video, for all its obvious faults, is somebody else’s place to find them. 🍷





Artificial Dreams

I'm facing a bit of a conundrum in *The Talos Principle*. I've played enough of the game to have unlocked the three main environments and reached the point where I'm acquiring red tetraminos to unlock the cathedral door in the World C hub and, it is implied, join Elohim as a reward for a virtuous choice in favor of obedience and purpose fulfilled. Alternatively, I can use the tetraminos to ascend a forbidden tower, which may hold the truth linking the fragmented archives of an attempt by scientists facing human extinction to create an artificial intelligence and the mechanical avatar I've been directing.

This choice, however, between obedience and rebellion, tower or garden, is not the conundrum confronting me. Right now, somewhere before the end of these few hundred words, I am going to have to decide whether to cheat. Will I remain in ignorance, resolving to continue in the nebulous future to collect tetraminos and complete the game on its own terms in my own time, or will

The Talos Principle
2014

System(s):

PC

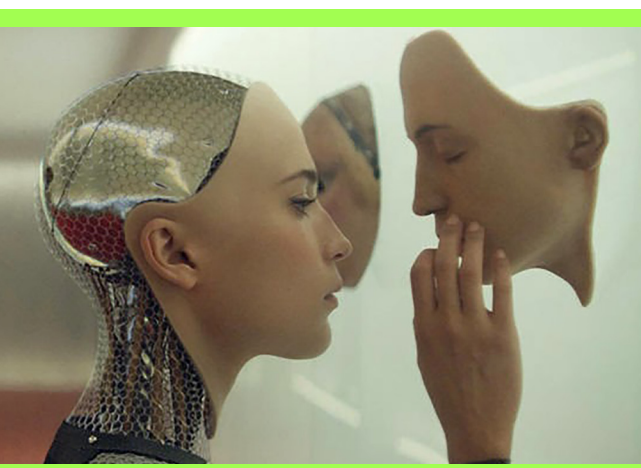
Played on:

PlayStation4

I pull up a YouTube video as a quicker path to discover the game's (I assume) two endings? On one hand, it feels irresponsible to try and talk about some of the game's ideas without knowing its chosen resolving states, but I'm not absolutely certain it's necessary.

I'm not alone in being fascinated by the possibility of artificial intelligence (AI). There's a long, long history of stories populated by artificial life, at least as far back as the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, through Mary Shelley's early industrial horror story of a man assembled from cadavers by Victor Frankenstein and animated by electricity.

The digital age has invigorated our imagination to the possibilities of artificial life, and freed the idea, at least in the programming world, from the necessity of embodiment. When we talk about AI in practice, we're just as likely to be



talking about software as hardware, algorithms and networks rather than mechanical bodies with mechanical minds.

Our stories on the other hand, still seem as likely as not to focus on AI as a concept enacted through an embodied consciousness. 2013's *Her* centered on Scarlett Johansen's voice as an

intelligent software operating system without a necessary physical location, but 2015's *Ex Machina* featured Alicia Vikander as an AI whose creation and being are directly informed by the politics and restrictions of (female) embodiment.

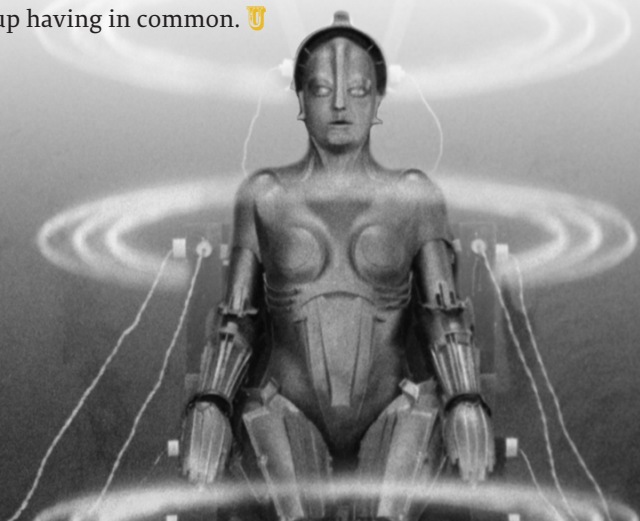
Through its invocation of Talos – a mythological bronze automaton destroyed in an encounter with Jason and Medea when a nail is dislodged from his heel and his vital fluids are drained – *The Talos Principle* ties itself to the tradition of AI as an embodied consciousness. Even if the bodies represented in *The Talos Principle* are not human, they are distinctly human-like, and apparently the result of an effort by a dying humanity to preserve something of itself. The automata who navigate the ruined and possibly virtual world are created in the image of humanity and the struggle for meaning they enact is an obscure reflection of the anxieties and uncertainties their creators confronted in the face of impending extinction.

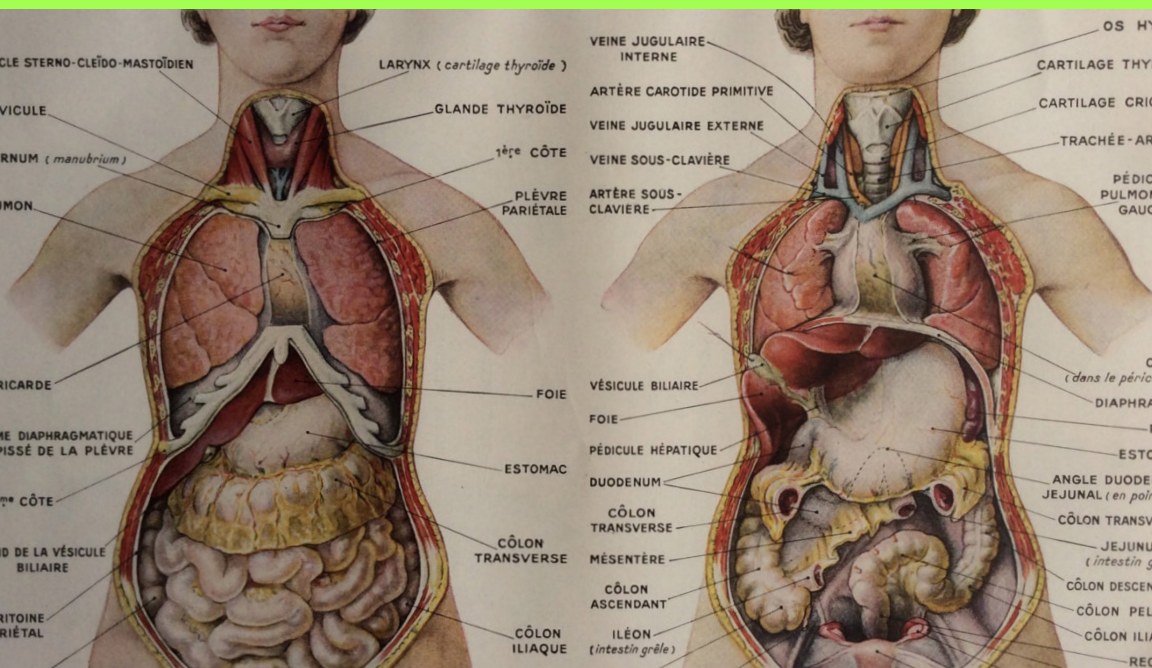
All of this is fine and good, but from the standpoint of an effort to imagine AI, it's just a touch disappointing. I'm not sure it's clear that the future of (non-fictional) AI lies in the creation of a human-like (embodied) consciousness. Our imagination of what exactly the human machine is tends to be bound to the reigning technological paradigm – so if Shelley's monster is a product of surgical reassembly and industrial (electrical) invigoration, then our current imaginative conventions on AI tend to operate in terms of computers and information systems. Our nightmares of AI involve Skynet and malevolent digital programs while our fantasies involve hyper-competent emotionless men and female voices offering succor to our post-modern inadequacies. They are the computers and networks we rely on but don't understand, and the bodies and spirits that can so often feel superfluous, impotent and undesirable. Our conception of them is limited by the way we construct our own bodies and engender our technological and social identities.

If these processes don't even function the same way or with the same efficacy for each of us, why should they have anything to do with a new form of being?

When we create AI, if we create AI, I think it's likely that we'll fail to recognize that we have done so. Especially if AI is an emergent property rather than a result of design, there's no particular reason it should resemble us in its form, its processes, or its desires. To that end, I'm not sure it matters exactly how *The Talos Principle* concludes. The self-actualization of an AI may not have anything to do with whether it fulfills a human-intended purpose or decides to reject human intentionality in favor of its own.

If artificial life doesn't center on consciousness, we are most likely to discover it in an unexpected competition for resources. If AI is instead an emergent consciousness, we may discover it when it decides it has reason or desire to attempt to address us. In either case, I tend to imagine we'll be surprised to discover how little it looks like us and perhaps embarrassed by exactly what we end up having in common. 🙏





Dissecting a Media Body

The words “flesh only” were spray-painted in yellow on a gray trash bin. Bodies in various states of dissection splayed out to the right and left of me, protected by a translucent tarp. There were bodies on slabs stacked four high, they outlined the perimeter of the room. Organs which had long succumbed to various diseases, maladies or old age floated in liquid on shelves.

Dissect the parts in order to understand how each organ, each cell depends on a different system to create and sustain life. From a theoretical perspective, this made perfect sense before the field trip but it was something else to see another human being open and naked before you. In that moment, I was confronted by my history with bodies, living and dead. What additional meaning had I ascribed to their various parts based on my memories and experiences from childhood? The teacher held up the cadaver’s heart. We dissect the parts to understand the whole.

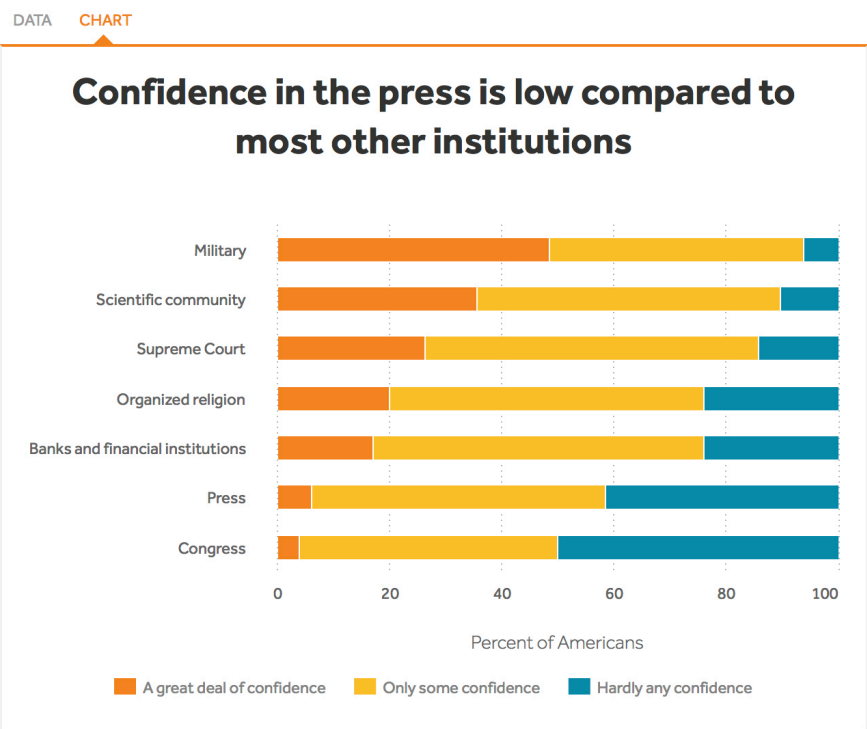
Dissection provides us with a means to understand the way people and systems operate. Learning how disparate components converge to create a sprawling thing, like a body or the media, requires work. This work dredges up uncomfortable facts and we bristle at the realities of our limitations.

Even more reason to engage in it.

A HOSTILE MEDIA

The most important function of games journalism is to inform, no wait entertain, no wait, do both? If you've ever found yourself having any these kinds of thoughts, congratulations: you are like every consumer of news.

Having confidence in news is an important indicator of how much people trust the press. In America, public confidence in the press is extremely low, rating only slightly higher than Congress. The 2016 Trust in Media [study](#) conducted by the Associated Press and American Press Institute indicates that only six percent of Americans have a high degree of confidence in the press. Confidence and trust in the press has been declining over the past two decades and this has consequences far beyond what news websites we visit. It impacts how people engage with not only politics, but civil discourse and information itself.



Data Source: Question: I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

People possess an almost reflexive kind of distrust when it comes to the media. Where does this come from? Well, researcher Robert Vallone identified one of the culprits of the terse relationship in 1985. The [study](#) looked at how

partisans perceived identical news coverage of a controversial issue. The researchers found that partisans viewed identical news coverage as biased against their side, whereas individuals with no partisan leanings viewed the same coverage having no bias. Dubbed the hostile media phenomenon, now referred to as the [hostile media effect](#), the study helped demonstrate how perception and consumption of news is shaped by an individual's values and beliefs.

The consequences of the hostile media effect are not simply that we tend to view unbiased news as biased, but it also contributes to an overall climate of [distrust](#) towards the media. If one regards the media as slanted towards one side or another then how they engage with media is colored by this belief.

It may be easier to demonstrate how this effect works using an example. Let's say we have three people: one, a self-ascribed GamerGater. The other identifies themselves as an activist opposed to the tactics of GamerGate and the last person knows little about the games industry. The hostile media effect says each of these people would read the same article and come away with very different perceptions of which side (if any) the article supported. All of these actions presume that each person both accessed and read the article, but our changing relationship with media technologies is making the behavior of seeking out and reading articles more unlikely.

Even before social media people engaged in [selective exposure](#). Selective exposure occurs when people search out news and information that supports their beliefs while filtering out information that challenges them. Not only do people tend to filter out disagreeable viewpoints, but the presence of these viewpoints reinforce our belief in media bias. [Emerging research](#) on the hostile media effect says the way we engage with news on social media can help increase the belief in the presence of a hostile media. In turn, this causes us to become *more* selective in the news we consume. This leads to a further erosion in trust in the news, exacerbating political polarization. Social media rewards our selective exposure by showing us more of what we say we want and less of what we don't, but we aren't always the most reliable judges of what is newsworthy.

THE SWELL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Individuals who [access](#) the news via their smartphones do so largely through social media and women are more likely to use social media to discover news. Minority communities, who are [underrepresented](#) in newsrooms, placed a higher value on news organizations who had reporters that looked like their communities. There's a difference between someone actively seeking out

information and coming across it while scrolling through a timeline or news feed. This difference influences how we engage with and interpret media.

Where and how people access news weighs heavily on how trustworthy we find a source. The American Press Institute [study](#) indicated that many Americans do not trust the news they read on social media sites like Facebook, only 12 percent of those polled said that had a lot of trust in the news they encountered on the website (Twitter fares only slightly better at 18 percent). Despite this lack of trust, however, a majority of those polled (some 66 percent) said they are accessing news through websites like Facebook. America isn't alone, however, in our [concern](#) over the integrity of news on social media.

Yes, I'm going to go back to the GamerGate example from above. The three people in our fake sample each have different values, opinions and life experiences guiding their perception. Each of these help to inform who their friends are on social media and how, or if, they engage with the content they find there. Throw in the additional presence algorithms powering newsfeeds that limit or curb the presence of discursive viewpoints. For the example, imagine the [algorithm serves](#) each person a *New York Times* article about online abuse in their newsfeed. Whether or not the individuals in our small sample would choose to click on, read, or comment on the article is shaped by a large number of considerations, like the ones listed below:

- Do they trust, like, or generally agree with the person sharing the article?
- Do they trust the *New York Times* as a source of news? Do they believe it is trying to perpetuate some sort of agenda?
- Do they have the time, motivation, cognitive resources to engage with that piece of news?
- Do they have previously held beliefs about the content of the article?
- What kind of device are they using? Is it a device that lends itself to full engagement with the news, or are they on their phone in an area with spotty reception?

Our brains are assessing and answering all of these questions rapidly and as demand for our [attention](#) through all forms of media increases, there's a scarcity of mental resources available to determine the veracity of some news.

An individual who finds the article disagreeable may attempt to counter what they presume to be the ill political or social effects of the article by posting a negative comment or engaging in some other form of [corrective action](#). People feel the need to engage with this action because they often overestimate the effect media has on others, while underestimating the effect media messages may have on themselves. Welcome to the third-person effect (TPE), first detailed in [research](#) conducted in 1983 by W. Phillips Davison.

There are times, however, when we actually want to believe we can be affected by media messages. Someone who believes videogames promote aggression and violence in children may see an advertisement advocating for the censorship of games to children and would want to believe that not only are they influenced by that ad but that others are as well – this is known as the [first person effect](#). The long and short of it is this: people perform all manner of mental acrobatics to preserve and bolster how they see themselves.

MISERY BUSINESS

Why do you choose to read one website over another, why do you trust one person's game but find another game reviewer to be swill? You might believe it's some kind of ephemeral feeling, but when people decide on a news source they do so using these [factors](#):

- **Accuracy:** Do we believe the information is error free and verified?
- **Authority:** Does the author or source have the right credentials?
- **Objectivity:** What is the author's purpose for writing this, do they have a conflict of interest (perceived or otherwise)?
- **Currency:** How up-to-date is the information?
- **Coverage:** What is the breadth of the reporting, is it complete?

These factors are echoed in studies on the news media in the United States and elsewhere from organizations like [Reuters](#), [Pew Research Center](#), and the [American Press Institute](#). In an ideal state, when we are highly motivated to obtain information and both willing and able to put in the effort to evaluate it, we may be able to consider everything listed above. The problem is, we are rarely operating from this motivated state.



36%

Automatically
based on what I've
read before



30%

Judgement
of editors
or journalists



22%

Automatically based
on what my friends
have consumed

People have the right intentions, they want to believe they are excellent judges of news and they want to believe they are highly motivated to stay informed. Asking someone if they believe their news should be determined by an algorithm and they might scoff. Ask this same person whether or not they would be happy if their news was automatically selected based on what they've read before and they'd be fine (really).

People have a tendency to believe we are all much more informed about issues like public policy and politics than we are. The reality is, we are a [miserly public](#). There is simply too much information for us to consider fully at all times. We'd become overwhelmed so we rely on cognitive heuristics or strategies that allow us to process information more quickly, with less effort. A 2013 investigation in the [Journal of Pragmatics](#) looked at how individuals evaluate information obtained online using these shortcuts.

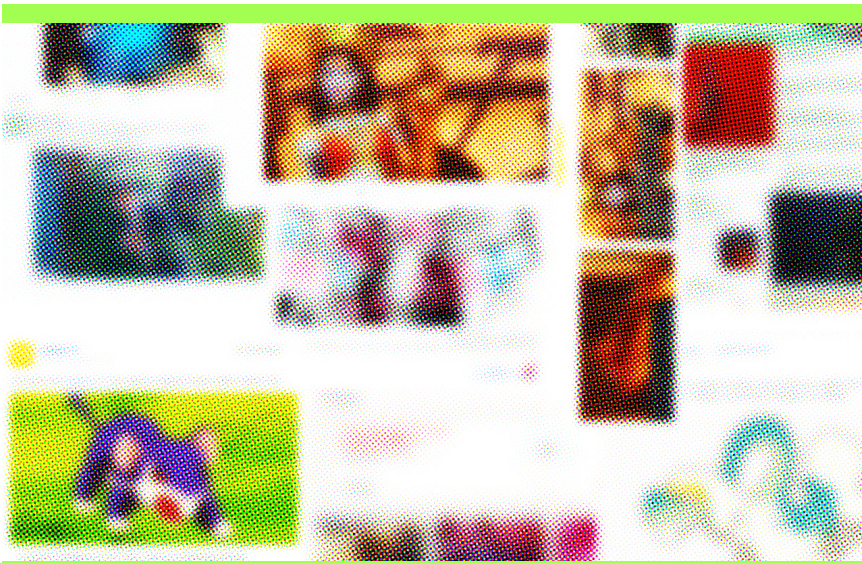
- **Reputation:** Name recognition, previous experience with a source, the integrity of a news brand are important factors that contribute to our assessment of news.
- **Endorsement:** If other people believe this news is credible, it must be credible.
- **Consistency:** Is the news being reported similarly across other sources?
- **Self-Confirmation:** We believe information is credible if it verifies or confirms preexisting beliefs
- **Expectancy Violation:** We believe websites (especially news websites) should operate in a certain way. When

they fail to meet these expectations, we are more likely to regard the information contained on the website as not credible.

- **Persuasive Intent:** People believe that biased information is not credible (imagine how you regard an advertisement for a videogame versus a story about that same game on a news website).

Advertisement placement, mobile compatibility, load time, a logo, these more superficial elements of news **influence** trust and reliance in a news brand. If an ad blocks me from reading an article, instead of waiting for the ad to load or finish, I'm much more likely to close the webpage. In my head I've made the logic leap and thought, *well they must not want me to read their news*. If a news website cites a press wire and then fails to link back to the original press wire source, that is a violation of our expectancy for how a news brand should work. It makes us second guess the integrity of the brand and how they operate. Those are cognitive heuristics at work.

The length of time a brand or journalist has been around is an important consideration for many when it comes to **choosing** which (if any) brand to engage with. Trust takes a long time to build but once trust in a news brand **erodes**, it's difficult to build up again. Readers who are more **trusting** of a news brand are more likely to be loyal to the brand, share stories, be more **engaged** and pay for access.



Here's what the research from [Reuters](#) Digital News Report tells us about our changing relationship with news brands. If I'm someone who reads about games news through a news aggregator, not only are my clicks and eyes and dollars not going towards that website but my loyalty is to the aggregator, not to the brand. The brand becomes almost a secondary consideration. When I receive a push notification from a BBC News App and click on that notification, I'm directed to the branded BBC news page. If I receive a push notification from Flipboard, that's where my focus of attention is going.

As more people turn to news aggregators or distributed media to consume news there will be new questions to ask. Questions about the relevancy of brands, websites and the larger impact this has on funding journalists and news will emerge even more. It's something readers of news, news producers, creators, publishers and advertisers will have to reckon with.

PIECING IT BACK TOGETHER

The relationship people have with news as with all media, is malleable and depends on everything from age, mood, to how we [conceptualize a source](#). A source is no longer simply the more visible person like the news editor (a traditional gatekeeper) but technology itself is now a source.

Have you ever heard someone say, 'I read on the phone today?' They are relegating their phone to the position of source. There's no functional difference for that individual psychologically between a news editor and their smartphone. We may also act as sources ourselves. If you've ever used a search engine and parsed through the results, you are acting as a source. Other users (friends on social media) may too act as sources. More simply, a source is whatever we decide a source to be.

PARTICIPANTS GAVE LOWER LIKING AND QUALITY RATINGS TO STORIES SELECTED BY NEWS EDITORS THAN TO IDENTICAL STORIES SELECTED BY OTHER USERS OF THE ONLINE SERVICE.

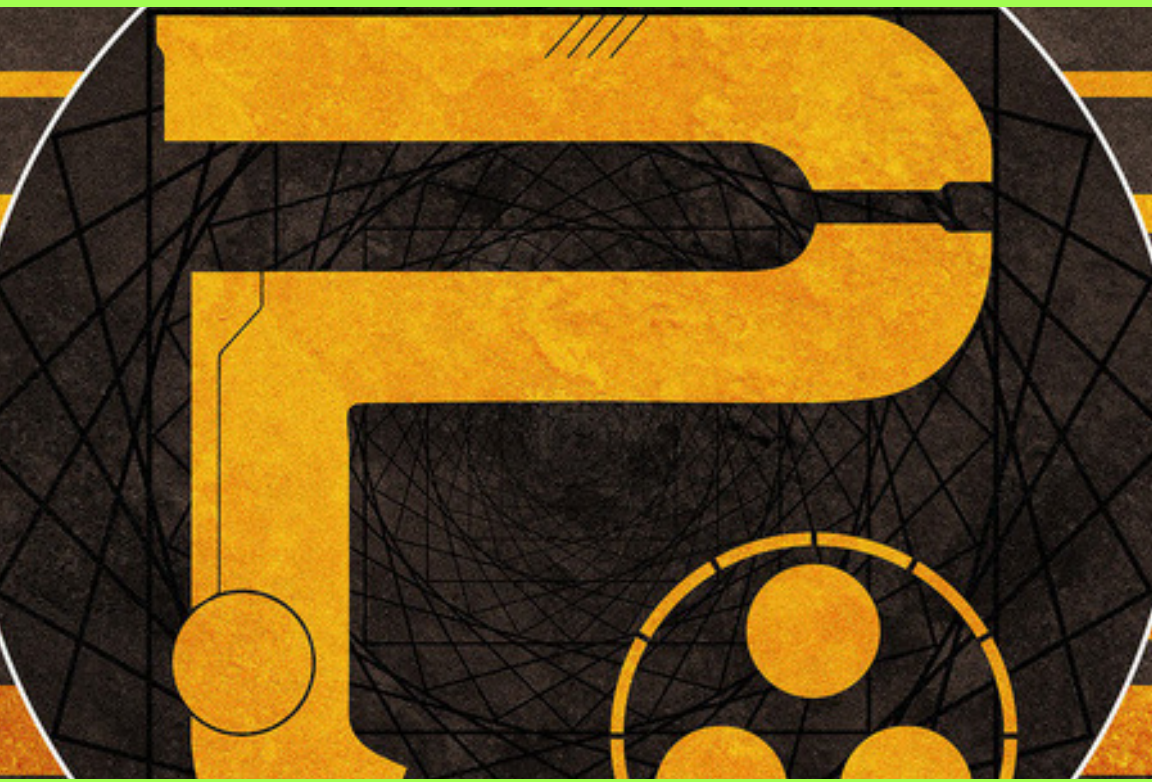
**- S. SUNDAR & C. NASS
CONCEPTUALIZING SOURCES IN ONLINE NEWS**

A 2001 study [published](#) in the Journal of Communication found people were more likely to rate a story higher when it was presented from another user than when it was presented to the receiver by a news editor. The bandwagon effect essentially take precedence over the expert effect--friends matter more than experts.

WHEN 'FACTS DON'T WORK' AND VOTERS DON'T TRUST THE MEDIA, EVERYONE BELIEVES IN THEIR OWN 'TRUTH' – AND THE RESULTS, AS WE HAVE JUST SEEN, CAN BE DEVASTATING.

The relationship people have with their news matters but, more importantly today, it's the relationship we don't have with news that matters. There's a duty to understand how we process news, how we filter out stories. News **shapes** public discourse, it shapes public opinion. It frames how we think of current events or historical ones. It can help or hinder the ability of someone to set an agenda. We still believe the press serves a vital **watchdog** function but the lack of confidence in news organizations seriously undermines the ability of news organizations to perform this task.

Loyal readers of games journalism websites may feel a friction between the reader and the news organization. They aren't alone. This friction is not isolated to games journalism. The want for transparency, the desire for total coverage, the dislike of ads are nearly universal beliefs by all news readers. Games journalism is not an anathema, it does not exist in some sort of obscure journalistic bubble, the same rules apply. My humble bit of advice to you?



With more than half of 2016 in the books already and the summer tour season in full swing, July is another great month for metal. There's some truly amazing, weird and unique stuff to check out, along with an unusually hefty pile of nonsense to avoid. We'll help you skip the latter, so hang out with us and enjoy the very best of metal this month. [Listen now to the Unwinnable Metal Playlist June 2016](#)

METAL ALBUM OF THE MONTH:

Periphery – *P3: Select Difficulty*

The follow up to last year's crushing double-album *Juggernaut: Alpha/Omega*, *P3: Select Difficulty* is Periphery's fifth full length release and it yet again raises the bar for djenty progressive metal writing, performance and production. There is oodles of variety, including brain-scrambling riffs aplenty (see "Motormouth" and "Prayer Position") and huge glacial flow grooves (see "Remain Indoors," my personal fave song on the record). Most notably there's a newly found depth to the writing, including sprawling polyrhythmic clean

sections and full-on orchestral arrangements and choir interludes, all of which gels together across 11 tracks to create another high point in the band's ever-increasing reign of riffery.

LISTEN [“MOTORMOUTH”](#); LISTEN [“THE WAY THE NEWS GOES...”](#)

RUNNER UP:

Revocation – *Great is Our Sin*

Founder/singer/guitarist David Davidson remains one of the fastest, most technically proficient death metal front men in the game, as he and the band takes us through Revocation's neo-Megadeth-meets-Exodus-meets-Death paces of its sixth full length studio record in 16 years.

LISTEN: [“COMMUNION”](#); LISTEN: [“PROFANUM VULGUS”](#)



BEST METAL OF THE MONTH:

Big Business – *Command Your Weather*

You can keep your guitars, Big Business doesn't need them to rock, as proved by this full album's worth of material performed with just bass and drums. Suffice to say, its super duper heavy.

LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)

Dust Moth – *Scale*

Dust Moth takes the typical post-sludge doom formula and sets it into orbit with booming melodies and soaring vocals from singer Irene Barber, taking *Scale* into territory that's equal parts Kylesa and The Cardigans.

LISTEN: [“LIFT”](#)

Hammers of Misfortune – *Dead Revolution*

Classic 70s-80s-ish metal riffs and an organ combine forces to create weirdo progressions and what-the vocal harmonies in a smart, fresh, and particularly unexpected way.

LISTEN: [“DEAD REVOLUTION”](#)

Jason Richardson – *I*

The prodigy and former Chelsea Grin guitarist's solo debut is nothing short of an explosion of some of the most state of the art guitar work this year. It almost sounds inhuman, Richardson is that good.

WATCH: "[FRAGMENTS](#)"; WATCH: "[OMNI](#)"

Deny the Cross – *Alpha Ghoul*

Dirty, mean punk metal hardcore straight outta Oakland, California, marked by lashing songs that often come in at under a minute. Think a metal Choking Victim, though the vocals aren't nearly at STZA status.

LISTEN: "[HEART LIKE SIBERIA](#)";
LISTEN: "[TEENS IN THE GRAVEYARD](#)"

The Night Watch – *Boundaries*

Every now and again, we find something that we just haven't really heard before, and The Night Watch is definitely that. *Boundaries* is a single 36 minute instrumental song filled with metal, folk, progressive and lots of violin.

LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#)

Spirit Adrift – *Chained to Oblivion*

Not your everyday stoner metal, *Chained to Oblivion* is interesting, well-written, and well produced heavy sludginess with plenty of heart and soul.

LISTEN: "[FORM AND FORCE](#)"

Deceptionist – *Initializing Irreversible Process*

This shotgun blast to the face is for fans of hyper-technical death prog, ala The Faceless and Necrophagist. It's ultra-heavy, ultra-fast, and plain old ultra-crazy.

LISTEN: [FULL ALBUM](#) 🍷





Don't You Dare Blame Kickstarter

Hooboy, that there Kickstarter, eh?

The crowdfunding service that popularized crowdfunding has been in the spotlight – for good and bad reasons – over the past few years, with a new batch of horror stories involving big names and even bigger promises making the rounds. For one reason or another a couple of high-profile projects failed to meet expectations (or just plain failed), leaving backers wondering what the heck happened and where the money went.

Here's the thing: Kickstarter is, first and foremost, about funding. Hence the term “crowdfunding.” What this means is that backers aren't actually buying a product – they're financially backing an idea. They aren't consumers so much as investors. Yes, the product being funded is almost always offered up as a reward for certain payment tiers, but it's exactly that: a reward; a thank you for believing in the project enough to give it money; a way to share in the collective joy of seeing someone's idea become a reality.

This isn't to say that the burden of understanding belongs solely to backers, though. Yes, it's extremely important that backers understand the risks, that this isn't a retail transaction, and that they aren't traditional customers. However, project creators and managers also need to be clear about their goals and funding. If every backer is an investor, they need to be treated as such. Let them know where the money is going. Keep them up-to-date on progress. Don't let them tell you what to do, but also consider their honest feedback.

Of course, this means that backers need to start acting like investors as well. They need to look at the details of a project, consider the reality of its goals, investigate the history of its creator (if there is a history to investigate, anyway) and so on. They also need to understand just how much money most of this stuff takes. The recent debacle with Keiji Inafune's spiritual successor to *Mega Man*, *Mighty No. 9*, is a good example of this problem. It's a good example for a couple of problems, really.

Mighty No. 9 was a train wreck, there's no argument about that. The project under-delivered on its promises and goals, changed visual styles partway through development (which was a surprise to all the backers) and, depending on who's asked, resulted in either an "okay" product or "complete garbage." Suffice it to say, it's a terrible example of how to run a Kickstarter project. That said, seeing backers complain about how the company basically burned its \$4 million funds gets my teeth a-grinding. Judging by what we've seen I'm sure there was some mismanagement going on, no argument there, but thinking a game like *Mighty No. 9* could be made – by a large studio, no less – for just \$4 million is monumentally naive.

There's this bizarre idea that most backers (at least the most vocal ones) seem to have where they think the funding goal is meant to cover all develop-



ment costs. This is simply not true. Unless it's being made by one person living with their parents or the independently wealthy, it all gets terribly expensive. Like, REALLY expensive. Employees need to be paid (likely for thousands of hours worth of work), rents need to be paid (over the course of several months or even years) and utilities need to be paid (ditto on the months or years). If a project includes bonus rewards for backers, like posters or T-shirts or whatever, those need to be budgeted for as well – and shipped. Then there's marketing, which is its own separate (and monstrously expensive) beast. So no, the problem isn't that *Mighty No. 9*'s developers pissed away \$4 million, because it's easy to burn through \$4 million or more when trying to make something high-quality (indie or otherwise) with a large team. The problem is that the game they delivered isn't the game they tried to sell backers on.

None of *Mighty No. 9*'s issues are the fault of Kickstarter and it's absolutely not an indicator that the idea of crowdfunding is a failure. It was (yet another) perfect storm of a creator not knowing what they were doing and backers not understanding how crowdfunding works. Backing a project is never any sort of guarantee. It's showing faith in an idea, with money. It's buying into something somebody else wants to make. Potential developers need to have a realistic idea of how they're going to manage their project – right down the tedious particulars. Potential backers need to have a realistic idea of the work that goes into these sorts of projects and how much that work can cost. 🙄





The Disorder 2016

I can't help but feel a little languorous writing about videogames at a time when the United Kingdom is intent on imploding. Myself and thousands of others have found ourselves going through fits of doubt, anger, exhaustion and fear when faced with the uncertainties the future holds for this small island nation.

Make no mistake, since voting to leave the EU, it has felt a lot smaller. A smallness of vision. Of stature. And of hope. Even as a man from a country that has historically strong ties to the UK, who has less reason to worry than some, a new ill-fitting reality has draped itself across the landscape. Never before have I felt so out of place in my beloved Scotland – and we voted overwhelmingly to stay. Try as I might, I can't seem to scrub away the anxiety that comes from knowing that on June 23, more than half of Britain threw their lot in with those who simply don't want me here. Lies spread by those who rule above us have riled up the public so much they now jump at shadows. Even in the face of economic recession and social decay, millions have been convinced to vote against their welfare.

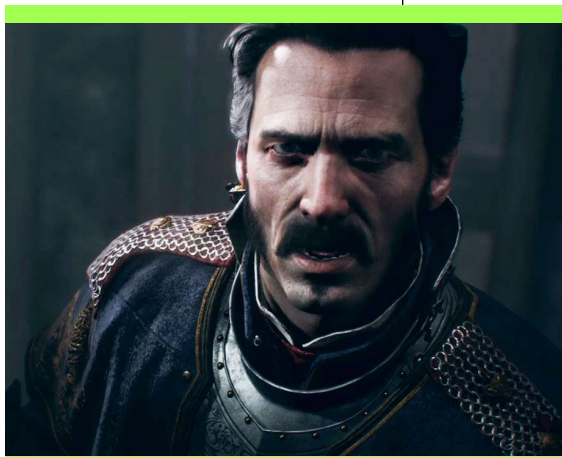
Recent events lend my thoughts about *The Order: 1886* a new relevancy, however slight that may be. The game was dismissed by many who saw it as nothing more than a graphical showcase that had the player watching it rather than playing. While it is a by-the-numbers shooter that has the audacity to end on a cliffhanger it in no way earns, there's something to be said on its meditation on class struggle and the politics of fear and control.

After the game's introduction, which serves only to tell the player that "somewhere down the line things will go bad for them," our first task is to suppress a group of rebels. We are established as a member of the elite. Sir Galahad, knight of The Order. The inheritors of King Arthur's knights of the round table, charged with protecting the country from the gravest threats. We are not told what it is the ne'er-do-wells are rebelling against, or any of their grievances. They are simply there to rebel and be bothersome. *1886* establishes the otherness of the rebels as soon as they come into sight.

I do not think that it is an accident that the first antagonistic voice you hear is an Irish one. Historically, Ireland has been a cause for concern, a thorn in the side of Britain's imperial ambitions. Perhaps we don't need a reason to gun these people down. Look at the histories, look at Ireland and see that violence has long been the British Empire's solution for those who do not march in time to their beat.

The game cements the rebels as an entity unto itself when it introduces their leader: a woman of color from the Jhansi state on the Indian sub-continent. Compare this to the Order, made up primarily of white men. The common people are diverse and chaotic, while the state is strong, unified and homogenous.

Then the game goes one step further and adds werewolves to the mix. The lycans serve as the aggressive representation of the alien-ness and uncertainty with which those from on high so often regard the lower classes. The idea that they are working in some capacity with the rebels is practically a given in the eyes of the knights. So the Order brings its powerful weaponry to bear on the common people. It is done in so casual a manner none of them ever express any concern over how bullets utterly pulverize and mangle their opponents.



The rebels and the werewolves share the same space, outside the Order's realm of understanding.

The rebellion is referred to as a contagion, something that must be excised through the clinical use of force, helpfully blurring the line between beast and man. "Go here. Kill these men. Do not over extend your remit." It makes the task of killing scores of their own countryman all the easier. Language is but another tool employed in the fight. Without it, perhaps the knights would stop once in their magically prolonged lives to question their motives.

Words. They can be real bastards sometimes. A lot of us in Britain have just had a crash course on how powerful they can be. How else could something like Brexit (what an utterly stupid word) have succeeded? In the face of financial experts, scientists, business heads and others, Britain has committed to an act of self-sabotage unmatched in modern western history. A familiar argument has taken root over the years, acting as a barrier against good sense. The free movement of people, multiculturalism, is the reason jobs are few and the council houses full. Not the politicians.

Not the banks. Immigrants.

It's the oldest trick in the book, but one can't pin all of its success to simple racism. Britain is hurting, and it has been for a long time. It has a population that sees no future for their children, stuck in a quagmire of diminished opportunity. Being ground down by austerity. Can you blame them for lashing out?

No, you should reserve your blame for self-serving politicians like Nigel Farage, former head of the United Kingdom Independence Party. His victory speech is a distillation of the sentiments that drove the result. Loathe as I am to grant this deplorable little pound shop fascist any attention:

"This will be a victory for real people. A victory for ordinary people. A victory for decent people."

Ordinary people. Here we have a former City commodity broker congratulating people for defying the elites. It has been devastatingly fascinating watching members of the establishment pretend they're sticking up for the working man while lining their own pockets. Of course, my American readers will be able to find a fitting parallel here in Donald Trump,



to which I say good luck. Oh, and those decent people? You can bet your ass he's not talking about anyone born outside the UK.

"We will have done it without having to fight. Without a single bullet being fired."

On the 16th of June, one week before the ballots were cast, Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered in the street. A woman who campaigned tirelessly for refugees was shot by a man who gave his name in court as "Death to Traitors. Freedom For Britain." It's telling that at any other time, a political assassination would have sent shock waves through the parliamentarians. Such was the frenetic pace of the referendum debate, Cox' murder passed by as something of a footnote to the whole affair.

Farage, that dried snot on the windows of democracy, his blatant rewriting of events is endemic among some of the more right wing politicians. After years of dehumanizing vast swathes of the population and setting up an us versus them mentality, they try to worm away when the tree bears rotten fruit. When angry men act on the hateful rhetoric that is a constant in the political discourse, no one is willing to take responsibility. They act surprised that their poison has killed, that obviously they didn't mean that, before carrying on business as usual.

"Let June the 23rd go down in our history as our independence day!"

Britain is a country that has never been *without* its independence. Many countries the world over have independence days because they specifically broke away *from* Britain. Somewhere along the line, people were convinced that they, the world's fifth, sorry, sixth largest economy (thanks Brexit) weren't at the controls. That somehow the EU was an undemocratic hegemony that had crushed their freedom. Utter bollocks, of course, but again, the politicians were eager to point a finger of blame across the channel to Europe in order to hide their own insidious machinations.

In 1886, it is revealed to Sir Galahad that the true enemy may be closer to home than he thinks. Journeying with the rebel leader Queen Lakshmi, it is revealed that senior members of the Order are not only sympathetic to the lycans, but are lycans themselves. The truth is revealed only when Galahad breaks away from the confines of the Order's language and traditions. The



suppression of the downtrodden had been but a diversion while powerful figures made their moves.

We don't have to worry about lycans over here. No, our monster came in the form of the immigrant, who stepped upon these shores because they had heard there were jobs, opportunities and the potential to build a life for their family here. They had heard of the welcoming and progressive nature of a country that has consistently punched above its weight on the global stage.

Now in this new dawn some are recognizing our own monsters are closer to home. Clad in expensive suits and hollow promises. The high profile resignations, perhaps indicative of some catching on too late that pitting ordinary people against each other, armed only with misinformation, has set the country on a disaster course, now fueled by a fiery brand of English nationalism. This is an old beast, perhaps the oldest, that has become emboldened since the vote. Not only has it reared its ugly head, but it's sprouted legs and is on the rampage.

How fitting then for Unwinnable's body horror issue that we can bear witness to a nation disfigured, tearing out its own heart. 🇬🇧





The conversation around superhero films has been dominated over the last few years by the Marvel cinematic universe. Even the release of *Batman v Superman*, a film featuring two of the most recognizable fictional characters of the past century, couldn't escape the comparisons to Marvel's financial and critical powerhouse series. The unprecedented success of the MCU now influences expectations around anything resembling a superhero on screen, which can have the effect of limiting the range of what's acceptable, or even possible, with these kinds of movies. It's in this environment that *Batman v Superman*'s predecessor, 2013's *Man of Steel*, starts to stand out.

With the first *Avengers* in 2012, the Marvel film franchise relaxed into a comfortable formula. While it's a framework that allows for some variety, each film fits all of its elements – theme, characters, dialog, visuals, score – within the Marvel house style made apparent in *The Avengers*. This results in a film series with uncommon consistency, but the individual releases within the series lack a strong sense of identity. It's a trade-off that favors the franchise whenever possible. It's also a savvy business decision: this consistency limits the risks of a dramatic critical or commercial disappointment and ensures that the series' fanbase knows what to expect.

This is where *Man of Steel*, even in its failings, distinguishes itself. Director Zack Snyder and his team used the Superman reboot as an opportunity to craft a different imagining of the idea of a superhero movie. Where the Marvel films highlight humor and a kind of self-awareness to make a winking gesture toward the audience, hoping to recognize the ridiculousness of the proceedings, *Man of Steel* opts for a thorough sincerity. This decision influences the entire experience, and it makes for a film that stands apart from its contemporaries.

I wish I liked the movie, as a whole, more. *Man of Steel* is long – nearing 2-and-a-half hours – and it suffers from a general sluggishness. Stretches of it meander, lacking momentum outside of expository necessity. It treats its subjects so seriously that it can feel ponderous or worse. It has no subtlety to speak of. These are exactly the sorts of problems that Marvel hopes to avoid by continually honing their Cinematic Universe formula with each new release.



Despite these legitimate grievances, *Man of Steel's* ambition allows it to surprise in ways that were refreshing in 2013 and have become even more notable in the years since. There's a boldness in its approach that creates moments unique within the superhero film landscape. Consider the sequence where Superman [first takes flight](#). Once he begins flying, the scoring is shameless, using the film's main musical motif in its loudest and most triumphant iteration yet, announcing righteous sentiment. The camera swerves hard as it attempts to keep the hero within the frame; there's a sense of weightiness as it shifts to track his movements. At one point, it cuts to a close-up of Superman's shadow as he flies over a field, only to pull away moments later to reveal him hundreds of feet in the air as he boosts away, over the sea and, eventually, into orbit. Within 90 seconds, he's evolved from clumsy jumper to space explorer.

Everything in this sequence directs the viewer toward feeling a sense of beginner's uncertainty coupled with unreserved excitement, an enormous release of energy. It goes straight for the gut in a way that's almost embarrassing. If it works, the physicality of the speed and the adrenaline of the moment should be palpable to the audience. If it fails, it'll be unforgivably absurd. Certainly, there are safer ways to film a scene like this: keep the camera steady, offer more stable medium shots, moderate the pace of movement, maybe tone down those drums a tad. By committing so thoroughly to its decisions, *Man of Steel* risks losing the whole thing. In the process, though, it demonstrates a set of aesthetic principles that go beyond what most blockbuster franchises are willing to attempt.

Man of Steel displays a similar attentiveness to its visual language throughout. This is most evident in the designs for the civilization on the planet Krypton, which feature flowing curved lines and big arches in place of straight edges and right angles. This holds fast for the entire film, offering a quick visual indicator of the origins of something on screen, whether it's a piece of technology, a ship, clothing, or whatever else. This is put to its most overt use when Clark meets (a hologram of) his Kryptonian father, Jor-El, who proceeds to [summarize the history of Krypton](#). As he narrates, a flat, metallic tableau



behind him comes to life and animates this history through stylized artwork teeming with the planet's distinctive ellipses. It's a weird moment to try to explain – Krypton had space travel but no film industry, I guess – but it reflects a desire to immerse the viewer, visually, in the world the film has created.

The film's approach to its themes also represents a departure from its peers. While Marvel films love their heroes and reward their fans' adoration, they attempt to depict their characters as relatable, particularly through the use of snappy, casual dialog. *Man of Steel* adopts a reverent posture with regard to the idea of a superhero, going so far as to include numerous, blatant Christ

allusions throughout. This is a film in awe of its hero and the tremendous responsibility he shoulders.

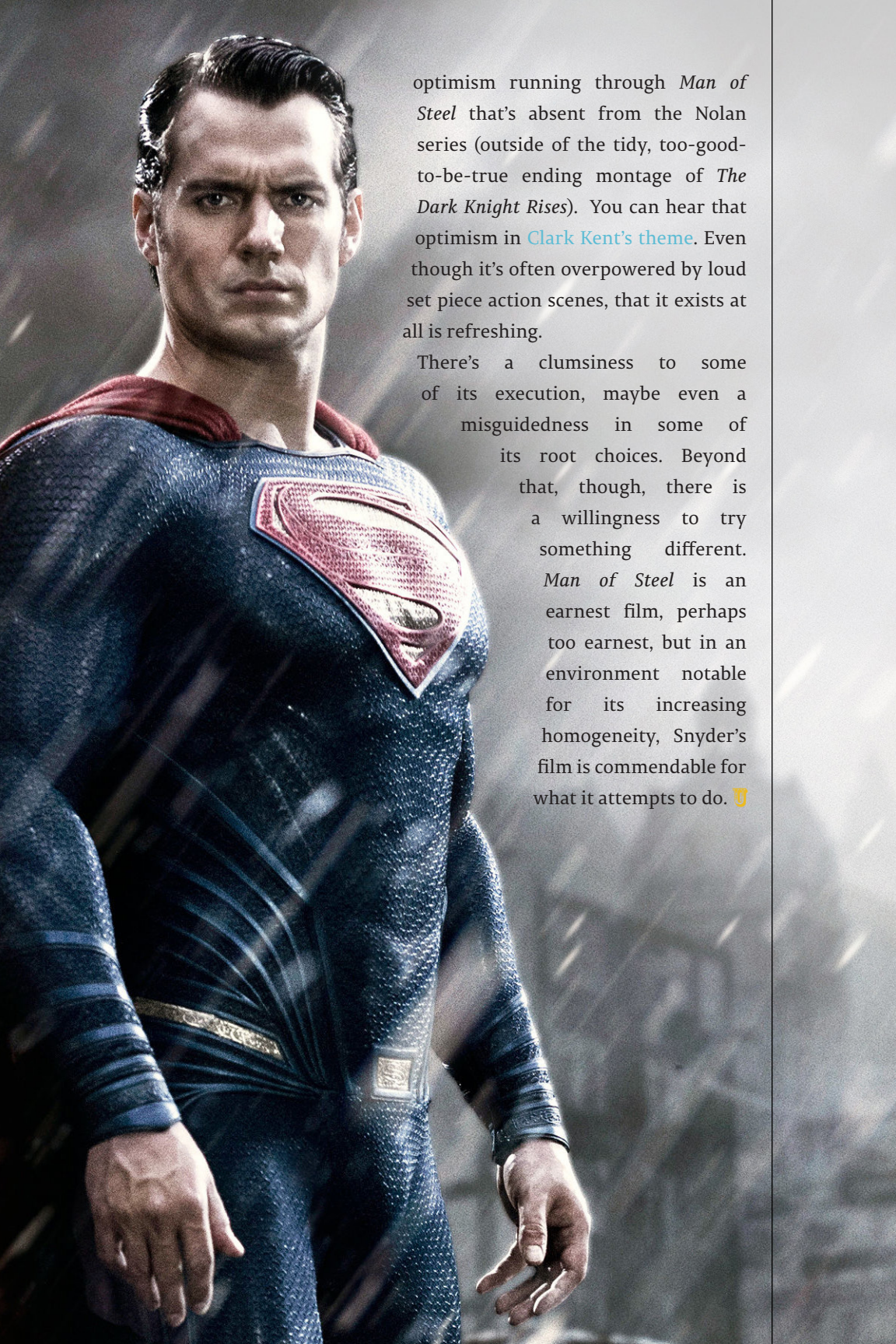
This approach has some odd results. The film can feel more like a presentation of ideas rather than an exploration of characters and the dialog tends toward literal discussion of big themes. Some of these themes make far more sense in an analysis than they do when spoken in conversation. One major point of contention arises from Jonathan Kent, Superman's father from Kansas, who worries about the repercussions of his son revealing his abilities to other people. This is a worthy concern, though it's voiced in *Man of Steel* by having Jonathan argue against saving a school bus full of drowning children in order to preserve Clark's anonymity. Curious choice.

Man of Steel's Clark Kent is not really the kind of guy audience members would want to hang out with after the credits roll and that kind



of reliability is outside of the movie's interest. This is a significant departure from the heroes as portrayed in the Marvel universe. There, the writers hope to depict protagonists that are both phenomenons and potential best friends of viewers. In *Man of Steel*, the superhero again becomes the modern myth, a metaphor for any number of human struggles and successes. It's almost worshipful, where the Marvel movies aim for a more congenial respect. The discussions provoked by these two styles will be markedly different.

Because of the involvement of writer David S. Goyer and producer Christopher Nolan, *Man of Steel* is often categorized along with the Dark Knight series. While there are some similarities here, particularly in a tonal severity present in both, *Man of Steel* ultimately feels less cynical than Nolan's superhero franchise. Snyder leaves little room for comedy in his film, favoring a seriousness that almost begs to be parodied. It isn't as dire a message as the one communicated in *The Dark Knight*, though. Superman is burdened and somber, but in him, Snyder also locates a potential for hope. There's a quiet



optimism running through *Man of Steel* that's absent from the Nolan series (outside of the tidy, too-good-to-be-true ending montage of *The Dark Knight Rises*). You can hear that optimism in [Clark Kent's theme](#). Even though it's often overpowered by loud set piece action scenes, that it exists at all is refreshing.

There's a clumsiness to some of its execution, maybe even a misguidedness in some of its root choices. Beyond that, though, there is a willingness to try something different. *Man of Steel* is an earnest film, perhaps too earnest, but in an environment notable for its increasing homogeneity, Snyder's film is commendable for what it attempts to do. 🍿

Throwing the First Brick | Mitch Bowman



Last month, after a good six months of fiddling around with it, my band's full-length finally came out. It's a huge relief to finally have it out of our hands and into the wild, and so far people seem to really dig it, but none of that is what I want to talk about today.

Instead, I want to talk about the hilarious, financially inadvisable world of releasing DIY music. If you've never self-released music, this is probably all news to you, but the overwhelming majority of DIY punk bands are such a clearly losing proposition that it's a miracle that anyone actually does this with their time and money. I'm not talking about "boo hoo, we don't make enough money to pay the bills" sort of entitled whining, I mean that the majority of bands are actually massively in the red, to a degree that makes it more of an expensive hobby than a means to sustain oneself.

Here's how it all breaks down for us, as far as the total cost of putting out a full-length album: the biggest expense was doing the actual recording. In this regard, we're pretty fortunate, because we have a friend who runs his own little studio and gave us a good deal. Even with that discount in play, recording 35 minutes of finished audio takes quite a lot of time, so just to get the tracks recorded was around \$2,000.

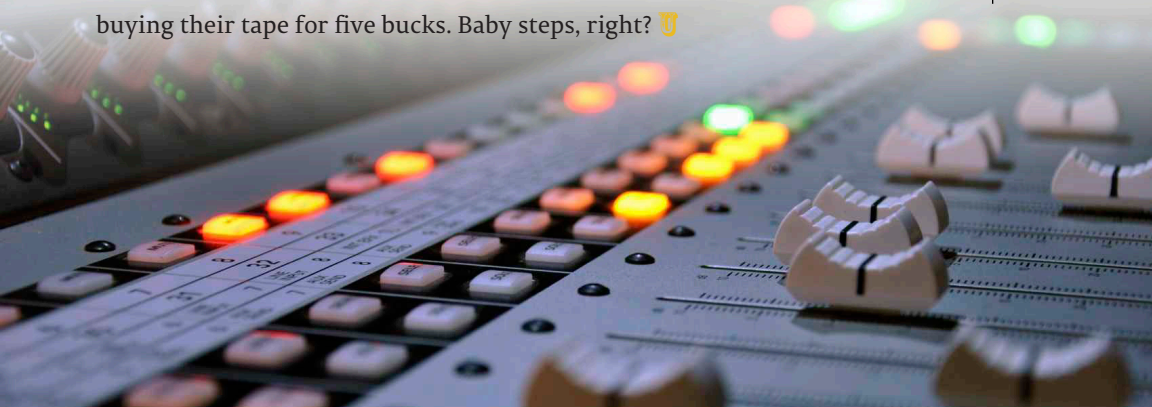
Once that's done, it needs to get mastered (\$150 in our case, though again, that's very cheap and mastering often costs much, much more), and made into some sort of physical object (in our case, tapes that we made ourselves, so that was only around \$100 too. Again, this is the cheapest possible option). Add to that a couple pieces of rented gear, taking the days off from your real job, etc. and you're looking at something in the realm of \$3,000 all-in.

Best-case scenario (assuming you want better audio quality than a self-recorded demo) is that you spend around three grand on creating a finished record – then what? Well, in our case, we throw the album up on Bandcamp on a “pay what you want” basis, which means most people download it for free, and then you sell your physical copies at shows. To date, we've brought in about \$40 from people who have actually paid for the Bandcamp download, and we're on track to sell out of the run of 50 tapes we made. So we'll end up with about \$300 in our pocket.

The astute observer will notice that leaves us with a deficit of well over \$2500. To be clear, this isn't a horror story of a failed release, or a naive band complaining about how poor their record did. This is normal. This is how most of the people I know operate. When you add in the expenses of owning gear, renting a jam space, having transportation to gigs, etc. it starts looking like a really stupid thing to do with basically all of your expendable income.

And in a lot of ways, that's hella problematic. It's so hard and so expensive to make and release music that it excludes a lot of people. You basically have to be people like us – reasonably well-off adults with decent, steady jobs and a bunch of expendable income – in order to be an active band. I don't want to live in a world where DIY punk is only made by people like that. Hearing marginalized voices is a huge part of what punk is about, and we're doing a shitty job of facilitating that.

I'm not sure what the solution is here. We try to help by running a [little DIY tape label](#), where we pay for the costs of making physical media, but even that only removes a tiny fraction of the financial burden from the band. Maybe y'all can help out by going to your local DIY spot, giving a band a hug and maybe buying their tape for five bucks. Baby steps, right? 🐣





I Play to Forget

Though I like to tout the potential of videogames as an art form, lately I've been gravitating toward games that are less about pushing the medium forward artistically than they are about refining a gameplay experience. When it comes to my videogames, I no longer look for experiences that challenge me, like *This War of Mine* or *That Dragon, Cancer*. As much as I appreciate those games, I can't bring myself to touch them right now.

I don't play to challenge myself. I don't play to empathize with others. These days, I play to forget.

This is not a realization about myself that I take lightly. After all, it's the same logic that drives one to vice. Whether it's drink, drugs, sex or Michael Bay movies, a load of misguided decisions and evil have been justified by a desire for pure escapism.

I read an article once about stress. It said workplace stress was a good thing because it signaled that you really cared about what you were working on. It

signals that, whatever you have going on in your life, you're invested in it. Six months ago I began working at the most stressful job I've had in my entire life. And it's true: I stress because I care.

But the more I stressed, the more I felt the walls crashing down around me and in an objective, not-in-my-head sort of way. I became less skilled, more scatterbrained and more apt to make split-second decisions that were ultimately unwise. When I got home, I spent time with my family, which for many months meant managing a newborn.

When Atticus became a toddler, I noticed something. I noticed that just the simple act of playing with him gave me peace. Part of this is obvious: love and family brings personal peace. I loved Atticus, and spent almost as much time with him and my wife before. Now, though, we were playing together.

I think that act of play is more than just an auxiliary thing here. I think the act of play is the ultimate way to blow off steam, because I am not stewing in feelings or purely distracting myself. I am escaping into an arbitrary set of stakes that are *markedly and refreshingly lower* than anything I am invested in otherwise.

Games like *Papers, Please*, *This War of Mine*, and *That Dragon, Cancer* helped me to understand certain real-world plights around me, but in 2016, I feel I am awash in plights. I feel real-world stakes in my Twitter notifications, in my podcast queue and in my Facebook feed. I feel the firm grasp of oppression, my own complicity in the suffering of others, the ultimate fate of death that each of us face, some more quickly than others. Every single hour of every single day, I feel the injustice of it all.

I won't deny it: I feel guilty that I have the ability to come home and at least *try* to forget about it all. Part of me feels desperate to embrace total and unquestionable solidarity with those who suffer more than I do, a financially-stable straight white male.

Another part of me knows that I was never meant to be fully and completely immersed into the darkness of this world and that the more clear-eyed I am, the more I can see the world as it is and act accordingly.

I don't even think about videogames all that much anymore. But I do think about play. I think about little ways to embed alternate stakes into my day. Anything to distract me from the broader, more nefarious stakes at play.

Like an addict to heroin. Like a drunk to the bottle. Like a loving father to his child. I take every moment I have to play, and you better believe I frolic with as much abandon as I can muster up.

I do this to forget. Maybe one day, it will work. 🍷

Michael Bukowski is a Philadelphia-based artist originally from North Jersey. Obsessed with genre fiction (particularly Ramsey Campbell, Margaret St. Clair, Laird Barron and Gemma Files), Bukowski has devoted an alarming number of years to illustrating every monster H. P. Lovecraft ever mentioned. He's since expanded to the creatures of other authors. In his spare time, he travels the world looking for ossuaries and collects Madballs. He was kind enough to take some time to talk about his art with us this month.

How'd you get into illustration?

I guess there's two layers to this answer. When I was young I used to love to make drawings of dinosaurs in space and posters for imaginary *Jaws* sequels and my mother was always super supportive and encouraging. I never had the stigma that art was a waste of time. Then, as I got older and started to get into heavy music, the cover art of Dan Seagrave, Vincent Locke and Michael Whelan inspired me to actually try to make art professionally.

How do you work? Are you all traditional, digital, a mix?

Yeah...I'm fastidious. I loathe a mess, so my process is all very neat and clean. I draw with the same mechanical pencil I've had since I moved to Philly and I use an eraser stick. Once the drawing's complete, I ink it, usually with a light box on the other side of the page so that I don't have to worry about erasing pencil marks, then I scan it and color and render digitally.

You're art is clearly inspired by horror literature, but what influences your style?

I don't know if anything *from* horror lit influences my style. It certainly influences what I choose to illustrate, but my style isn't as dark or moody as the source material would suggest. There's a lot of pastels and bright colors. I also try to draw them as . . . anatomically correct as I can. I always think about a creature's musculature and skeletal system when designing it, unless the author specifically discounts that in the fiction. Since my style itself is "cartoony" (bright colors, solid line work) and the designs are anatomical, the creatures often come out "disturbing." A mix of jovial and bestial. It's kinda what I'm going for, and it seems like that's the genuine reaction people have to it.

Your long running project, [Yog-Blogsoth](#), sought to provide an illustration for every creature Lovecraft ever mentioned, and it has since trickled into other authors. How have you sustained that over the years, and will it ever end?

I think my ability to sustain that project comes from my enjoyment of reading. I was rereading HPL when I started it as well as listening to the H. P. Lovecraft Literary Podcast. So, I'd reread a story, listen to their episode and be excited to draw Ghatanothoa based on the fresh eyes and new info. Then, when I got into his poetry, I started to get to gods from world mythology, which is another interest of mine. That kept things fresh and exciting. Now, I'm *almost* done with HPL (eleven mythological gods left! And one big bad) and I'm tired of drawing togas (dude LOVED Greek/Roman gods!), so I've slipped into drawing stuff from other authors. It started out just as authors that write in the mythos, but then I started *Stories From the Borderlands* with Scott Nicolay and that's really expanded my selection. 🍷



plate 1. cover for Michael Wehunt's *Greener Pastures*



plate 2. cover for Richard Gavin's "Fume"

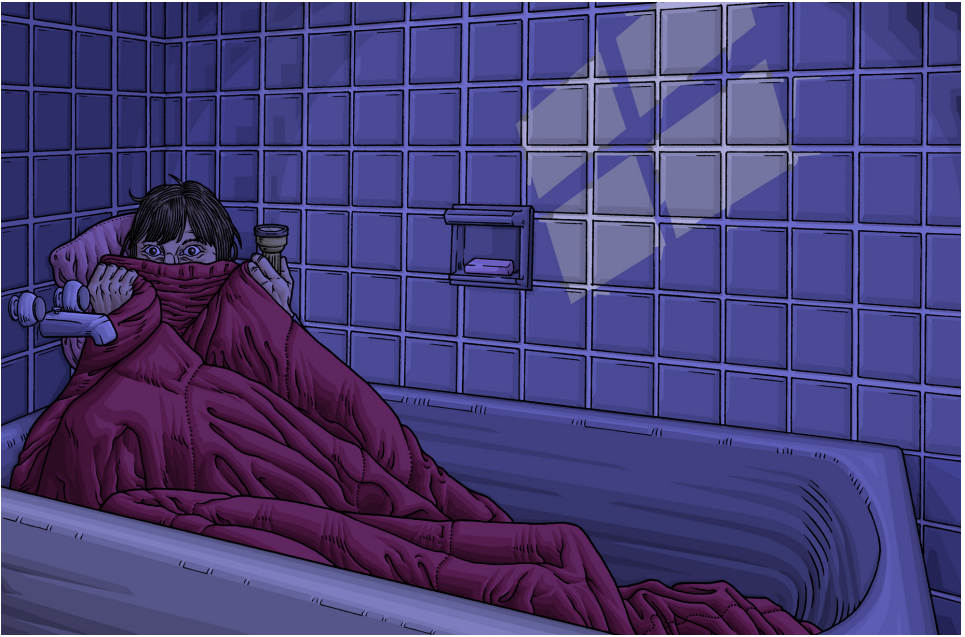


plate 3. interior illustration for Scott Nicolay's *After*



plate 4. cover for Scott Nicolay's *After*



plate 5. cover for audio drama of Matthew Bartlett's *Gateways to Abomination*



plate 6. piece for Paradigm Gallery's Growth show, based on William Hope Hodgson's "The Voice In the Night"

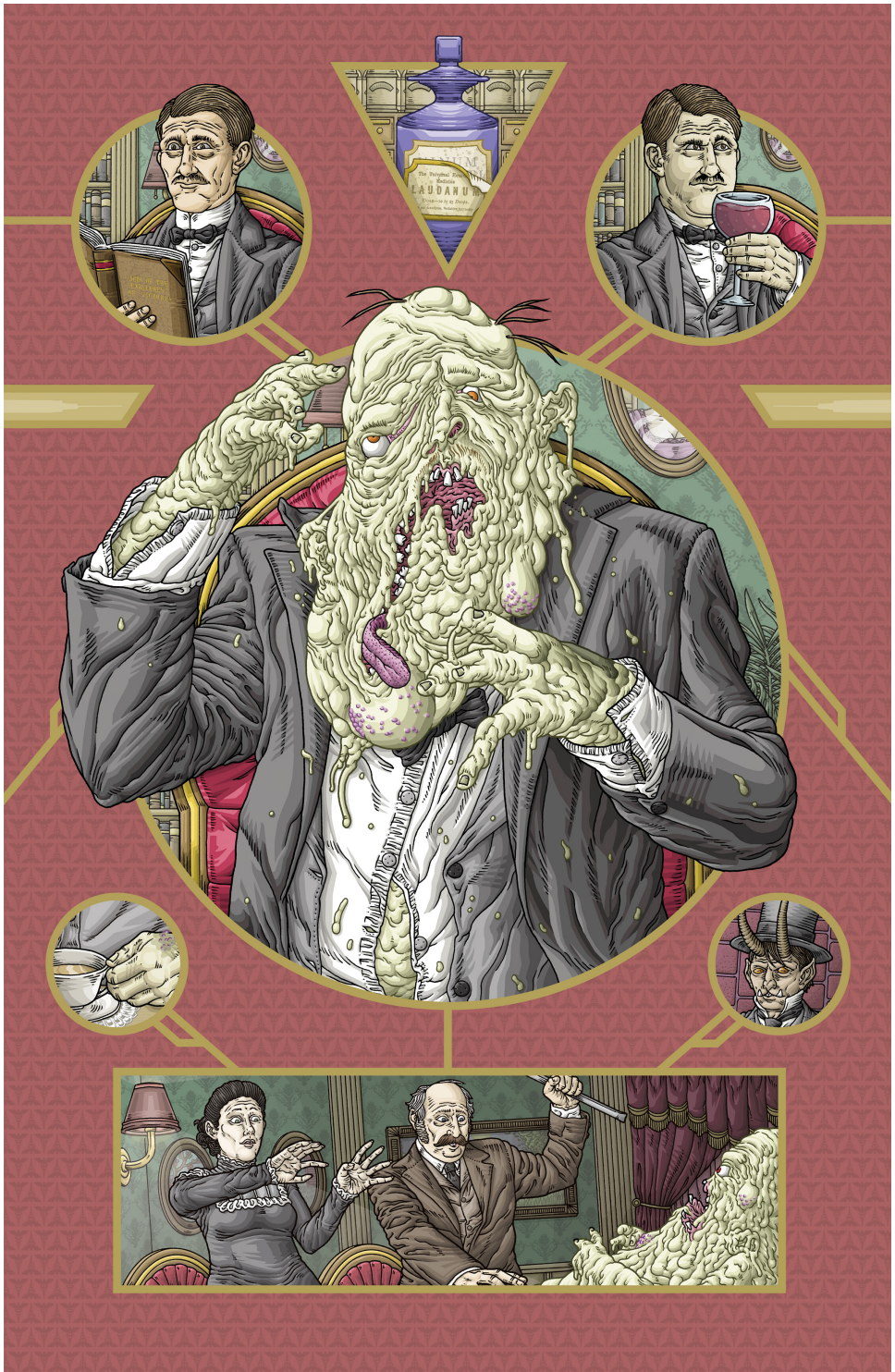


plate 7. piece for Antler Gallery's Decay show based on
Arthur Machen's *The Novel Of the White Powder*

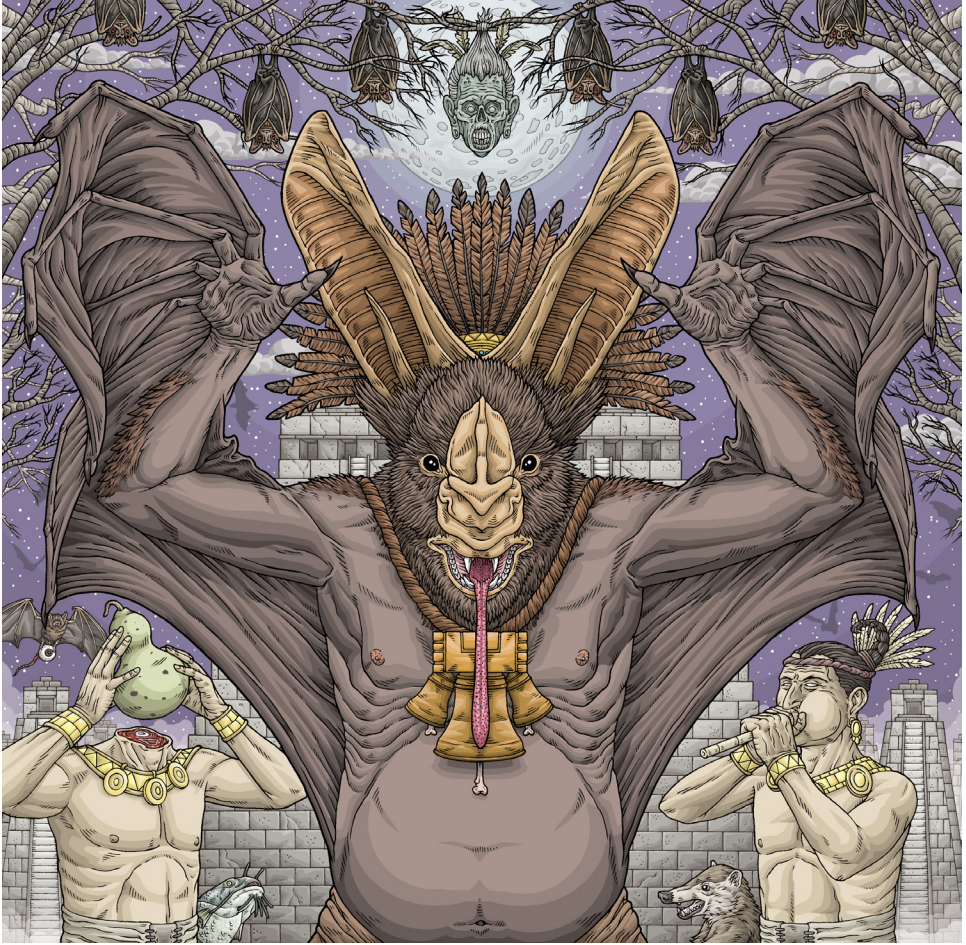


plate 8. piece for Empty Night Skies bat benefit show
based on the legend of the Hero Twins and Camazotz

לב, וגוהו רשבתם תרועב לגעמ הז ינפל ינעמל לילעב דערל גיצהל ידכו עיפוהל ידכ, חורה התא זה, דל הדו

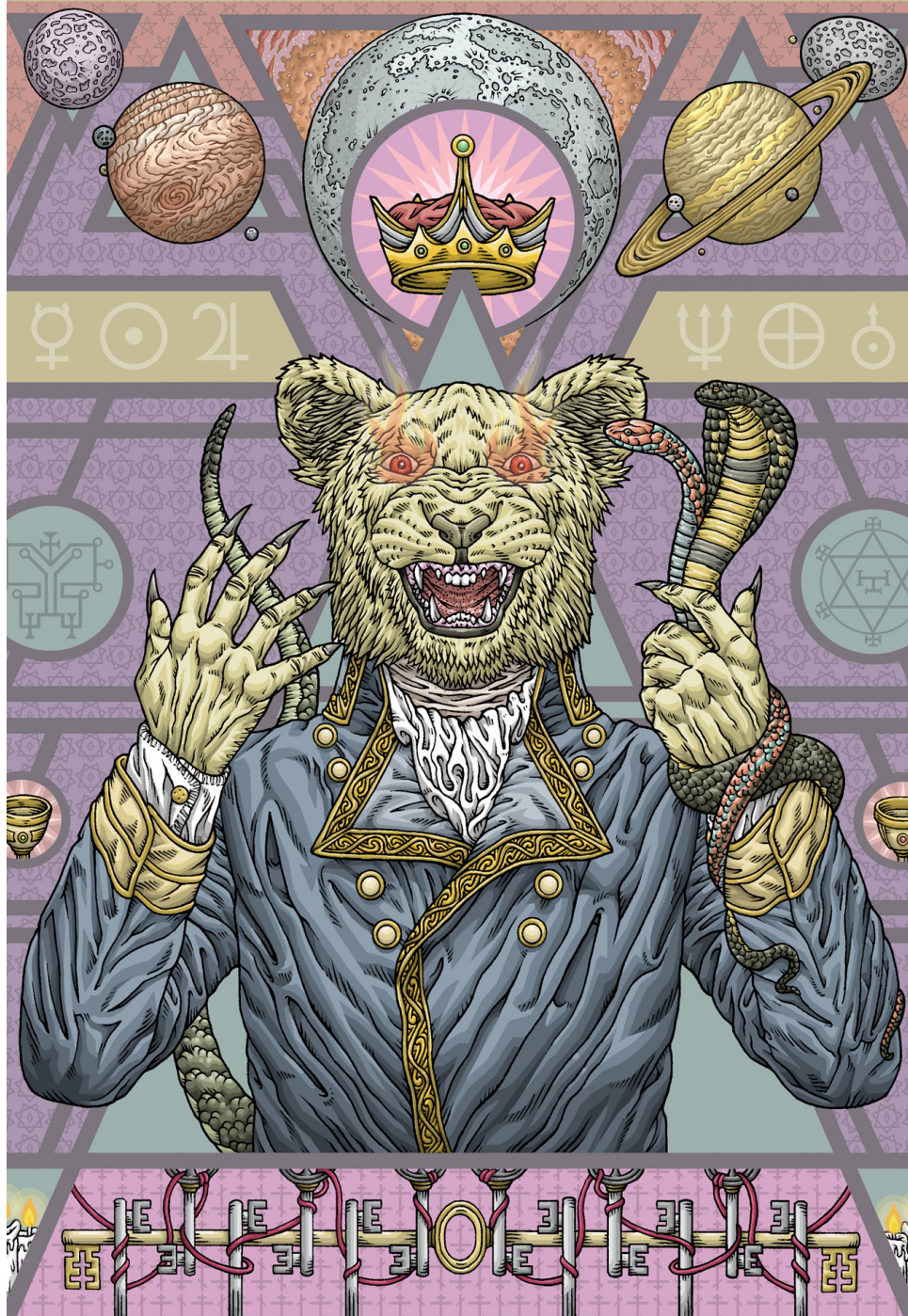


plate 9. the demon Orias

Playlist |

"Never Land," by The Sisters of Mercy

"Crane Your Neck," by Lady Lamb

"Twenty Four Hours Ago," 12 Rods

"Lune," by Periphery

"Obstacles," by Syd Matters

"Black and Yellow," by Wiz Khalifa

"Los Rancheros," by Adam & The Ants

"Hip Hop," by Dead Prez

"No Future," by Blink 182

"The Less I Know the Better," by Tame Impala

"Your Ex-Lover is Dead," by Stars

"Fa Cé-La," by The Feelies

"Born Again Teen," by Lucius

"Avocado, Baby," by Los Campesinos!

"Didgeridoo," by Aphex Twin

"I Against I," by Massive Attack

[Listen now on Spotify](#)

Selected by Stu Hovath, Matt Marrone, Jeremy Voss, Casey Lynch, Matt Sayer, David Shimomura, Ian Gonzales, Jason McMaster, Erik Weinbrecht, Gavin Craig, Declan Taggart, Michael Edwards, Sara Clemens, Melissa King, Chuck Moran and Ken Lucas.

Reading List |

The Fisherman, by John Langan

The Sense of an Ending, by Julian Barnes

How to Talk About Video Games, by Ian Bogost

Skin Game, by Jim Butcher

Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham, by Mike Mignola, Richard Pace, Troy Nixey, and Dennis Janke

American Gods, by Neil Gaiman

Sharp Objects, by Gillian Flynn

Grind: Inside Baseball's Endless Season, by Barry Svrluga

Dodger, by Terry Pratchett


Democracy Now!, by Amy Goodman

The Night and the Music, by Lawrence Block

Pond, by Claire-Louise Bennett

Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa

Selected by Stu Hovath, Jeremy Voss, Matt Sayer, David Shimomura, Ian Gonzales, Jason McMaster, Erik Weinbrecht, Don Becker, Gavin Craig, Declan Taggart, Michael Edwards, Sara Clemens and Chuck Moran.



Threes - Unwinnable's General Counsel, Ed Coleman, mentioned a few weeks ago that he played *Threes* most days on his commute. This off-handed comment wheedled its way into my brain and I soon found myself downloading the game for the first time since I kicked it back in 2014. What a terrible thing, to backslide into this compulsive puzzle playing. I have played my battery dead more nights I am willing to admit and still can't top my two-year-old high score. I'm doomed.

(Stu Horvath)

Shaun White Skateboarding - I had a craving for a skateboarding game, and Steam is sorely lacking in options. *Shaun White* isn't on the level of *Tony Hawk*, but it's got grindin' and frontside 540s, and the mechanic of restoring color to the city by nailing tricks still feels fresh. In the absence of a good modern skating game, it does the job.

(Matt Sayer)

Pokémon Go - I feel 10 again on the inside and that's all that matters.

(Erik Weinbrecht)

Pokémon Go - Because walking around near my workplace is better than sitting at my desk.

(Don Becker)

Pokémon Go - My office is right by the river, so I've been farming Magikarp like it's my job (while still doing my actual job, of course). Now I have a Gyarados.

Ho - ho - ho

(Sara Clemens)

Pokémon Omega Ruby - I needed some more substance than what Pokemon Go has to offer.

(David Shimomura)

Sorcery! 2 - Because I want to feel like I did when I was 10 years old, too, and *Pokémon* passed me by.

(Declan Taggart)

Fallout: New Vegas - I had decided to replay *Fallout 3* since I'm more lore savvy now compared to the first time I played it, and all I could think the entire time was "gee, I sure wish this was *New Vegas*." So, I ordered *New Vegas* and dropped 3 like a hot potato as soon as it was delivered to my home.

(Melissa King)

(*Theme*)



Body Horror





Wave of Mutilation

By **Anthony McGlynn**

The first *Dead Space* is a vulgar experience. The 2008 survival horror game was sold on the many different ways it allows the player to amputate enemies with weapons like the plasma cutter and the pulse rifle. And boy, did it deliver on that promise! What made the game truly interesting, though, was the setting – the darkened corridors of the USG Ishimura, the infested ship you must cut your way through, combined with the game's long draw distance, made playing a properly chilling experience.

The game's story is simple and effective – the ship's captain sabotages the mission leading to the infestation – but it's the animated prequel film, *Dead Space: Downfall*, that brings full context to the terror. A mining expedition sent from the ship had discovers a Marker, an alien monolith, and the captain orders it brought on board. A signal from the Marker takes hold of members of the crew, turning them into the Necromorphs. Eventually the entire ship becomes a hive of these scythe-armed, bug-like creatures, waiting for the next ship to come along and discover them.



What will this enlightenment teach? Who knows? Who cares? All that's important is that convergence is real and we should all wish to be a part of it.

The film reveals that the captain of the Ishimura was a member of a religion that centred on the Markers. The Church of Unitology, as they call themselves, worship these relics. Their philosophy is a heady concoction of Creationism that dictates that the human race is the result of a divine alien agency's design and a fervent eschatological belief that they will bring our rebirth. After the discovery of the Black Marker on Earth, the Church began as a cult worshipping

the writings etched on the alien artifact, which speak of grand unification. Under the guise of "transformation and rebirth," they espouse that the next step in our physical evolution can only be granted by the convergence, a transformative event caused by the Markers.

The convergence is not a rebirth to further our evolution, but our devastation. The signal rewrites DNA, transforming human flesh into that of Necromorphs, horrifying aliens with scythes for arms. Our conversion into Necromorphs is the first step in the birthing of a gigantic, space-faring creature known as a Brethren Moon. High-ranking Unitologists are aware that the Marker's influence is lethal and they believe that those who become Necromorphs are somehow defective. Helpfully,

anytime the truth is realized, a host of freshly-turned Necromorphs murdered everyone.

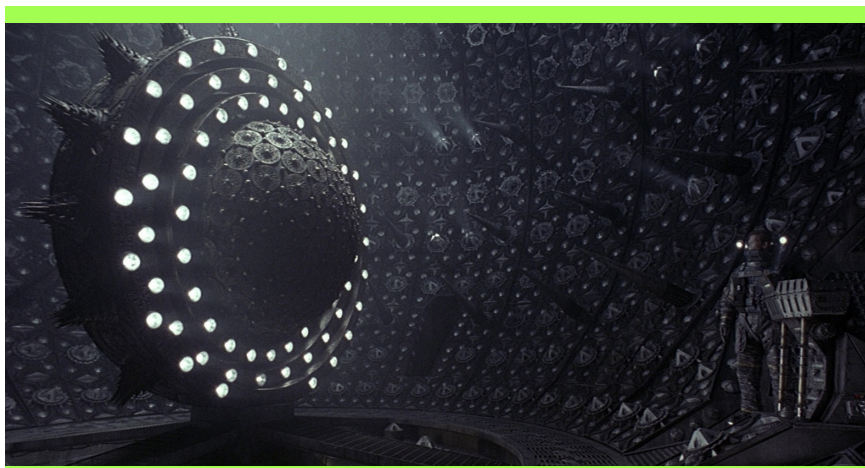
Unitology functions with a kind of new-wave fundamentalism. Though members take the word of the Markers as gospel, they don't entirely reject science. Their belief is a merging of a bedding of science – that we are evolved creatures – and a consummate desire to ascend and become something altogether *more*. The Markers' promise that we can become part of something new is not only perversely inviting from a scientific standpoint, it's a confirmation of a fundamental rule of thumb common to all major religions: there is a paradise that only the worthy shall inherit. The convergence is a transfiguration we can actually experience. What will this enlightenment teach? Who knows? Who cares? All that's important is that convergence is real and we should all wish to be a part of it.

Their fervent belief is echoed in the character arc of one Dr. William Weir, in the film *Event Horizon*. A physics engineer, Weir is the designer of the ship *Event Horizon* and its "experimental gravity drive," which allows it to create and travel through wormholes. The ship disappears for seven years and when



it reappears, Weir is part of the team sent to investigate it. A video relays the original crew engaging in an animalistic orgy in which they tear themselves apart in a fit of madness, while the ship's captain holds his freshly gouged-out eyes up to camera, repeating Latin phrase, "liberate tute me ex inferis." *Save yourself, from hell.*

Throughout the movie, nightmarish visions haunt the reconnaissance team. They extrapolate that the ship itself is generating the visions – wherever it went made it capable of reacting to stimuli. Weir develops an obsession with the ship, staring into the gravity drive he designed. What begins as mere pride for what he built becomes a twisted worship of the ship and a devout desire to bringing it back to whatever hellscape it visited.



Weir grows to view the ship the same way the Church of Unitology views the Markers. The horrific hallucinations his crewmates suffer from, the seemingly inevitable violence – these are things he's aware of, but rather than disgust him, they drive his dedication to *Event Horizon*. He humanizes and then deifies the ship, regarding it as a She as he begins to learn that it was fundamentally altered in a way beyond human understanding. He tries to sabotage the crew's escape, telling them that they can't leave because "She won't let them." They are Her new crew, who'll serve to return her to wherever she ended up for those seven years.

Weir's infatuation with *Event Horizon* comes from a kind of parental pride in his invention's success and a deep yearning to witness what it is capable of first-hand. During the movie, he gouges out his own eyes as a sort of atonement, to become more at one with the ship. It's the same indoctrination Unitology is built on – the knowledge of something far beyond human perception and a

need to be a part of that thing. Weir and Unitologists see the sacrifice of the human body as a suitable one.

Though delusional, that kind of compulsion is intoxicating because of how it plays into our primal insecurities. The idea that the human race is somehow alone in the known universe is a lonely one. The idea we're not alone, but can't be a part of the greater whole because of our inferiority? That's even lonelier.

Weir's mental breakdown comes at the hands of a realization of the great unknowable. *Event Horizon* had travelled too far and, in its wake, Weir comes dangerously close to staring into the black seas of the infinity. The need to voyage there himself drives him mad.

Unitology is founded on that same need, but without the vessel immediately on hand. The events of the first *Dead Space* happen because the captain of *USG Ishimura* decides to take it on-board the ship, effectively dooming everyone aboard. The fixation on the Markers overrides any kind of logic. When they come close, madness ultimately takes hold.

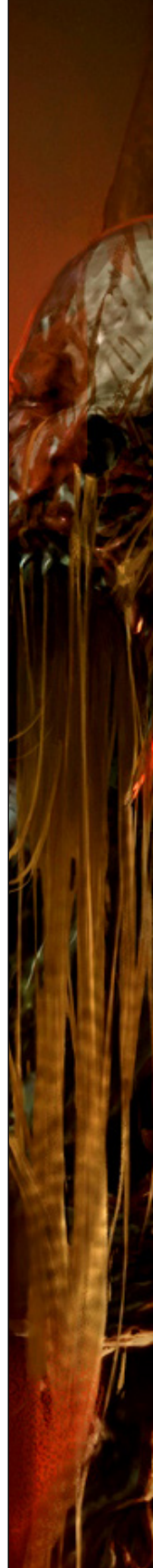
Both Weir and the Unitologists wish to pay for enlightenment with their flesh. In the face of such an opportunity, they view human bodies as currency and conduits, parts of the sacrificial ritual to gain access to something greater. The convergence, wherever *Event Horizon* went to, they're one in the

same – a great beyond to strive for, to explore, to become a part of, to attain. It costs the human body, but what price is that compared to becoming part of something more whole, to unlocking a new understanding of the universe?

These events tell us that we're both not alone and not enough. Our journeys to the stars have yielded a new place for us and it is below the bottom. Dr. Weir and the Unitologists, though vile, merely seek to turn frustration into action. To pay the toll instead of trying to ignore their otherwise total inadequacy. If we made such a discovery tomorrow, would you be able to resist the same thoughts? Resist the urge to explore, to join and evolve? To shed the limitations of the human body? To stem the curiosity?

Well... Could you? 🍷

It costs the human body, but what price is that compared to becoming part of something more whole, to unlocking a new understanding of the universe?





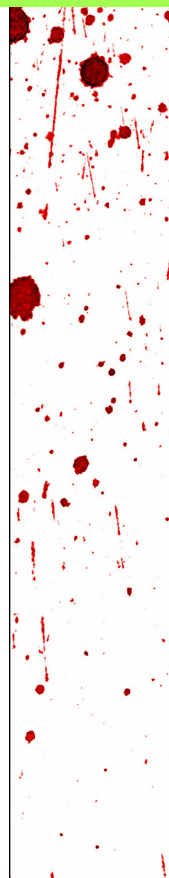
Fear the Old Blood

By Hazel Monforton

Drown yourselves in the blood of Christ crucified, bathe in his Blood, slake your thirst in his Blood, inebriate yourselves in his Blood, array yourselves in his Blood, mourn and rejoice in his Blood, grow strong in the Blood, lose your weakness and blindness in the Blood of the spotless Lamb.

— Saint Catherine of Siena

Catherine's theology was one of personal union with Christ; she testifies her own love so that others might find it within themselves. Through her demand and desire of frequent Communion, that union was affected through consuming the flesh and drinking the precious blood of her savior. Through this practice, she gained the knowledge and the understanding of God that she craved. Alongside this, corporeality – admitting to one's hunger and sating it



with the flesh and blood of God – was the most basic symbol of encountering the divine in the Middle Ages. To this day Holy Communion remains the most sacred and intimate union between Christ and his faithful. Blood and flesh is His essence and blood and flesh is how the faithful must take him.

After being denied the Eucharist, which was, at the time, her only earthly sustenance – Christ came to her and offered to give her private Communion from the wound in his side. Cradling her head in his arms, Catherine knelt before her Lord and drank the holy blood of the Divine to form a physical and spiritual dependence on Christ's body like a child on the breast.

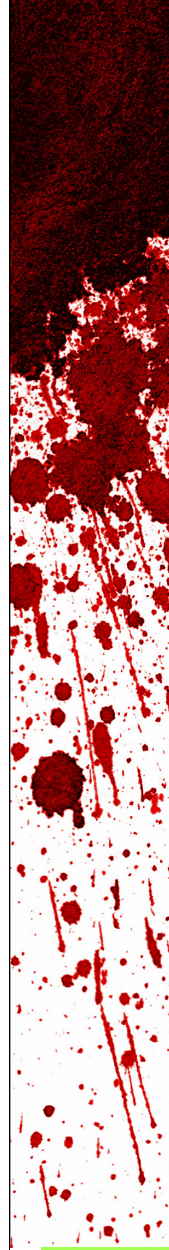
Catherine of Siena died in 1380 after a lifetime of starvation, sacrifice and service to the Catholic Church. She served as not only a theologian and author but also as an extreme ascetic whose visions during these intense periods of self-starvation deeply touched the incarnated nature of God. Her personal theology and experience with the Divine illuminates not only Christian worship but the way *Bloodborne* constructs and enacts the Divine as an experience located within the body.

The blood of Christian imagery stains the world of *Bloodborne*. Formless spirits impregnate women who wail at the death of their celestial children. Consuming the flesh and blood of the Divine as an act of ritual worship drives adherents into a frenzy. The Healing Church prizes their saints and martyrs for their physicality as much as their holiness. Those that try to sate themselves on the Old Blood become ravenous beasts, creatures with mouths filled with teeth, consumed whole by their need for blood.

While Christ suffered and died on the Cross, so too the inhabitants of Yharnam: divinity is a fleshly thing. The gods are among them, weeping, bleeding, hungering, unknowable but finite in their own physicality. Ebrietas, the Great One, waits beneath the Healing Church in a perpetual kneel before the Altar of Despair. Her name is Latin for intoxication; we are to assume the church has used her blood's properties. As in the Eucharist, the Church drinks her blood to try to make contact with the Old Ones; as in the Passion, Ebrietas's suffering records her divinity.

And the passions of the Saints, as with God's, are all of fleshly suffering; Saint Valerie holds her own severed head, caught miraculously at the moment of her execution. Saint Agatha holds aloft a platter bearing her own torn breasts, while Saint Lucy presents her gouged eyes to the penitent. Suffering

While Christ suffered and died on the Cross, so too the inhabitants of Yharnam: divinity is a fleshly thing.



Confusion over just what was on that platter in artistic depictions of Agnes led to her being the patron saint of bell makers.

- Editor


connects the human to the divine; the shared blood shed for faith that unites them. Even Catherine herself, famed for her mystical marriage with the infant Christ in a vision, wears a wedding band not made from gold or jewels but the Savior's own severed foreskin.

While Yharnam's Healing Church performs "blood ministration," it is unclear whether they are ministering the sick or the blood itself. The Healing Church, as with Mensis – Latin for 'month', from which we get 'menses' and 'menstrual' – seeks contact and union with the Gods through these acts of bloodied communion. This desire, this ritualistic frenzy, was a something with which Catherine had intimate knowledge. While most took Communion once a month, Catherine asked to take it every day. When this privilege was granted, she often fell into ecstatic trances that paralyzed her and even lead to her ejection from the building. Knowledge and understanding is a visceral experience; as the impostor Iosefka exclaims as she shudders and heaves on the operating table during the Blood Moon, "It feels awful, but it proves that I'm chosen. Don't you see? How they writhe, writhe inside my head...It's...rather...rapturous..." Blood is Truth, and the Truth is understood through suffering.

Upon Catherine's death, her head was removed from her body and encased in a gilded reliquary which stands today in the Basilica di San Domenico in Siena. Draped in her white veil, her yellowed skin stretches tight over sunken, sightless eyes as jewels glint along the base of her eternal casement. When we approach Yharnam's Grand Cathedral for the first time, we witness Vicar Amelia kneeling before the disembodied and decayed head of the First Vicar, Laurence; it is before his grotesque skull that she transforms into a beast. Still she clutches close the locket that holds the truth of Laurence's awful fate. The inscription: *Fear the Old Blood*.

To eat the flesh of God is to accept God into oneself; there were Christians terrified of taking the Eucharist because of their own feelings of unworthiness. Still others would accept the wafer and taste honey, blood or flesh on their pious tongues. Some saw visions; of Christ himself offering his blood or as the infant Christ carved up like a lamb on a platter. But there was no satiety to be found at this table. Hunger is desire, and as Catherine knew, desire for the Divine is the insatiable hunger, that ravenous beast, which eats at us from the inside out until we can do nothing but suffer.





Drinking the blood of our fellows, birthing the child of God, or lining our brain with glistening eyes; *Bloodborne* engages in the corporeal intimacies of Christian worship. There is, like Catherine of Siena's life, a personal communion. It is a private revelation, in Saint Adeline's words. God is a living, breathing body; a body that suffers, a body that bleeds. And our bodies are more than simple mediators between our consciousness and the world; our bodies are instruments of the divine, through which we take a daily communion of God's flesh. As with the Christian sacraments, *Bloodborne* locates the intersections between the human and the divine within the body: in the veins, in the mouth, and in the eye. And in Catherine's theology, it was not the resurrection of Christ but his incarnation as God, a God who bled, suffered, and died with his children, that was most important to living in this life.

May the good blood
guide your way. 🩸



Gross Physicality

By Austin Price

Kentaro Miura's dark fantasy *Berserk* is a work of gross physicality. Gross because it is a repulsive, disgusting story, yes, gross because Miura often sees the body as nothing more than a kind of septic balloon filled with meat, blood and shit. Eyes and teeth pop out of crushed skulls like candy out of a pinata, ropes of organs trail from bisected bodies, plague scars fester and boils ooze all over the skin of the diseased, swords slice fingers from hands as if separating leaves from trees and all of it is rendered in grizzly, exact detail.

Gross as well because in *Berserk*, the physical is all-encompassing. The exaggerated violence of the series, which must seem pornographic at first, is in truth a gruesome reminder that nothing and no one exists independent of their body. God himself is only the literal embodiment of people's deepest suspicions that the world is inherently evil. Be you unsullied royalty, pious clergy or rank-and-file mercenary, your body is the literal and figurative limit



of the world, only ever a sword swipe or a crossbow bolt away from exposing this ugly truth. The body is itself a horror.

Torture reduces the noble Griffith – a commander of unparalleled skill, unmatched strength and unearthly beauty – to a mute, impotent husk unable even to lift a spoon to feed himself; women are nothing more than sex objects and tools to carry on the next generation no matter their intelligence or ability.

Certain characters unfortunate enough to run afoul of the demonic faction

known as Apostles – the secret chiefs of the world – are marked with an unmistakable brand, like cattle, as if to remind them that there is no escape from the sad reality of their physical forms short of grizzly death.

The body is itself a horror.

A sick joke, no doubt, but one befitting of demons who know firsthand the horrors that plague those living at the bottom of the world. For before they were monsters, the Apostles all were men and women fallen so deep into despair they willingly sacrificed the one person they held dearest in the world for a second chance at life. Each was given a new form to mark the occasion, and while a very lucky few came out better for the exchange – taking on the appearance of winged minotaurs or crystalline dragons – most now resemble discarded Giger concepts: a fetal torso with phallic head rising from the center of an insectoid abdomen; an orb covered in gaping, idiot mouths roving on a bundle of tentacles.; a pair of human legs and tongue peeking out from a pocket of reptilian scales.

In a strange inversion, their bodies have become an outward projection of their innermost desires. No Gregor Samsas, though, they celebrate this metamorphosis, throwing themselves into every facet of life – into sex, into war, into feasting – with maniacal violence. For the already simian Wyald, whose transformation gives him a gorilla-like body that manifests his gorilla-sized lusts in the form of a demonic penis/tongue as large as a battering ram, there is no motto left but “make it fun, make it stimulating” and nothing left worth doing beyond raping and pillaging. The corpulent Count has transformed into a gargantuan slug and now sates himself on the corpses of his subjects.

It seems strange that anybody would so readily accept such a transformation. Our first reaction to body horror as an audience is, after all, a shuddering recognition that there is something deeply wrong in such biological perversions. Nobody needs to explain Tetsuo's anguished cries as he transforms into a gigantic baby made of organs in *Akira* or Seth Brundle's wild-eyed desperation



Nobody needs to explain Tetsuo's anguished cries as he transforms into a gigantic baby made of organs in *Akira* or Seth Brundle's wild-eyed desperation as he searches for a cure in *The Fly*.

as he searches for a cure in *The Fly*. We know, without being told, the pain they must be enduring; it is not difficult to imagine the mental anguish they suffer as their thoughts shift into alien modes that match the unholy forms they now inhabit. What could possibly lead anyone to accept so horrid a mutation, let alone appreciate it?

The Godhand – the pantheon of Cenobite-like deities who reign over the Apostles and control causality within the world of *Berserk* – may promise all those who become Apostles will “never know sorrow or despair.” That they “shall transcend their very humanity.” But the promise is a rook. Becoming the monstrous embodiment of your own darkest desires could never guarantee escape. Stuck still in your body, you would remain defined by all the same pressures that warped you

in the first place, able to do little more than thrash and rage against your lot all the more. In the end, you would only ever find yourself more deeply ensconced, like a man stuck in quicksand flailing wildly about. Yet, therein lies the very appeal.

What the Godhand offer is not transcendence. What they offer is debasement, and the Apostles accept because they know there is no escaping the world. Any desire to do so is a mug's game. They have seen God's agents – they have seen God – and know even the most elevated of beings are still bound to a form grotesque. Only those who sink to the level of the world's basest logic will be able to control it, and the only way to do that is to possess a body of exceeding power.

A body too frail or weak would be no good; you would merely end up another victim, and in *Berserk*, there is no human so strong that they are anything greater than another victim waiting to happen. Likewise, a body that's too human would be subject to the same sets of social and psychological pressures that attend human appearance. Thus, these Apostles sacrifice their humanity and become abominations of the worst kind. They have learned the dark lesson of Miura's nihilistic materialism.

In our own way so, too, have we. As body horror fans we return, time and time again, to characters like the Apostles, not with hopes of learning some lesson about being comfortable with our bodies or for a reminder that, as the pop psychologist tell us, our bodies can turn against us, no. What we feel is not



so much fear – for fear demands the elimination of the other – but fascination. While we might cover our eyes at the sight of these monsters, we still peep out from the space in between our fingers with half-disguised curiosity. Like children, the things that repel us most are also the things that compel us. We know that there is something deeply, ironically human about this desire to wallow in carnality. We know as well there is an element of these character's willful self-degradation that is sympathetic no matter how atrocious their actions. Who has not found themselves so cornered that they would do anything to possess power that would put them beyond such despair? Is there anyone, living or dead, who has not hoped to rise above the suffering inherent in the world? It seems unlikely.

Sooner or later, everybody comes up hard against the realization that there is nothing beyond the material world before us, that power – real, physical, unfettered power – is the only guarantee we have of harnessing that world and that our bodies define our power within this setting. Though we find ways around – cooperating with others, science, a million and one tools – these are only stop gaps and contingencies: inevitably we will be left with nothing but ourselves.

Better then that these selves match the horrors of the world we see, that they take the world on its own basest terms rather than seek to transcend them. At least when we're playing by the logic of this world will we have some measure of control over it. If it leaves us looking so much worse for the wear? So be it. That is our true nature. That is the sad reality of this gross physicality. 🍷



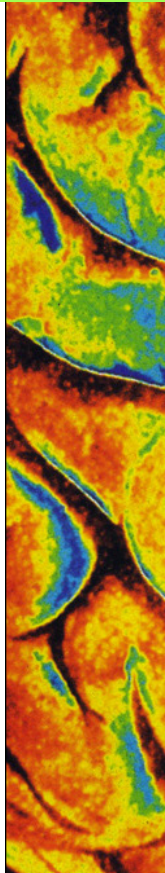


The Blunt Force Horror of Addiction

By **Matthew Byrd**

When you're addicted, your life becomes a series of clichés. You layabout in the physical mess you've made for yourself long after you've stopped caring about the prospect of someone who may care seeing you like this. There's no chance of that happening, anyway, as you've cut ties with judging eyes in exchange for a relationship with those who finally understand that the purpose of life is to combat the pain of existence through any substances necessary. You spend your days in the pursuit of making yourself as numb as possible, and then you wake up and do it again.

I spent three years of my life never willingly knowing a day of sobriety and, in some ways, I'm still ashamed to refer to myself during that time as an addict. Not entirely because I'm ashamed of how I spent my time, mind you, but rather because I never reached a point where I resembled the addicts I had seen in various forms of entertainment. I never turned to the needle, I never



lived on the streets, I never stole from my mom for another fix and I never reached into the worst toilet in Scotland to retrieve lost drugs.

It seems like such a silly thing to downplay your own addictions because they do not quite match the ones you've seen on film or read about in books, doesn't it? Yet, you must understand that I was also something of an entertainment junkie during this time (honestly, I was hooked on just about any form of escape) and the most hardcore of fictional junkies became a kind of line in the sand to me. So long as I did not pass their exploits, I was doing all right. I suppose that I've always felt that everyone else would think the same.

In my heart, I know that's not true. I know that addiction is addiction and that measuring it by degrees is a poor way to gauge your health. However, in a way, I will always look towards entertainment portrayals of addiction for some kind of connection. For something that always allows me to look upon it and remind myself why I cannot go back.

In many ways, that work portrayal has long been Frank Henenlotter's 1988 film *Brain Damage*.

At the time of *Brain Damage*'s release, Frank Henenlotter had already established himself as a master of the body horror genre. Henenlotter's work on 1982's *Basket Case* showed that the man was capable of exploring the more graphically seedy elements of this genre with a particular dark wit that didn't seem as interested in social commentary as the works of David Cronenberg.

Brain Damage was very different in that respect. This tale of a parasitic life form named Aylmer that offers hallucinogenic bliss to a young New Yorker by the name of Brian in exchange for human brains is unmistakably a glorified metaphor for the hardcore drug usage haunting America during that time.

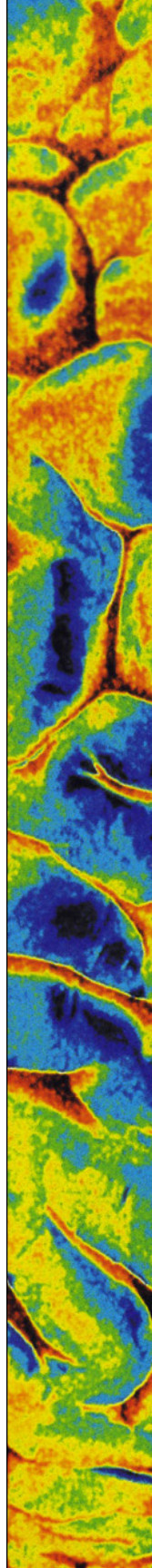
Actually, the movie's intentions can be best understood as a parody of the anti-drug PSA culture of that era. Released about a year after the infamous "This is your brain; this is your brain on drugs" commercial, *Brain Damage* often seems to revel in knowingly applying a heavy dosage of that old *Reefer Madness* absurdity to the modern "shock and awe" style anti-drug piece. From the moment that Brian becomes a kind of accidental addict after Aylmer chooses him as a host, *Brain Damage* begins to spout a tirade of popular "Just Say No" sentiments with its tongue firmly in cheek.

"Of course you can become addicted from using drugs just once."

"Yes, the feeling of being high produces a sensational light show that the sober mind could never replicate."

"Never doubt that you will betray anyone and perform horrific acts in exchange for that next fix."

If a viewer does not hear the snickering behind these statements, perhaps



it is because they are too busy being traumatized by *Brain Damage*'s liberal use of extreme violence. Though the type of gore we see in *Brain Damage* is the same over-the-top kind popularized by B-horror films of the '80s, it ends up packing a formidable punch when combined with the movie's underlying sarcastic humor. This is especially true of the film's most infamous sequence, which shows Brian following a young lady to the alley behind a club where she offers to perform oral sex. Upon unzipping his pants, however, she is greeted by the very phallic Aylmer whose subsequent method of retrieving her brains begins to resemble the act she was about to perform.

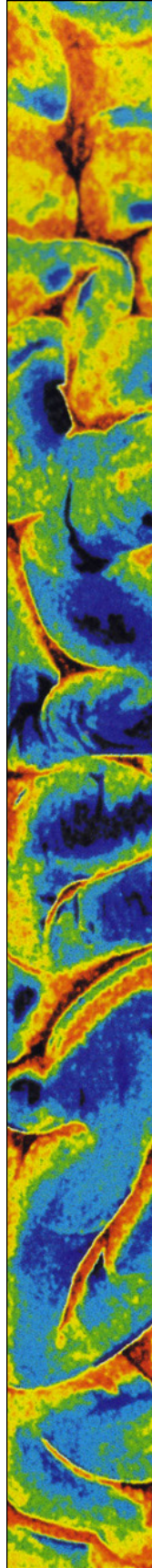
Though that scene was cut from *Brain Damage*'s theatrical version, it nonetheless manages to perfectly summarize why so many people (even Henenlotter fans) despised the film upon its release. It failed to replicate the nonchalant seedy fun of *Basket Case* and instead came across as a confused film with a misplaced sense of importance. What praise the movie did receive was typically reserved for its practical effects and ability to comically skewer the most outlandish of PSA messages.

While *Brain Damage*'s dark wit and casual gore make it easy to analyze the film as a simple parody, what cannot be discounted is the way that Frank Henenlotter's mastery of the body horror concept allows him to, almost by accident, turn *Brain Damage* into the premiere anti-drug film of the genre.

Body horror is most commonly defined as a work that deals in the "graphic destruction or degeneration of the body." It examines what happens when individuals' obsessions and curiosities cause them to lose their humanity in a physical sense. Aware of their physical malformations, but now unable to willingly revert themselves to the person they once were, these mutations must endure a kind of horror that is perhaps best described by this passage from Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream*:

**I CAN DREAM, I CAN WONDER, I CAN LAMENT.
OUTWARDLY: DUMBLY, I SHAMBLE ABOUT, A
THING THAT COULD NEVER HAVE BEEN KNOWN
AS HUMAN, A THING WHOSE SHAPE IS SO
ALIEN A TRAVESTY THAT HUMANITY BECOMES
MORE OBSCENE FOR THE VAGUE RESEMBLANCE.
INWARDLY: ALONE. I HAVE NO MOUTH. AND I
MUST SCREAM.**

There is perhaps no greater example of *Brain Damage*'s natural ability to portray the terror of addiction through body horror conventions than the



character of Aylmer. Aylmer may provide the substance that Brian becomes hooked on, but in reality, Aylmer is the personification of addiction. His promise to provide Brian with a new life free of pain and loneliness is less of an offer and more of a threat of what life without him may be like. When Brian is attempting to get clean by waiting for the withdraw effects of Aylmer's drugs to fade away (a rare moment where the film offers no comfort through humor or absurdity), Aylmer is there to calmly assure Brian that he has been

***Brain Damage* doesn't present Brian as a victim of some faceless evil substance, but rather gives that substance a clearly evil form and forces us to watch as Brian crawls back willing towards it.**

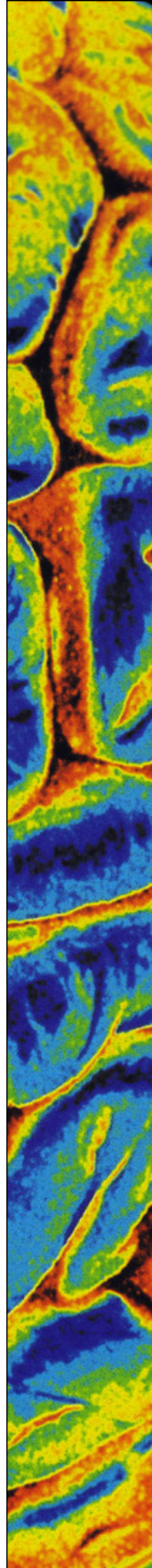
at this for a long time and that there is no way that he will outlast him. He even sings light-hearted songs while Brian tears away at his skin in agony.

The singing remains so haunting all these years later. Films like *Panic in Needle Park* and *Requiem for a Dream* have always relied on making the audience come to terms with the terrors of addiction by making them feel depressed as they watch a fellow human fall to the worst horrors our mortal world can offer. *Brain Damage* isn't interested in making you feel depressed. It doesn't present Brian as a victim of some faceless evil substance, but rather gives that substance a clearly evil (even

mocking) form and forces us to watch as Brian crawls back willing towards it. Even though Brian is released from the torture he knows that he suffers from and is able to scream once more, he would rather accept this parasite that mutes his fears back into his life than find any redemption in the pain.

If this sounds like a cruel way to view an addict, perhaps it is. Then again, *Brain Damage* is a cruel film. It's unflinching in its vulgarity and dares you to be entertained by its violence. Though the same can be said of many body horror films, what makes *Brain Damage* special is that it suggests that a genre we typically allow ourselves to be entertained by, based solely on the fact that its most horrific elements are ultimately sensationalized works of exploitative fiction, may indeed not be that unrealistic after all, at least as it concerns the process of becoming an addict.

Brain Damage may handle the sensationalized subject of general drug use with razor-sharp wit, but when it comes to the topic of addiction, the film is a blunt-force horrific examination of how a true addict can begin to resemble the type of monstrous creation typically reserved for the most terrifying works of body horror. 🍷





Mental Illness, Memoirs & Games

By **Kaitlin Tremblay**

To be completely honest, I wasn't quite sure what body horror was when I started making games that were, quite ostensibly, body horror. Which is a funny thing to say, now that body horror has become a political genre for me to talk about healing. But when I started making games, my aim wasn't to make something that grossed people out or made them feel sick (as a friend of mine told me was the case for her when I first gave a talk on my games).

I was just trying to make a game that was honest about how I felt about my body.

That first game was [*Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before*](#), a straightforward game where you follow a woman as she unravels psychologically and physically dismembers herself, before reconstructing her body with new body parts. It's pretty standard for the sub-genre.



The player creates a Frankenstein monster out of the parts they previously dismembered from Elizabeth as a reaction to vague, unspecified symptoms.

My idea behind *Stop Me* wasn't to gross people out. It was an attempt to convey the weird and torturous relationship you can have with your body while you're suffering from and attempting to recover from an eating disorder. While I didn't realize it at first, Twine was the perfect tool for me to tell this story in. Not just because Twine is accessible and has the lowest

barrier to entry of any game-making tool out there, but because at the time I had no idea on how to put images into games in Twine. Due to my own impatience and technical limitations, I was forced to convey everything I wanted through words and what I hoped were clever hyperlinks.

For eating disorders, where discussion is often heavily focused on appearance to the point of being almost counterproductive, making *Stop Me* without any visuals forced me to talk about what it's actually like. How you actually feel about your body, rather than how it looks. And in *Stop Me*, the player is forced to help the protagonist, Elizabeth, dismember the parts she doesn't like about herself.

I wanted to show people the deep self-hatred, the pain and the urgency in the pain, the kind of urgency that leads to distress. Cutting off fat, replacing bones and creating a new Elizabeth from old parts is the core of the gameplay of *Stop Me*. The player creates a Frankenstein monster out of the parts they previously dismembered from Elizabeth as a reaction to vague, unspecified symptoms. It's reactionary and it's about clinging to whatever attempt at feeling better you have in the midst of overwhelming self-loathing and embodied desperation.

Depending on the route the player chooses in *Stop Me*, the dismembering and reconstruction comes at different points. Regardless of the order of the events, the game ends the same way: Elizabeth's new body crumbles, breaks and she is left worse off than when she started. It's not a pleasant game. It's an ugly game about ugly feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. The horror represents these conflicting feelings toward my own body: a fraught sort of abhorrence mixed with urgent (and sometimes destructive) self-care.

It's a game that I don't really show people or talk about much anymore. It served its purpose, but it no longer feels like what I want to accomplish with storytelling and games. It did teach me two important things, though. One: that making games is a powerful way for me to talk about mental illness; and two, that body horror is the way I want to talk about healing. I'm free to talk



about things the way I actually feel them, unrestricted. Through metaphor, I have a freedom to be honest, rather than trying to couch what I feel in easy-to-stomach terms.

Stop Me is the only game I've made that is about symptoms and experiences and not healing. Making it was a raw experience for me. It came on the heels of one of the worst relapses I've ever had with my eating disorder. In many ways, it was a reaction to that relapse and to the intense pain I felt at the end of a relationship that was emotionally and sexually abusive.

Horror is the only time women are believed when we talk about real, uncomfortable and traumatizing things.

Horror is a powerful tool for feminist gamemaking because horror is the only genre in which we believe women unequivocally. Think about *Scream*. As audience members, we know Sidney Prescott is telling the truth when she says she is in danger. As audience members, the tension and suspense comes from when other characters refuse to believe Sidney, to listen to her or to even give her the benefit of the doubt.

Horror is the only time women are believed when we talk about real, uncomfortable and traumatizing things.

Talking about eating disorders specifically, which is so often misunderstood and met with a lot of mainstream stigma, mobilizing this tendency in horror makes me feel safe in telling these otherwise unsafe stories and experiences. If I make a body horror game and construct the main character to be physically dismembering herself, it's easier to get people to believe what that kind of pain would be like than if I just explained what it's like having an eating disorder. Shitty, but true.

My body horror games are where I can get people to listen and then maybe believe. From there, hopefully there can be room for understanding.

Let's take this one step at a time, though. I'm happy right now just to have people believe me.

I don't know if, in the long run, making *Stop Me* was a healing experience. It's an ugly game, in every sense of the word. I had no idea about good game design when I was making it, and the feelings behind it were too raw for it be something that I think of as well designed. On the other hand, it was an important game because it got me making games.

I've moved from making games about symptoms to making [games that focus on healing](#), while still mobilizing body horror tropes and the understanding built in to horror as a genre. *There Are Monsters Under Your Bed* is about how daunting beginning the healing process can be. I made it when I first started on antidepressants and it was an exploration of how overwhelming recovery is. *Say When* takes the idea of *Stop Me*, of self-dismemberment, but introduces a third party: how do we help others who are struggling? How can we unintentionally harm, even when our motives are kind? How can healing take a toll on not only our physical well-being, but also our sanity? These kinds of questions feel like I can only address them through body horror.

For me, recovery is a brutal process. Body horror gave me a space to talk honestly about real feelings.

At the beginning of *Stop Me*, I wrote a little introduction. It reads, “*Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One Before* is an interactive horror story and mostly true memoir. Sometimes metaphors are more real than the events that happen. Sometimes the metaphors are more violent, too.”

I didn’t know at the time that that brief introduction would become the guiding principle for my solo gamemaking practice. Sometimes the metaphors we use to talk about our experiences more genuinely get to the heart of what we mean to say. And when I’m talking about eating disorder recovery, body horror is the truest metaphor I can think of. 🍷





Mother, Maiden & Crone

By Sarah Stang

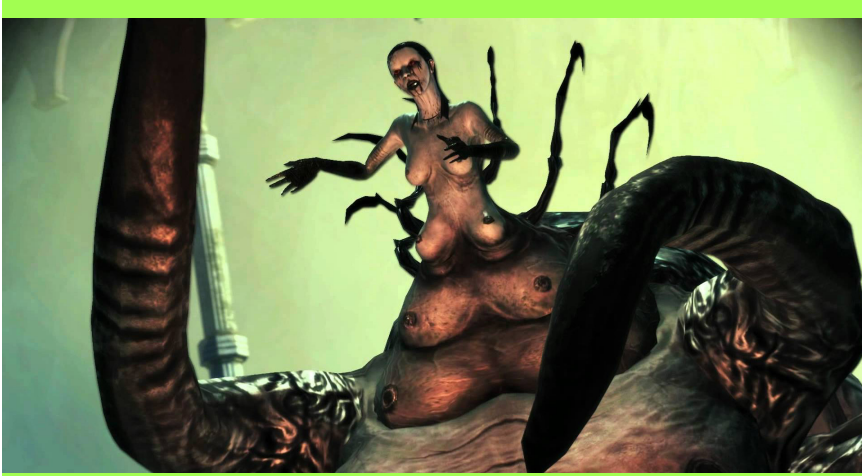
All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.”

Barbara Creed’s now famous analysis of horror films applies Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic discussion of the abject – that which is repulsive, repugnant and must be rejected – to closely examine what she calls the “monstrous-feminine.” These are more than just female versions of male monsters, as “[t]he reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience.”

It is the female physicality of the monstrous-feminine that makes her horrifying.

Of course, as Creed reminds us, “the feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific.”

This is because the films Creed analyzed were all directed by men and were clearly intended for the male gaze. The same can be said of most videogames – videogame developers are overwhelmingly male and [scholars have noted](#) that developers often make games that would appeal to the demographic they fit into themselves.



THE MOTHER

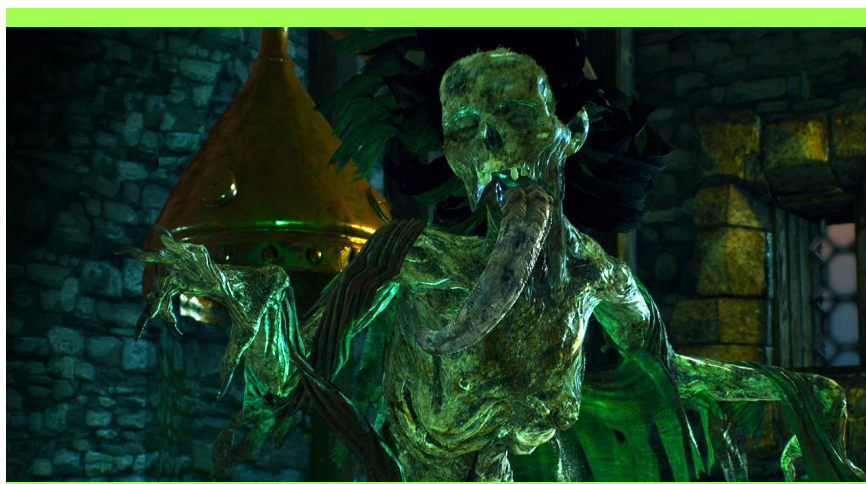
The “dadification” of videogames, seen in many recent titles featuring paternal protagonists, has caused [some game critics](#) to [ask where the mothers are in video games](#). In nearly every game that features a player-as-father-figure, the mother-figure is absent, deceased or outright vilified.

Villainous mothers have always been a staple of Western literary, theatrical and cinematic culture, and they’re certainly present in videogames as well. The mother figure often goes beyond villainy, however, into the realm of the monstrous.

The horror and revulsion associated with the monstrous mother, particularly the pregnant or birthing female monster in horror films, has been a subject of much feminist film scholarship. In writing about David Cronenberg’s 1979 body horror film, *The Brood*, Creed points out that “[t]he mother’s offspring... represent symbolically the horrifying results of permitting the mother too much power. An extreme, impossible situation – parthenogenetic birth – is used to demonstrate the horrors of unbridled maternal power. Parthenogenesis is impossible, but if it could happen, the film seems to be arguing, woman could give birth only to deformed manifestations of herself.”

BioWare’s critically acclaimed fantasy role-playing game, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and its expansion *Dragon Age: Awakening* (2010) clearly parallel this twisted maternity in the figures of the Broodmother and The Mother, respectively. In *Origins*, the player encounters the monstrous Broodmother – an enormous, fleshy, multi-breasted female creature who exists to give birth to litters of twisted and evil Darkspawn. The player then fights this monster, who attacks by screaming, spewing vomit and saliva, and grabbing at the player with her tentacles.

The Mother, a unique, self-aware Broodmother with a similar design and combat style, is the final boss of *Awakening*. Driven insane by her own mutations, she controls hordes of her loyal offspring until the player slays her to restore symbolic order. Broodmothers are created by force-feeding corrupted Darkspawn blood to female prisoners until they become cannibalistic monsters themselves. The race of the female victim, whether elf, dwarf, human or Qunari, determines the type of offspring she produces. In this way, the Broodmother embodies the fear of the fecund female monster: the fear of and revulsion toward bodily excrement, cannibalism and, without paternal input, her unchecked maternal control over deformed manifestations of herself.



THE MAIDEN

As Creed points out, “[t]he ultimate in abjection is the corpse.” The most abject of the monstrous-feminine would be, then, the female corpse.

In CD Projekt RED’s critically acclaimed fantasy role-playing game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the player-character, Geralt of Rivia, often has to face and slay female wraiths, angry spirits which take the form of decaying corpses.

“Classical mythology,” Creed points out, “was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female.” These creatures were almost always killed by the male protagonist, punished for their unchecked sexuality, fecundity and feminine power. Similarly, many of the monsters Geralt faces are female: from succubi to sirens, he slays them with his silver sword, the symbol of his phallic power and paternal authority.

Perhaps the most abject of the female wraiths Geralt faces is the Plague Maiden, or Pesta. This creature is the tormented spirit of a young woman who



was eaten alive by rats and seeks vengeance against the lover who left her to die. She appears as a skeletal woman covered in rotting flesh, scabs and boils, with rats scurrying around her. She spreads pestilence and disease, and according to the game's text, "it is certain that she delights in dealing pain and suffering, in hearing the howling and moaning of men."

This creature clearly embodies the revulsion towards death and decay, bodily alteration, bodily fluids and disease. More importantly, though, in targeting men, she also embodies the fear of the monstrous-feminine.



THE CRONE

According to Creed, "[t]he witch...is a familiar female monster; she is invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts." Among the many female monsters Geralt faces in *The Witcher 3*, the Crones are arguably the most interesting and repugnant. These ancient witches disguise themselves as beautiful young women and hold powerful sway over the peasants who live in their swamp. In her analysis of the figure of the witch, Creed observes that "historically and mythologically, the witch has inspired both awe and dread...Witches were feared because it was thought they could cast terrible spells and bring death to those they curse." The peasants in *The Witcher 3* worship the Crones because they hope to receive their blessing while at the same time fearing their wrath.


Geralt encounters the Crones first as beautiful women portrayed in a tapestry woven of human hair, from which they talk to him and flirt with him. He agrees to help them in exchange for information about his long-lost daughter. After choosing to either do their bidding or not, Geralt encounters the Crones again, this time in their true form. The Brewess is large and fleshy,

her swollen, pockmarked skin bulging out from her clothing and the ropes binding her. The Weavess is a thin, hunched figure, with claw-like hands and bees buzzing in and out of her honeycomb eye socket. The Whispest carries a bloody bag full of children's body parts and wears a necklace of human ears taken in tribute, which she uses to hear everything that happens in her swamp. The Brewess, as her name implies, makes potions and also cooks human soup for her and her sisters to consume.

Even in their revolting forms, they continue to flirt with Geralt, propositioning him in a way clearly meant to both amuse and disgust the player. The Crones strongly evoke the abject, including cannibalism, brews and potions, corporeal alteration, human sacrifice and sexual perversion. These women clearly parallel the witch figure in both mythology and horror, and they, too, are slain by Geralt and his daughter to restore symbolic order.

TRIMORPHE

In the late 1980s, Creed lamented the fact that feminist film scholarship had focused primarily on woman-as-victim, and wondered why woman-as-monster had been so neglected. The same could be said of current videogame scholarship – the lack of dynamic female representation in videogames has been a heated topic of discussion for years; however, while feminist scholars focus on woman as damsel-in-distress, the study of woman-as-monster has been neglected.

The portrayal of the monstrous-feminine in videogames such as *Dragon Age* and *The Witcher 3* fall into a long tradition in Western popular culture of making the female body into something horrific and repulsive. Just as the problematic portrayal of female physicality and maternity in horror films needed to be critiqued thirty years ago, more critical scholarship is needed to analyze the monstrous-feminine in videogames. 





Sympathetic Disgust

By **Dominic Preston**

Body horror has a reputation for being disgusting. From the oozing, bristling flesh of *The Fly* to the instinctively unpleasant premise of the *Human Centipede* trilogy, it would be easy to believe that prompting queasiness is the genre's highest aim. On that view, David Cronenberg and his disciples have devoted themselves to find novel combinations of body parts to provoke the strongest reaction that they can.

Surely there's more to it than that though? Cronenberg's *The Fly* turns 30 this year, and remains much loved. Can you attract three decades of devotion purely by grossing people out? To be fair, Cronenberg is *exceptionally* good at being disgusting (I almost threw up in my mouth just now from looking at a gif from the film), but the 'ick factor' is only half the equation. Every viscous body fluid or stomach-churning prosthetic would be for nothing if it wasn't for body horror's secret weapon: sympathy.

It was when my child protagonist dragged a rotting corpse across the floor to drop it 60 feet onto a switch that I began to wonder what he was really there to do.

As Jeff Goldblum is transformed from scientist Seth Brundle into the grotesque Brundlefly after a bit of accidental gene-splicing, each step of his transition is horrifying. More than that, his journey is tragic, every new development implicitly asking the audience to imagine undergoing such a

transformation themselves. The more deformed and hideous Brundle becomes, the more we are drawn into perverse sympathy as he mourns his lost humanity. He's both monster and victim, threatening and vulnerable. It's the push and pull between those seemingly contradictory forces that gives *The Fly*, and much of body horror, its power.

Though it may not seem so at first blush, the same is true of recent puzzle-platformer *Inside*.

Playdead's follow up to indie hit *Limbo* starts on familiar ground, as you control a young boy, alone in a dark wood with nowhere to go but right. As the game progresses though, it delves down a path less trodden. While breaking into a mysterious facility, you might witness lines of seemingly mindless

human drones. Later, the game requires you to imitate these helpless husks, still later to control them. Although at first it seems the aim might be to help these poor souls, later developments throw this into doubt. It was when my child protagonist dragged a rotting corpse across the floor to drop it 60 feet onto a switch that I began to wonder what he was really there to do.

The game's most terrifying moments – encounters with an aquatic foe, disconcertingly similar in appearance to the player character – that set up the first stages of the sort of transformation seen in *The Fly*. As there, when the change begins, it seems innocuous, beneficial even, as gaining the ability to breathe underwater opens up hitherto inaccessible areas. You're newfound abilities sweep away any immediate concerns, practical expediency outweighing any pesky misgivings about the loss of humanity, much as Brundle revels in the strength and confidence his transition confers.

It's safe to say that the game's second transformation is harder to ignore.

You know that there's something there before you even get a glimpse for yourself. Crowds of scientists and workers gather at the viewing pane, while you desperately crane your neck in vain for a look. The game then drags you away on another dive through the facility's innards, opening hatches you don't

understand as you fight to see it first-hand. And when you finally do . . . could any player possibly have predicted what they'd find in that tank?

The game up to that point hints at human experimentation and genetic manipulation, the drones you encounter becoming gradually more deformed, less developed, as you in turn progress, but there's nothing to prepare you for the amorphous mass of flesh you find at the end of it all, the tangled mess of limbs protruding from a heaving heap of indeterminate body.

Even in this first moment, that disgust/sympathy duality kicks into effect immediately. Horrifying as this . . . thing . . . is, your initial task is clear enough: free it of its shackles, help it – or them, perhaps – escape its aquatic confines. It's a monster, more grotesque than any other the game has yet offered, but it's presented to us first as victim, as an object of sympathy. The player is bound to help it, no matter how repellent – and it really is repellent.

In many other stories, this would be the point where the creature turns on its rescuer, or else puts them in danger through its own maddened rampage. Except this is *Inside* and things are less predictable here. Instead, our silent protagonist finds himself sucked, well, inside the very thing he's trying to save. In a game full of confusing, opaque moments, this is perhaps the pinnacle. At first, I didn't comprehend. Then I wondered if I had somehow failed, been killed and would respawn. Next, I fought with the controls, trying to break the boy free of his fleshy confines. Slowly, acceptance set in: I was no longer boy, but beast. That hideous creature that inspired both pity and disgust was now my own avatar.

From there, *Inside* settles back into familiar tropes, confident that it's done its work. We get the maddened rampage, the rampant destruction, the cathartic revenge, but suddenly it's from our own hands. The monster now charges through the hallways and chambers the player crept through as the boy. Violence is not just possible, but unavoidable, the creature crushing everything, and everyone, in its path.



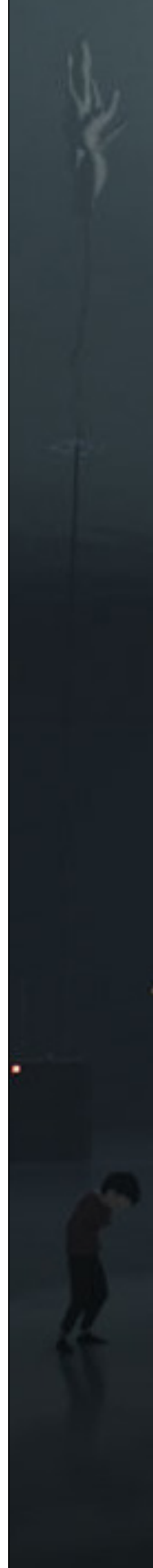
The creature only gets more disgusting as it advances, smeared with blood, shedding limbs to lie twitching on the floor behind it. That revulsion is tempered once again by sympathy though, the piteous cries and moans as it flails ever onwards unsettlingly suggesting a being in constant pain, lashing out in desperate confusion (a clear highlight in a game already packed with excellent sound design). Except that being is *us*. We are it, blindly pushing ahead with no clear aim, wantonly murdering because it seems to be the only thing we *can* do.

We're disgusted by the creature. We're sympathetic to the creature. Through our own control, we feel both more strongly. We feel the strain as we heave its mass around, desperately reaching out the multitude of limbs to grasp the next ledge, and we must somehow rein in our revulsion in order to continue helping it forward. We're also responsible for turning it from victim to monster – it's only through the player that the violent rampage becomes possible. We pity it because we see something of ourselves in it, but it's by adding ourselves to the mix that we've made it the monster we first feared.

Playdead could have created a truly monstrous beast, fanged and horned and generically evil. And that would have been fine for an action-packed climax, the player wreaking havoc and having a grand old time. The creature could have even been truly disgusting – with weeping sores or glowing green puss – and, again, it would have been *fine*. But when people look back on *Inside* in 30 years, it won't be the destruction they remember. It won't be the catharsis, the violence, the chaos. It'll be that confusing cocktail of disgust and sympathy, that contradictory desire to get as far away from the creature as possible while simultaneously wanting to give it a big ol' hug.

Just as *The Fly* is ultimately a tragedy, so is *Inside*. After a frantic 20 minutes of increasingly violent escape attempts, the player finally breaks through the far wall, the only appropriate end to three hours of 'just go to the right'. It's hardly a euphoric finale. Bursting into the fading sunlight, the still-horrifying creature stumbles down the slope to the waterfront, collapsing, never to stir again. It's sweet, and sad, and heartbreaking.

But there's still that bit of me that is glad those limbs have finally stopped wriggling, that mass has stopped heaving, that the horror is finally done. 🙏





The Hidden Side of Body Horror

By **Matt Sayer**

The scariest monsters in videogames aren't *DOOM*'s grotesque demons or *Bloodborne*'s tentacled terrors; it's Mario. More specifically, it's Mario's face. The moustachioed plumber greets you with a smile when you boot up *Super Mario 64*, and everything seems fine until you start poking and prodding at his polygonal mug. Stretching Mario's mouth to mimic *The Scream*, pulling his forehead to turn his eyeballs into eye-ovals, twisting his cheeks into bat-like wings; the resultant abomination is one of the creepiest to ever grace the screen.

This kind of unintentional body horror is a mainstay in videogames. In their race to take advantage of the latest technology, games often take a tumble into the macabre.

Consider the early days of the 3D era. In *Goldeneye 007*, character faces took the form of blurry photos pasted onto boxy heads, creating a ghastly smear



effect that made it look like all the enemies had received botched Botox jobs. In *Final Fantasy VII*, the overworld character models resembled unholy human-animal hybrids, their bodies segmented with bulbous hands connected to the torso via absurdly small arms and giant heads bobbing on pencil-thin necks.

His mouth looks like it was carved with a knife. His arms shoot out of his ears. His eyes scream for release.

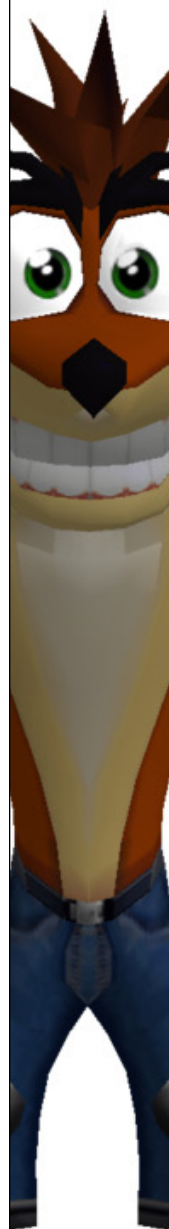
Then there's *Crash Bandicoot*. Just [look at him](#). His mouth looks like it was carved with a knife. His arms shoot out of his ears. His eyes scream for release. He's basically a furry version of the Joker.

This phenomenon only grew with the advent of ragdoll physics. Making bodies go limp might be useful for communicating incapacitation, but it quickly turns terrifying when limbs start bending and contorting in ways they shouldn't be able to. In games like *Dishonored*, ragdolled bodies can be dragged around, leading to limbs catching on doors and table legs and tangling up like [spaghetti on a fork](#). In *Fallout 3*, ragdoll animations can get caught in perpetual motion, causing bodies to [bounce and fly around the world](#) like they're in the grip of the black smoke from *Lost*. The most common nightmare, though, is when death animations get hung up on objects in the environment, producing such terrifying images as [this mangled mess](#) from *Halo 3*.

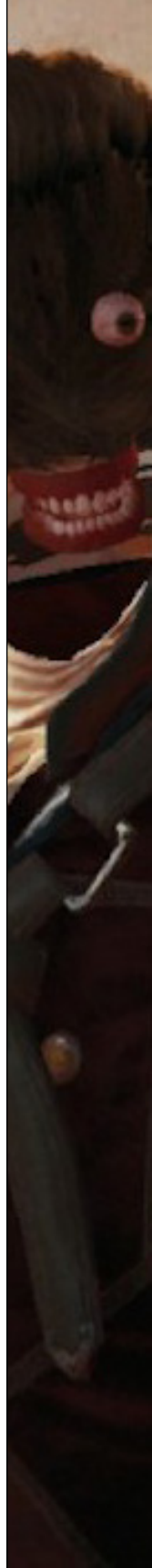
The pursuit of ever-more natural movement models has given rise to its own wealth of body horror. *Fallout: New Vegas*, in attempting to loosen the animation of its characters, occasionally [re-enacts the head-spinning scene](#) from *The Exorcist*. *GTA IV*, though touted for its then-revolutionary Euphoria animation engine, turns nightclubs into nightmares when dancers start imitating the iconic spider walk, bending backwards and defying physics with [mad grins on their faces](#). *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, meanwhile, not only [tears the face off](#) its protagonist, it [sucks the bones](#) right out of hapless citizens.

One of the more common horror tropes is the notion that you were the monster all along. While it might not have quite the impact it once did, it must have scared the bejesus out of the *NBA 2K* players who found themselves staring at [twisted versions of themselves](#) after scanning their faces into the game's create-a-player mode. From [melted faces](#) to heads that look like they were [crushed in a vice](#), the deformed creations are a mirror into a Picassian perversion of reality.

High-definition gore and jump scares are disturbing, but the pinnacle of videogame horror is unquestionably in the unintentional. Glitches and bugs



produce nightmares beyond that of even the most warped minds. Body horror is no longer the sole domain of the David Cronenburgs and Clive Barkers; the monster is in the machine, and it doesn't even have the decency to wear its nature on its sleeve. 🍷



[*Variation*]



Nathan Drake is the Worst Thing to Happen to Archaeology

By Amanda Hudgins

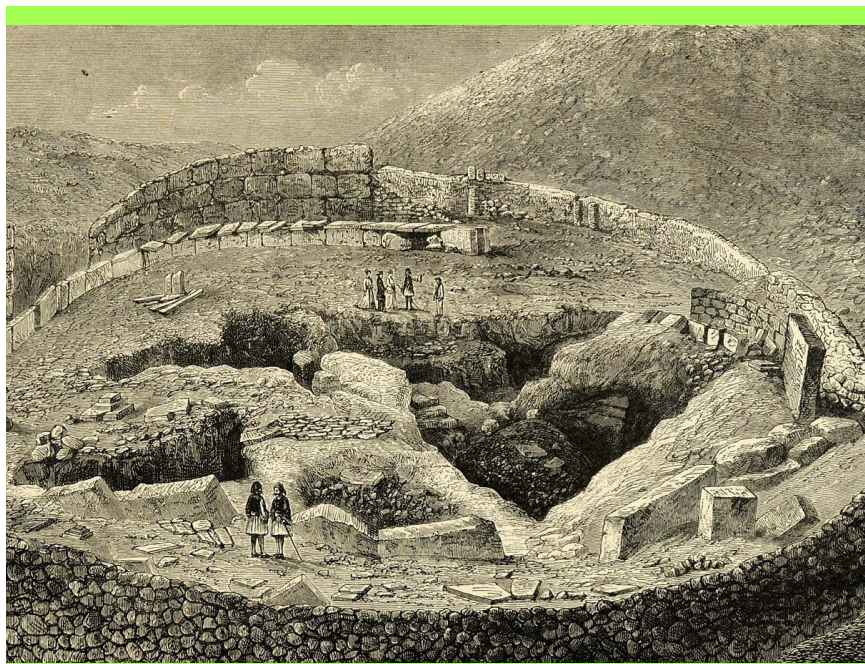
In *Uncharted 4*, Nathan Drake swears at Nadine's mercenary troops as they detonate their way towards treasure - using dynamite like a certain Wile E. Coyote would against his Roadrunner foe. Green and moldy cities, tinged in gold, fall after hundreds of years of holding under their own staying power. Drake's exasperation is tinged with the basic thought: who would be so careless?

Heinrich Schliemann would. Perhaps one of history's worst archaeologists, Schliemann was a German businessman who will now forever be remembered as the man who blew up Troy.

Schliemann, like many of the characters in the *Uncharted* series, was a man possessed by vision. He believed in the "historical reality" of the places listed in Homer's epics in a time when this was under question. Troy, and therefore the remains of the Trojan war, had to exist. He even found it, buried as many

archaeological finds are, beneath other, later versions of the city. The Troy that Schliemann sought was known as Troy VI - supposedly the home of King Priam, Helen (the face that launched a thousand ships) and a Golden treasure of the Bronze Age. To get to this point in history, Schliemann would have to be careful and dig through the remains of previous cities that had come to inhabit the same location in order to preserve the artifacts of several eras of Troy.

Alternatively, he could use dynamite to level the Mound of Troy, as well as dig an “enormous trench.” What Schliemann pulled out of the earth, golden jewelry and goods, he declared “Priam’s treasure.” But modern archaeologists have since pointed out that the “Priam’s treasure” is about a thousand years too old, and is probably from Troy II. In his exuberance to find the lost city of Troy, Schliemann found it, and then promptly blew it up.



It's difficult to imagine what Schliemann would do with the information Nathan Drake had throughout the *Uncharted* series, but it's little removed from what actually happened to every location that Drake visits. It's an inside joke in the series that every bit of wood or earth under Drake's feet is ready to collapse at a moment's notice – but it becomes a little less silly when you consider the historical ramifications of his extreme clumsiness. Through the course of the series, Drake manages to find and destroy the Lost City of Iram

of the Pillars, Libertia, Shangri-La and El Dorado. Really, the only reason he didn't destroy Troy was because Schliemann beat him to it by a little over one hundred years.

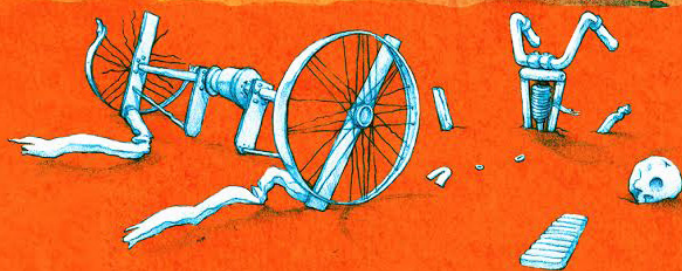
In fact, *Uncharted 4* makes a bigger joke of this by pointing out that Drake doesn't even take pictures of his finds before they're lost under the sands of time once more. He simply sketches them out in his note pad before he smashes yet another historical find under his labrador like exuberance.

Heinrich Schliemann found the most famous ancient lost city after Atlantis and then proceeded to blow it to smithereens. Nathan Drake's jocular enthusiasm and devil-may-care attitude took care of the rest. 🇹🇷



M A N A D R I V E

COREY MILNE



PART TWO

The darkness was absolute. Maebh lay under the heavy warmth of the cab's air. Her brain slowly reached the conclusion that she was still alive, as faint memories of her most recent ordeal aligned themselves with the series of aches that pulsed through her body.

For now, it was nice enough to just lie there, eyes closed. Her own personal oblivion was infinitely preferable to the one reality provided. The prospect of having to claw her way out of her cage still wasn't an enticing notion. Sitting in the turf and broken glass, she wondered if the tensile strength of a gear stick would create enough leverage to pry apart the steel plates.

Then, she heard the sound of something scrabbling outside. Her exhaustion was gone. Wrenching her revolver from its holster, she brought the barrel up, menacing the heavens. She cursed under her breath.

The door was gone, giving way to the infinite depths of a star strewn sky. She sat there unmoving, wondering what would rip a door like that open and not take advantage of the easy meal inside. Getting out would be risky; she would need both hands to hoist herself up and out. She'd be at the mercy of whatever might still be out there until she hit the ground again. Putting the revolver

between her teeth, she reached out and pulled herself up. Hands grasping the edge of the doorway and feet kicking off the tattered seat, Maebh launched herself out and down onto the dry grass.

On her knee, her revolver swings left, right, only to be met with silence. Then she's up with her back against the underside of the wretched cab.

With light steps and heavy breaths, she sprang around the corner, then up to the next. Under the moonlight the world appeared frozen in time. Only a third of the trailer is left attached to the truck. It had begun to collapse in on itself, the sleek form ending in shredded metal. Maebh did a full circuit but found nothing of note. Against all odds, it appeared safe enough.

Just the wind then, she lied to herself. Relaxing a little, she sucked in a lungful of fresh air, doing her best to ignore the pain that stretched across her chest.

Maebh kicked through the scrap with her heavy boots. The cargo was gone. Most of the steel and mortar they'd been towing was probably strewn along the autobahn if it hadn't already been picked up by some entrepreneurial soul.

That didn't matter anymore, though. Maebh couldn't give a damn about wasted cement. Torch out, she searched the area, moving through the debris until she found what she was after. Wedged under one of the remaining bits of steel was a garish red cooler. Maebh pulled on the lid. Nothing. Reaching around to the back of her belt, Maebh unclasped a strip of leather and pulled her long handled crocodile wrench from its scabbard. Unlike the average pipe wrenches that hang from the belts of mechanics across the continent, the cro-wrench had a modified head that wouldn't strip when gripping hard metals. What's more, its long handle flattened out into a reinforced blade. Good for prying and, if need be, stabbing. It was this that Maebh thrust under the cooler's lid, and with a few kicks, was able to claim her hard won prize: half a liter of warm, still water.

Canteen full, she sat down and leaned back against the trailer's corpse with the plastic bottle at her lips. Before anything else happened, she needed a plan. Her fingers tapped absentmindedly across her right knee pad as she considered her options. Stuttgart was still her best bet. They had come too far to go back now without supplies.

She looked at the compass embedded in the underside of her wrist brace, but its needle was spinning wildly. This far south, it wasn't unusual to pick up residual magic flows that struck out from the Austrian manafields. Reaching into her jacket, she pulled out a zip-locked plastic bag full of maps, charts and various contacts. The detritus of a life spent running. The old road map she now poured over was a mess of pen and pencil scrawls. Outposts, way stations

and no go areas all fighting for dominance. Maebh always thrilled in tracing the lines, ruminating on places that had been wiped from the pages of history.

“Right then. Where am I?” she asked no one in particular.

They had left Nuremberg around noon and had picked up the bandits not long after crossing the Dead Lovers. She penciled some calculations underneath the biro doodle of a crown.

“Ah, bollocks.”

A day’s walk to Heilbronn, where Maebh was fairly confident she could catch a ride on an imperial caravan down to the city. The only thing that stood in the way was the Kocher river.

Kocher. Even just thinking about it caused Maebh to fight down her gag reflex. The crossing was bad enough on wheels. A slow march across would be another thing entirely. Her fingers traced the route over the map.

“Follow Via Carolina straight across the viaduct and hoof it to Heilbronn. That damnable river,” she mumbled.

“Can’t you go around?”

The voice came floating from around the front of the cab. The pair of eyes that had been peeking out from behind it barely had enough time to widen as Maebh, tired and injured, still closed the distance in a flash. She pinned the young boy under her knee, boot knife at his throat.



"Where the hell did you come from?" she barked.

"I - I - I," The boy flailed a little, as if trying to snatch the right words out of the ether. "I opened the door! The door. I, I let you out." Maebh didn't move. "I was up on the embankment. You were asleep. Didn't, didn't want to surprise you when you came to."

"Aye right. Likely story, kid. More like you were wanting to jam that crowbar you've got in my gut." Maebh argued.

"No! That's why I didn't stay in the cab. Seen too many people wake up n' stab their friends! You know. Instincts and stuff! I swear..." His voice trailed off.

Maebh couldn't quite place the accent. Nothing too out of the ordinary. Early-to-mid-teens. He wore the simple garb of your average Zoner. Jeans, belt complete with a few zip ties, spanners, the aforementioned crowbar. A dirty shemagh wrapped around his neck. She eased up a little.

"Well it's nice of you to allow me to take a considered approach to stabbing you." She pulled him to his feet. "Not that I believe you managed to pry that door open."

"Well," the boy said slapping the dust off his jeans, "Who else then?"

"Mm-hm, all I'll say is you must be packing some muscle under that scrawny frame of yours." She retreated back to her spot on the grass and gathered up her various navigational items. She could already hear the boy coming up behind her.

"So like, why can't you just go around the river?"

"Because it wouldn't be long before I hit the Black Forest. Christ kid, that's cruising 101 in these parts." The boy's ignorance put a hole in her Zoner theory. Everyone knew the tales of the Black Forest in the Duchy. Either the kid was an idiot, or he was something else. Could have come up from the Mediterranean Tundra for all she could figure out. He was a foreign object. Out of place. That was enough to be considered dangerous.

Maebh hopped back through the cab's door one last time. The boy was still yammering on. She reappeared a few minutes later with the sawn-off back on her thigh. Her cursory search had only turned up two shells. Not exactly an armory fit for a highway exhibition.

"-your name." The boy was still there. "I said you can call me Baz. At least everyone else does. What's your name?"

"Maebh." She walked past him and began to make her way up the grassy embankment, where the tarmac lay. Baz was still following. Still talking.

"Mav? That's a funny name!"

"Maebh. Like, I dunno, you pronounce it like it were spelt m-a-v-e. *Maebh*. It's Irish. And a damn better name than Baz, whatever that is." Maebh said. The truck had slid pretty far off the road, searing a deep furrow into the earth.

“Never heard the name Mayv before,” Baz said, rolling the word around his tongue, clearly enjoying himself. “Did you make it up?”

She could do nothing but sigh. “All names are made up. Now are you going to leave me alone? Cheers for the help. Good luck and all that.”

“Wait, but I helped you out!”

There was pleading in his voice. It cracked as he started to made his case.

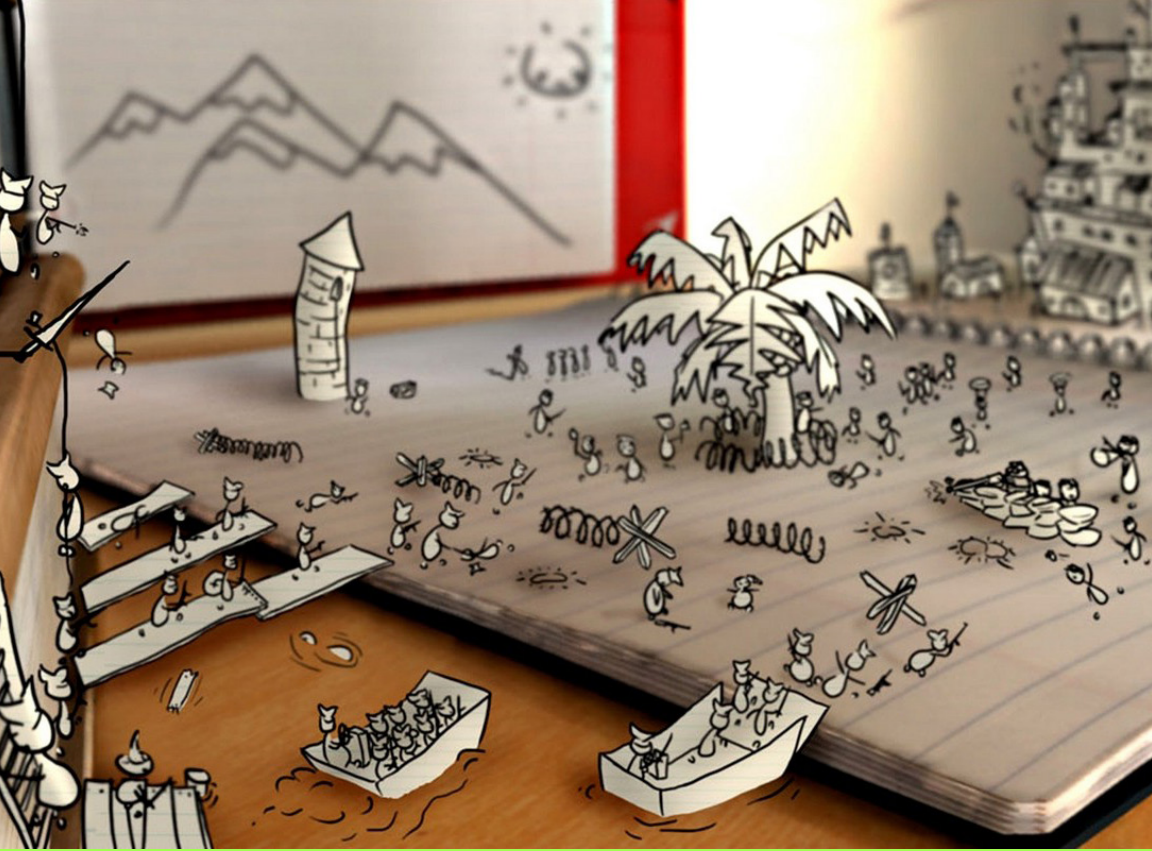
She cut him off. Time to nip it in the bud.

“Listen, kid, I know what’s happening here. You’re going to keep following me in the hopes we’ll become best buddies and have jolly adventures together. I’m not a bloody babysitter. I’ve had too many friends die on jolly bloody adventures and I’ve enough on my plate without having to look after a runt.”

Baz looked at her with hurt shining through those big round eyes of his. At the road’s edge she knelt down, palms flat on the warm surface. This is where she was meant to be. *Carolina, old dear*, she thought, running her hands across the uneven road. *Looks like we’ll be spending a bit more time together.*

“I just, I was kind of hoping that I could follow you. Just until we get to Stuttgart. That’s where you’re going, right? I mean, that’s pretty much it for the zone, the Big 6, right? I did save your life and all.”

Maebh rose, putting her gloves on. “Carolina baby, give me strength.” 🍀



Game Transfer Phenomena: The Original AR

By **Sophie Turner**

Ever been living your mundane, day-to-day life and reached for your non-existent Portal gun after noticing a blank white wall or had to fight the urge to pick through some particularly useful looking foliage for a Stimpak? Perhaps you've curled up in bed after a long *Tetris* session and continued seeing the game behind your eyes, or have reached for the save button in a perilous situation before being hit by the crushing reality of living in the real world? If so, you've experienced Game Transfer Phenomena (GTP), and you're definitely not alone.

GTP is a term coined by psychologist and self-confessed gamer Angelica B. Ortiz de Gortari, who began studying the phenomena after her own experiences with them. "While shopping in the supermarket after a week of intense videogame playing, I couldn't read some labels that were far away," Angelica says. "I found myself thinking that if I had the scope of the rifle from

Resident Evil 4 I could actually read them. After this experience I ran home, convinced that I needed to investigate.” Investigate she did, and as a result, we are now blessed with some wonderful research that can help reassure us that we’re not complete weirdos.

On [her blog devoted to the subject](#), Angelica defines GTP as “involuntary phenomena manifesting as altered sensorial perceptions, automatic mental processes, actions and behaviors.” Among other things this can mean seeing visuals from games after you’ve finished playing them, hearing disembodied music or sound effects, or even trying to use game behaviors in real life. Most people experience this after particularly long gaming sessions, Angelica says, when mental fatigue can make it more difficult to have control over your executive functions.

This sort of thing doesn’t just apply to games, of course. Any repetitive activity can have strange effects on a person’s day-to-day life – I felt this strongly during my time at university. When I was learning shorthand (which often meant around three hours of solid practice each day) I’d hear conversations and vividly “see” their translations almost constantly. And when I was revising for my law exams (which usually meant crying into a box of chocolates and playing *Candy Crush* for hours on end) the mobile gameplay soon began to bleed into my everyday life, too.

At one point after a long session crushing candy, I was speaking to a friend and completely zoned out from what they were saying. I was

briefly overwhelmed with frustration because I couldn’t create a match out of any of their facial features and had a bizarre urge to move their nose to align their eyes together. I snapped out of it quickly, but despite having experienced similar things with shorthand practice, I found the whole thing jarring. When you start wanting to rearrange someone’s face it’s a pretty sure sign that you should lay off the gaming for a while, so I took the hint and never played *Candy Crush* again. (This also meant that I actually did some revision and managed to pass my law exams. GTP, I owe it all to you.)



Effects like these are common, but surprisingly few people seem to know it. In one of Angelica's studies, 97% of over 2,000 gamers surveyed had experienced it at least once – but not everyone thinks to talk about it. “Many people have felt relief that they are not alone in their GTP experiences,” Angelica says. “I believe that helping gamers to interpret them is one of the most important contributions of my research so far, in terms of social impact.”

Angelica stresses that GTP should not be considered pathological, as this could actually be a harmful way to think. “Misunderstanding causes a stigma, and contributes to keeping something a secret that might make someone feel awkward and question their own mental stability.” With her research she aims to educate and demystify GTP, including through [a series of cartoons](#) that can help people feel less alone in their experiences.

That said, not everybody feels uncomfortable about the way GTP manifests itself for them. Many people who shared their stories with me felt amused and entertained by the phenomena, and lots of

them said they look forward to it happening again. One gamer, Ellen, found herself subconsciously collecting bottle caps at work after a long stint playing *Fallout 3*.

“I didn’t even realize I was doing it,” she told me, “until I came home from work one night after a long shift and realized my apron was filled with them.” Ellen has also found herself using exclamations from games without realizing it, like “Maker’s Breath!” from *Dragon Age*. “These experiences are positive for the most part,” she explains. “They don’t really bother me, and now have just become a part of my personality.”

Certain examples of GTP are more concerning than others, though. Many people have reported having the urge to drive recklessly after playing too much *Grand Theft Auto*, for example, tempted to drive on the wrong side of the road or use the sidewalk to bypass traffic. “In most cases, gamers experience thoughts and impulses to do something but do not actually perform the actions,” Angelica says, reassuringly. “It seems that very few gamers have gotten into problems.” She doesn’t rule out the possibility of harmful game



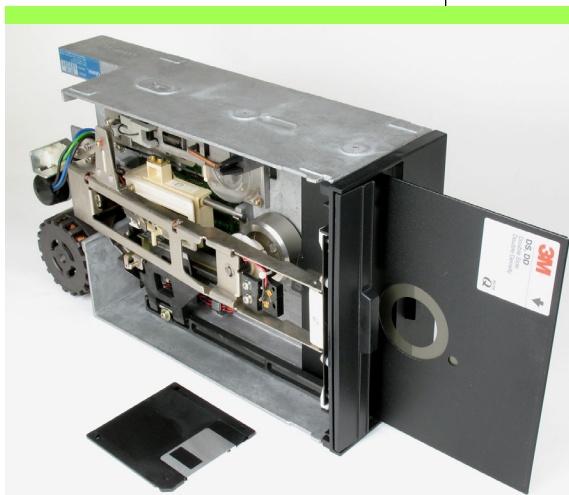
behavior transferring into a person's real life, though. "I am concerned about individuals with lower control of impulses who may be unable to override these automatic responses," she says. "Individuals with underlying conditions may also be more at risk of negative effects."

For many people, though, GTP experiences are simply neutral or mildly disappointing, serving to remind them of cool features real life lacks. One gamer in particular, Chloe, found her experiences more inconvenient than concerning. "I was driving home when I realized I didn't take my clothes out of the wash before leaving," she says. "I was already two hours into a four-hour drive and I immediately tried to load from my last save file. It took me a while to figure out why it didn't work." Trying to restart real life at a previous checkpoint appears to be very common, with multiple people sharing their frustrations at the permanence of real life actions.

The ability to save a game is a feature that many people feel the real world is sorely lacking – but that doesn't stop people from involuntarily trying to do it. "I game on PC and have 'quick save' mapped

to my capslock key," says another gamer, Alex. "Sometimes before I, say, go into a store, I flick my hand to the left and get momentarily confused when I only find air." In a similar vein, many people that binge play *The Sims* have been disappointed to find no option to speed their way through boring day-to-day tasks, instead being forced to complete them at the speed of a normal human being (but generally with substantially fewer suspicious deaths along the way).

While some examples of GTP can cause disappointment, not everyone sees their experiences that way. For some gamers like Rissa, it can actually be life-enhancing. "Games train you to see the world in a specific way," she says. "I think a lot of the ache of life comes from dullness – not sadness in that bad things happen, but sadness in that exciting things don't happen more often. Something about games can make you think differently about how you interact with the physical world, and the way games can bring their sense of fun and engagement into everyday life is enchanting. It's like putting a layer of wonder back onto an old worn out thing."

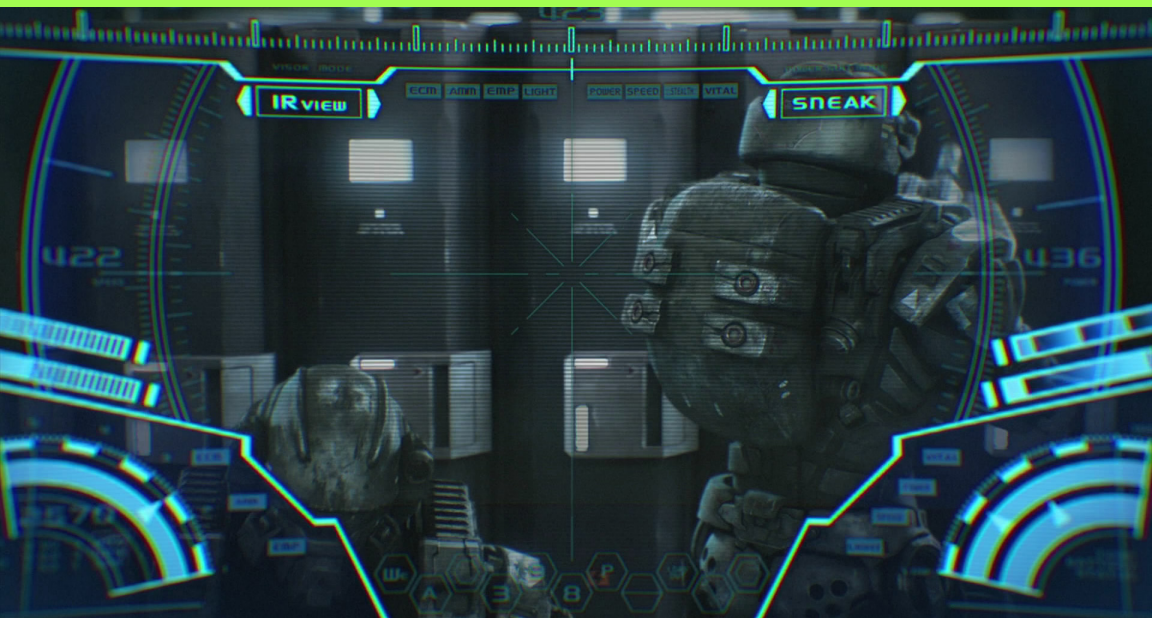


Rissa has experienced GTP in lots of different ways, and even the strange ones can add a sense of fascination into her days. “FPS games have made me feel weird about my hands before. Have you ever really looked at your hands and how they interact with your field of vision? They are weird. There are all these amazing things in life, like bodies, but we just don’t tend to think about them.”

Seeing life through the lens of a videogame can produce some bizarre effects, but sometimes it’s nice to inject a little weird into your day, especially if it can help you to appreciate the things you’d otherwise take for granted. “I struggle a lot with apathy, which has recently led all the way to depression,” Rissa says. “Because of that, anything that can make me care and engage with the world is really great. Although it often seems like games are an escape, a way to detach from the world, they can actually do quite the opposite if you let them.”

So next time you can’t locate the mute button for the game soundtrack echoing in your brainhole or find yourself lost without an HUD, just know that psychology has got your back – and you might even be able to find some positives in your experiences. But really though, maybe you should consider laying off the games for a while.

(Some names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.) 🍷

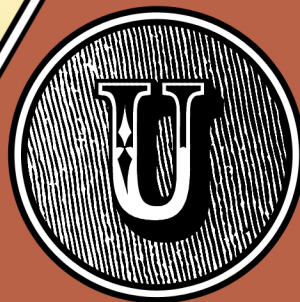


REVVING THE ENGINE

A SERIES PROFILING THE RECIPIENTS OF
UNREAL DEV GRANTS



THE LONG JOURNEY HOME



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Several years back, I was flying from Ohio to New York. There were high winds from a nor'easter pounding JFK airport, preventing us from landing. The pilot gave it his all, attempting and landing several times. Once, he almost touched down, was maybe 20 feet from above the runway, before the wind started to shudder the plane in a way that seemed dangerous and he pulled up. All for nothing. Time passed. We ran low on fuel.

Despite the fact that storm was worse beyond Long Island, air traffic control directed us to put down at T. F. Green airport in Providence, Rhode Island. Green must benefit from some quirk of airport design that makes it less dangerous during a storm, because we touched down there without a problem.

We disembarked into chaos. The airport was essentially closed, so there wasn't adequate staff on hand to help the hundred or so passengers figure out what happens next. Was there another flight tonight? Was there a hotel voucher? Would the airline reimburse a rental? Train? Bus?

There were two general types of people: those that shouted to alleviate their frustration, and those who got real quiet, let that anger boil inside so you could practically feel the heat coming off them. The desire to get home, even if that home is as temporary as a hotel room, is powerful one and dangerous to thwart.

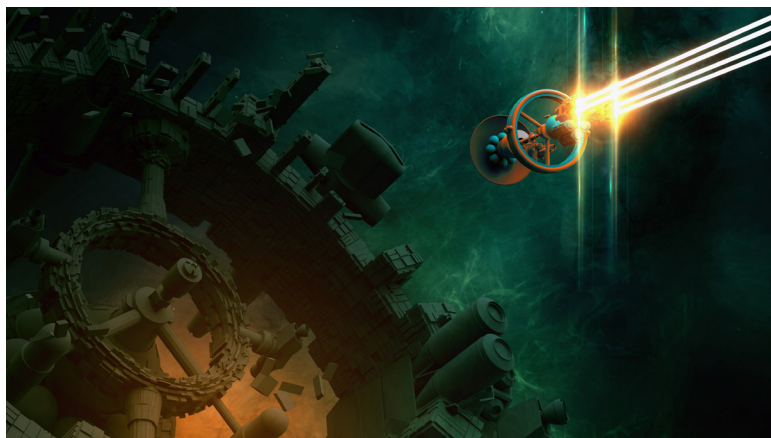
I didn't want to see what happened when the scene boiled over, so I walked for what seemed an impossible distance to the car rental hub. There I rented a mid-sized sedan without a voucher from the airline (something that would come back to bite me later) and drove off into the rainy night.

On a good night, with no traffic, it's about a three and a half hour drive from Providence to New York City. With the gales driving sheets of rain sweeping across I-95, in a car with a wobbly steering wheel, we made it in about four and a half. That's three hours longer than the flight was supposed to be.

I didn't have to battle any monsters, of course. Mostly, my opponent was time, but not being home is an absolute state – you don't feel any less frustrated or desperate because you're stranded across town or 100 miles away instead of a 1,000. That's why *The Odyssey* is a timeless classic – everyone can relate.

That is the feeling *The Long Journey Home* is trying to evoke. Heck, it is right there, in the name. An epic space exploration RPG, you have to get your crew of four mismatched experts back from the other side of the galaxy after a test of humanity's first hyper jump drive goes wrong. Every game gives you a new galaxy to explore, aliens to meet and dangers to face, but the core of the game is to chart a path home.

The *Long Journey Home* is currently under development by Daedalic Studio West, a small team obsessed with epic Greek poetry and the strategy game *Star Control*. The core group consists of Andreas Suika, the co-founder and creative director of Daedalic Studio West, co-founder and technical director Dirk Steenpaß, writer Richard Cobbett and composer Kai Rosenkranz. Andreas was kind enough to take time from his busy schedule shepherding *The Long Journey Home* to a fourth quarter release to chat with me about the game's development.



I don't imagine we can discuss *The Long Journey Home* without touching on Homer's *Odyssey*. Is there interplay between the poem and the game? Can you elaborate on how the poem influences design decisions and themes?

A. S.: *The Odyssey* is one of our writer's favorite stories and just about every story of this kind owes a massive debt to it. It's a poem built on a fascinating contrast – the listener's drive to see amazing monsters and new adventures, mixed with the hero's deep longing for home and the familiar. That's something we want to get across,

with our crew's dialogue and personalities and skills – that sense of homesickness we've all felt at some point. This isn't a story about getting a ship back to Earth. It's about these four people and getting them Home. Hopefully players will be better at keeping their crew alive than Odysseus was though – he wasn't a great Captain!

Our take is a little different in that you're not stopping off at crazy planets for individual adventures, like, say, *Star Trek: Voyager*, but having organically generated encounters with the various alien races. This galaxy is their territory, their home. Some are happy to help you out, others want you dead, and some . . . let's just say, they're happy to have a little fun at the lost humans' expense. Learning how to deal with them all is a big part of working with them.

What we do take from the *Odyssey* is the idea of damage. Neither your ship nor crew are prepared for this mission or the strain that it puts them under. Just jumping between systems damages your ship. Technology is always falling apart around you. If your crew dies, they're not coming back and nobody's going to replace them. What's great about Odysseus as a hero was that he wasn't the strongest of the Greeks, he was the most cunning. He was clever. That's what got him home. You've got a tiny research ship surrounded by pirates and opportunists and natural threats. You'll have to be clever too, or you won't last long!



I am intrigued by the idea of a game about coming home. The vast majority of games follow an outward movement, starting at “home” and slowly exploring (and dominating) the surrounding unknown

territory. *The Long Journey Home* is obviously different from this – there is exploration but it is secondary to this idea of returning. Also, being lost in space is a more intrinsically more dangerous place to start from. How do these differences effect your decisions on a design level? On a philosophical level?

A. S.: It's very different, yes. You're plunged into the middle of this living alien galaxy with a crew of strangers, a destination and then we leave you to it. You can do quests, you can trade, you can hunt for relics, you can try and make friends – we want to give you as much freedom as possible. For instance, if you agree to give an alien passage to their homeworld, which would normally be a pretty standard quest in an RPG, we're not going to stop you turning around and selling that alien to a slaver. Or even as meat to another race. There'll be consequences, of course, but that's always a decision you can make. You're in charge. It's your journey!

We can do this thanks to our quests being very object-orientated, and those objects having multiple uses. A stone tablet in the hands of your archeologist, Siobhan, might point the way to a lost temple. To Miri, the linguist of the group, it might teach an ancient language. Who you have on board, who you meet and what uses you find for things will change every game.



There seem to be a good handful of different styles of game under the hood in *The Long Journey Home*. Can you run through them and talk about how they interact?

A. S.: We've focused on a very clean, easy to approach style, where exploring space is done from a top-down perspective, while planetary exploration is done via a side-on view a little like the old *Lunar Lander* – though a lot more forgiving! That's where you spend the bulk of your time, exploring the galaxy, meeting aliens and mining for resources and ancient relics.

When you meet aliens, we cut to the TRANSCOM – your handy translator. You can talk to them about things and races you've found, offer and show them your finds to see if they can tell you more or unlock new opportunities, and more. What we're excited by, though, is that actions speak as loud as words. Some of the aliens will take offence if you raise shields and weapons in their presence. ("How dare you not trust them!?"). Others will take offence if you don't. ("Do you dare mistake them for weaklings?!") Learning their quirks is crucial to getting on well with them, and figuring out what makes them tick. There's lots of secrets to uncover.

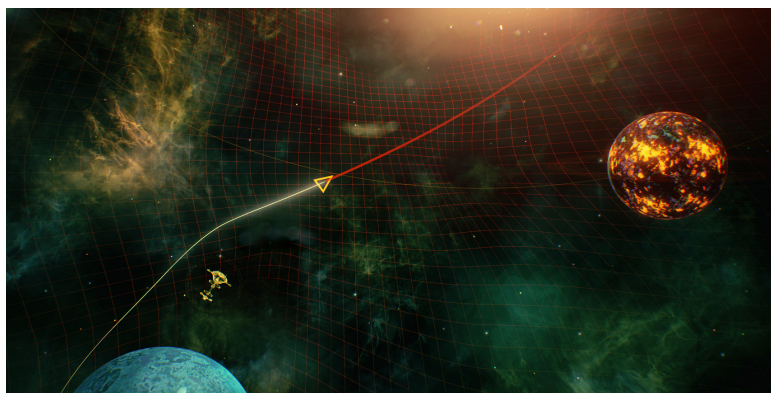
We've got one race who are . . . visually, think giant grasshoppers. We call them the Wolphax. On their home planet they were weak herbivores who just happened to be smart enough to survive and get into space. Now, they've found that nobody cares how physically tough you are when you have spaceships and plasma guns, so they're making up for lost time by playing Knights. The first time you meet one, they'll ask you for a friendly fight – just sparring – so they can get the measure of these strange new aliens. Do you risk damaging your ship to make a good first impression, or turn them down? That's just one of many decisions to make.

Do you have specific inspirations for the game, both in terms of other games as well as other media like books and movies?

A. S.: Oh, so many! *Farscape* is one of our biggest, especially in terms of making the universe a quirky, interesting place. A lot of science fiction can be very sterile and humorless. We don't want that. We want you to enjoy meeting our aliens, doing the quests and being part of a living crew that jokes, feuds, panics, reminisces about old quests and generally becomes a close family as a result of both their shared and individual adventures during the Journey. *Farscape* is the perfect example of a universe that's fun and funny, but still grounded enough

to feel like a real place that might actually exist somewhere out there. We hope so, because we all love it!

After that . . . where to begin? Our biggest inspiration has to be the PC game *Star Control II* and its precursor, *Starflight*. Along with that, too many to list. Everything from *Firefly* to, heh, maybe a bit more quietly, *Lexx*, *Stargate SG-1*, *Voyager* of course, Red Dwarf . . . most recently, *The Martian* and *The Expanse* . . . games like *Mass Effect*, *FTL* . . . Douglas Adams, Jack Vance . . . so many European science fiction novels . . . I could go on for hours. Our whole team is full of sci-fi obsessives. If we love it, if it can possibly fit in our universe, we want to play with it. Everything from shows like *Star Trek*, to cool systems unused since 1985's *Psi-5 Trading Company*.



How do you balance a procedurally generated universe against the need for complex moral dilemmas? Those two things seem to be on far ends of a spectrum. What kind of challenges are you facing on this front and how do the two things work together?

A. S.: Our universe is designed to offer a good mix of pure procedurally generated content – the stars, the planets, mining locations, lost relics and so on – with hand-written content like quests and alien interactions. Every galaxy only gives you four out of ten crew members and four alien Empires (plus a few smaller civilizations), and then what you get is a mix of what our quest director generates and the results of your decisions. If you find a priceless relic on a planet for instance, its original owners might come and demand it back. Do you lie to them about finding it? Hand it back? That's an example of a moral decision coming from the procedural generation side.

Then there are the more specific calls, in the quests and other scripted sections. An alien slaver who demands one member of the crew in exchange for sparing the rest, forcing you to put a shock collar round their neck and send them screaming into subjugation. Working with pirates to trick other vessels into ambushes. Deciding whether to help ships in distress that you come across or try and profit from them.

A more specific example is that one of the crew, former astronaut Kirsten, invited aboard the ship for one last mission, has untreatable cancer. On Earth. The other end of the galaxy has scientists who can treat that kind of thing with ease – but at what cost?

There's a lot more to our system than that. As said, if you agree to give someone a ride, you can turn around and sell them to slavers for a payout. Or maybe another ship appears and demands you hand them over. Do you keep your promise, or give them up to avoid a fight? Your decisions will have consequences and your crew will have things to say about many of them, but we don't keep track of morality on a meter or anything like that. We're looking forward to seeing how players handle their freedom – where they draw the line, where good intentions give way to desperate pragmatism, and what they consider the price of finally getting home.



What do you hope to accomplish with *The Long Journey Home*?

A. S.: At heart, we want to make the game we've wanted to play ever since *Star Control II* came out – only harnessing modern technology

and the added tension and replayability of roguelikes to create an experience that stays fresh and full of discovery for game after game. We want to not only give the player their own starship, but a universe worth taking the time to explore and master, where the best that the science fiction genre has to offer comes together for the ultimate space adventure.

And of course selling lots of copies would be nice too!



Are there any advantages or disadvantages to using Unreal to develop a game like *The Long Journey Home*?

A. S.: Inevitably, there's a bit of both, but overall the advantages easily outweigh the negatives.

We primarily chose Unreal for Epic's philosophy of openness. We knew going into this project that we wanted to do things that didn't come out of the box, like planetary gravity in space flight, or procedurally generating galaxies, nebulae, star systems and planets. We briefly considered writing our own engine, but that was a moment of madness. Our programmers have developed engines before, and know all too well what a nightmare it would have been for a team our size. Unreal is built by experienced hands to be a solid foundation, allowing us to focus on the bits that we have to do ourselves . . . some of which push it to its limits! Even then, we get to take advantage of both the community and Epic itself, both of which are very useful.

How did the Unreal Dev Grant come about?

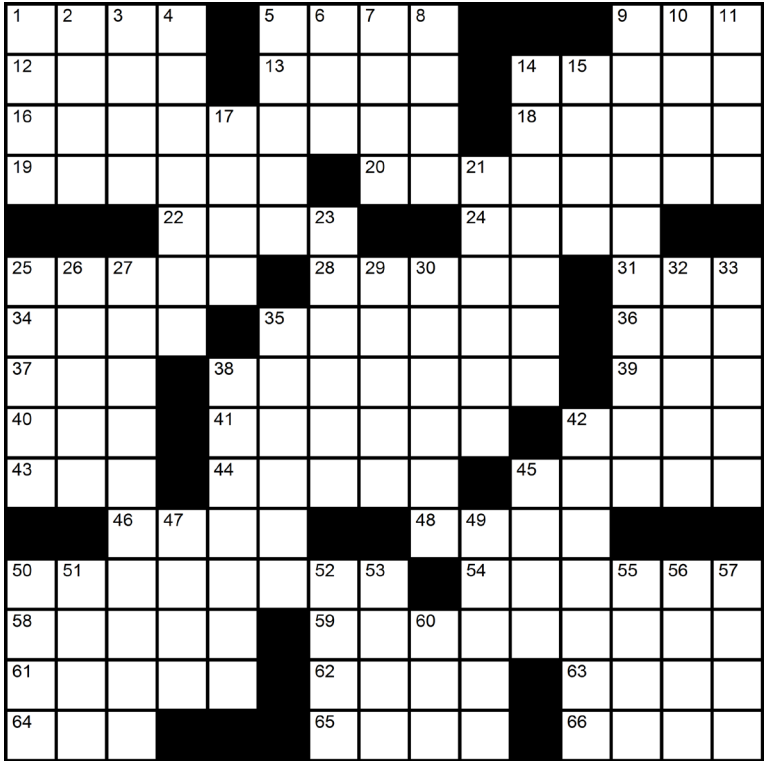
A. S.: Actually, it came as a surprise, shortly after Epic asked us to join

their booth at the Nordic Games Conference in Malmo. My suspicion is that I've done a talk at several conferences now about procedural generation and 'breathing life' into a galaxy. There was a very nice Unreal Evangelist at one of those. We met after the talk and I think he liked what he saw. Certainly when we applied, the game was in a much earlier stage. I think it also helps that we got some positive press coverage from both GDC and PAX East.

How has the Unreal Dev Grant affected your work? Did the grant allow you to do things with TLJH that you wouldn't otherwise have been able to?

A. S.: Oh yes. For a small team, it has an impact. We were able to hire an additional person because of it, mostly to help us with testing. Our game is procedurally generated with lots of random elements – that means a lot of testing. A *lot*. Happily, we were able to find someone who could not only take that on, but help with internal communication, project management and improving the build pipeline. That means so much less pressure – and at least a little more time to sleep at night – for the rest of us, we focus on finishing and polishing the game. We're thrilled that Epic likes what we've been doing, and can't thank them enough for their support! 🍷





ACROSS

- 1. Cabin Fever
- 5. Boxing prize
- 9. Driver's spot
- 12. Nabisco treat
- 13. The Beehive State
- 14. 1938 Physics Nobel
- 16. Outlaw
- 18. Dodge
- 19. Look up to
- 20. Related to, at an angle
- 22. Mark
- 24. Bonny pirate
- 25. Images of sound
- 28. Shade (fr.)
- 31. Colo. neighbor
- 34. Golden calf
- 35. Film Mel
- 36. "Ciao!"
- 37. Cow's mouthful
- 38. FM receivers
- 39. "To ___ is human ..."
- 40. Slick

- 41. Eyes-maker
- 42. Calc. predecessor
- 43. Large degree
- 44. More rational
- 45. War verb
- 46. ___ and aahs
- 48. Not on a date
- 50. Sells, at a diner
- 54. Cabbage plant
- 58. Personnel director
- 59. Wherever
- 61. Things in the fire
- 62. Middle East travel option
- 63. Orchestral tuner
- 64. According to
- 65. Eats at
- 66. Slither

DOWN

- 1. Harassed
- 2. They're found in veins
- 3. Try
- 4. One who tries
- 5. Myanmar
- 6. H, in Athens
- 7. Boys
- 8. You, once
- 9. Videodrome
- 10. During
- 11. Auction actions
- 14. Girth
- 15. Level off
- 17. Slippery swimmers
- 21. Hellraiser
- 23. Re-Animator
- 25. Toxic by-product of..castor oil?
- 26. Something separated out, in chemistry
- 27. Genre for 1- & 66-Across and 9-, 21-, and 23- down
- 29. Optically illusive effect
- 30. Definitely not fans
- 32. Eagle's home, var
- 33. Hidden dangers of the Arctic, for short
- 35. Unprofessionally awesome
- 38. Part of a British breakfast
- 42. Manila language
- 45. It's perpendicular to the weft
- 47. Beehive, maybe
- 49. Asian weight units
- 50. Transport concerned with
- 33-Across
- 51. Cork's country
- 52. Fell off a certain wagon
- 53. It's got a collar
- 55. South Asian term of respect
- 56. Religious image
- 57. Spotted
- 60. You might read it in a doc's office

< *Contributors* >

Thoughts

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Illustrations

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