

ISSUE 58

# EXPLOITS

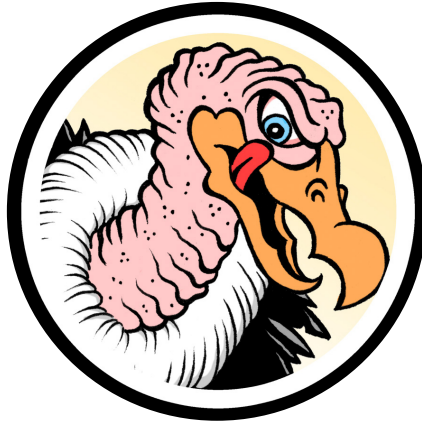
JANUARY 2022

an UNWINNABLE publication



Krista McCay on  
**UNPACKING**

**SIMULATIONS • DEATH METAL  
• PROVIDENCE • BLOOD BEAT •  
The ESSEX SERPENT**



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## **EXPLOITS**

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

# The AGE of SIMS

by Andrei Filote

In 1999, *Age of Empires 2* was at the top of the world, having sold two million copies in three months. A year before that, *Starcraft* had planted the seeds of a massive competitive scene. A year before *that*, David “Thresh” Fong won John Carmack’s Ferrari at a *Quake* tournament. PC games were big. And they were only going to get bigger. Except, not really. These days, writing about the classic PC canon is an exercise in taphonomy, that is, the study of how dead things fossilize.

What happened? Some franchises expanded to consoles, while others lost out to the popularity of character-driven action or simply failed. In part, this is due to hardware manufacturers that zealously communicate their appeal in terms of exclusivity, something the PC has historically lacked. But it’s also because its ideas have contributed to gaming DNA in a way we don’t really think about. Gaming today subsumes much of what PC gaming used to be in 1999.

*Doom* brought first-person shooters into the world. *Diablo 2* gave us a prototype of our games-as-a-service present. The idea that we can harvest a tree and replant its seed to create a forest also comes from this period and is the philosophical requisite of capstones such as *Minecraft*. But if I had to offer a fundamental line that separates PCs and consoles, it would be the simulation and the unholy quest to attain the matrix.

Take *Civilization*, a classic. It features systems of rules interacting with each other without the player’s input. We can leverage the systems on a grand scale, and if the results are what we expected, we win. But *Civ* and its extended simulational family have thrived because of something else: the collision of systems results in events no one can predict. More than winning, surprise is the key because the player must adapt to the game instead. The systems have a way of speaking to us.

Another PC staple sees life in the same period: the immersive sim. A strategy game simulates a single thing from a single angle. The immersive sim attempts to tie together various crystallizing genres of the 90s into a grand unified theory of sorts. The player, this time embodied as a character in a story, can shoot, stab,

speak or sneak, applying these mechanics to any situation as if to say we are accessing the rules of a universe and not the rules of a game. The player's ultimate role then is to test the strength of the simulation.

Today, the closest thing to a curated PC experience is Game Pass, its identity stemming mainly from its presence in Microsoft's Xbox presentations. But the appeal of the platform lies in the absence of curation, which is synonymous with ownership. The appeal of the simulation is a similar one, an absence of the creator's hand, which instead gives us the reins and commands only that we surprise. 🍷





# MUSIC



**DEATH METAL** – When I was growing up and discovering heavy music, I approached death metal with a mix of fear and fascination. The gore-soaked album artwork and over-the-top song titles of bands like Cannibal Corpse tucked into the back sections of magazines like *Metal Edge* were genuinely terrifying to my early teenage brain. It all seemed like it had to be a joke, but at the same time, I couldn't picture anyone who would make [something like this](#) ever doing anything normal. Who were these people and who was this music for?

Decades later, I'd learn that George "Corpsgrinder" Fisher is a world-class crane game enthusiast with a wife and two kids, Obituary drummer Donald Tardy has devoted his life to taking care of stray cats, and that death metal musicians generally aren't as diabolical as their creative output might imply.

Death metal is about more than morbid comic book imagery and brutal blast beats. The genre's grim subject matter often uses dark fantasy settings as a metaphorical foundation for themes like rebelling against

societal power imbalances and standing up against unearned authority. Even at its most putrid and puerile, it offers an outlet for anger and frustration in a way that feels less literal than, say, Fred Durst telling you to break shit (or whatever else I was listening to at 14). It makes the real world feel easier to deal with by forcing you to get comfortable with discomfort, like a personal trainer but with more guttural growling.

Given present circumstances, death metal feels more necessary than ever. Underneath the silliness of its Cookie Monster-esque vocals and grim aesthetic, death metal invites us to look at the ugliness in humanity and the world with an unflinching eye. It tests the listener's endurance while also offering an outlet for the anger, frustration, and fear that permeates our existence, reminding us that we have a choice to confront our anxieties or to be consumed by them. Death metal is about staring down what scares us the most, and to that extent, death metal is for anyone ready to make that leap within themselves.

– BEN SAILER

# MUSIC

## PLAYLIST



“Soothsayer,” by Horrendous

“Those Which Stare Back,” by Phobophilic

“Celestial Cyst,” by Artificial Brain

“Slave Species of the Gods,” by Blood Incantation

“Planetary Clairvoyance,” by Tomb Mold

“From the Ashes,” by Gatecreeper

“Hex, Curse, & Conjuraton,” by Temple of the Void

“Infecting the Crypts,” by Suffocation

“Visions of Purgatory,” by Fuming Mouth

“No Love Lost,” by Carcass

“Left Hand Path,” by Entombed

“Hammer Smashed Face,” by Cannibal Corpse

“Summoning Redemption,” by Morbid Angel

“Laid to Waste,” by Bolt Thrower

“Chapter for Transforming Into a Snake,” by Nile

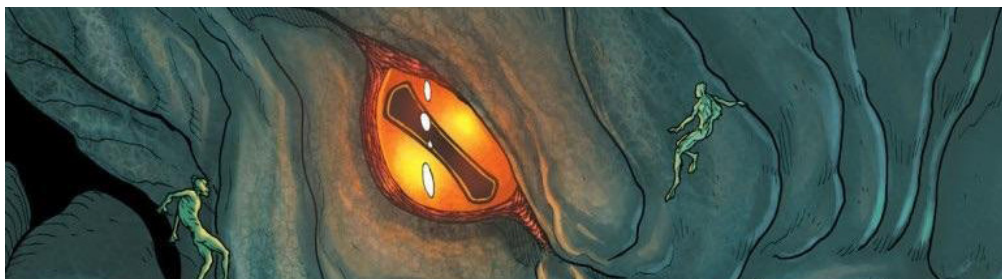
“Body Bag,” by Obituary

“Exhale the Ash,” by Ulcerate

“Chime Diabolicus,” by Hooded Menace

[LISTEN ON SPOTIFY](#)





**PROVIDENCE** – Where Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987, art by Dave Gibbons) deconstructed superheroes, his 2017 book *Providence* (art by Jacen Burrows) goes after Lovecraftian horror, fusing Prohibition-era American history, psychoanalysis and literary theory to ask where horror comes from – and question what function it serves. While reading Lovecraft’s corpus beforehand enhances the experience, it isn’t necessary. Moore’s frequent nods to Lovecraft’s world and works, which would be thoughtless fan service or belabored ends-in-themselves for lesser writers, instead furnish sly winks and tension-heightening Easter eggs.

*Providence* follows journalist Robert Black, shaken after his lover’s suicide, as he wanders New England in pursuit of material for his long-dreamed-of novel. In true Lovecraftian fashion, Black’s research into a forgotten but once-newsworthy book enmeshes him in conspiracies and terrors beyond human comprehension. Moore’s devious script and Burrows’s harrowing illustrations merit **every conceivable trigger warning**. But those who brave *Providence* will find a masterpiece of slow-burn horror that oozes smarts and scares alike.

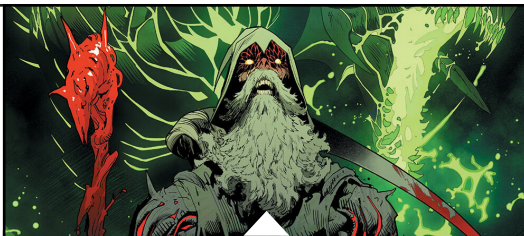
*Providence*’s pronounced strength is its clever engagement with psychoanalysis (a favorite subject of the novel’s dream-explorers and headcases). Certain psychoanalytic schools posit that there’s no such thing as a “background” detail when it comes to the

unconscious mind; anything we’re exposed to can shape or reshape, our mental architecture. *Providence* makes this theory its practice. Otherwise throwaway details – names footnoted in old pamphlets, panel compositions that seem to frame Black in hanging portraits, unusual spellings and dialects, and so on – wrap like subtle spiderweb threads around both protagonist and reader. Only when their victim is tangled beyond escape does each element’s full, vicious significance cohere. Hoisting the repressed, racist, and paranoid United States of the 1920s as its backdrop, *Providence* invites us to consider the horrors such collective ugliness has conjured.

Yet *Providence*’s real subject is the written word. Lovecraft’s narrators often bewail language’s descriptive insufficiency, but Moore recognizes that its failures sketch the contour of its powers. *Providence* celebrates – or perhaps cautions – that every act of writing moves the unconscious into the conscious, transmitting the writer’s mental alchemy to their readership. This process makes humanity more receptive to particular ways of thinking and their attendant possibilities, thereby breaking ground for new worlds. In this respect, *Providence* dreams of a world where every book is as great – in all its beauty or horror – as it can possibly be. But, as Lovecraft himself intuited, the dream of one may well represent the nightmare of many.

– ALEXANDER B. JOY





**ONCE & FUTURE** – December’s always a rough reading period for me, but one thing I can almost always count on is graphic novels. And especially graphic novels by Kieron Gillen. I finished reading *Die* earlier this year and loved its grimdark yet extremely honest take on escapism in SFF culture. But I was unsure if *Once & Future* was going to be more grimdark stuff and was wary of it for several months before I finally took the plunge. I’m happy to report that while there’s still a darkness to this series, the tone is a lot more balanced this time around.

Yes, this is a commentary on Brexit Britain and how myth and folk heroes have contributed to many toxic political campaigns throughout the ages. But it’s also about working out old grievances with your monster-hunting grandma who encourages you to stay true to yourself, no matter how bumbling you may be. Also? About time someone commented on how tired references to Arthurian Romances are. Making King Arthur and his court undead is a little on the nose, but genius.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

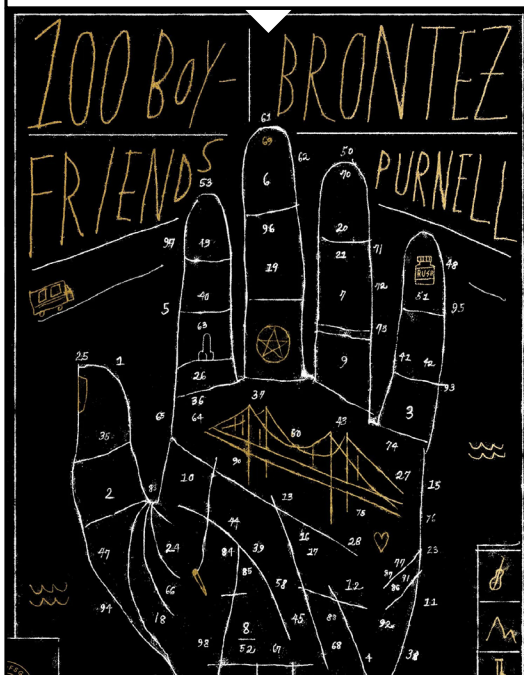


**100 BOYFRIENDS** – There is something almost superhuman about Brontez Purnell.

From music to writing to an extremely chaotic Instagram page Purnell feels more like a force of nature than anything that can be contained within one human. This book is no exception to that, juggling a wild number of perspectives and making them all land, shifting from dark comedy to erotica to tragedy. All of this is dripping with sweat, blood and all the fluids which make us human.

It truly feels like this is Purnell’s queer world and we’re just living in it.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE



**OVER SEA, UNDER STONE** – I read *The Dark is Rising* sequence back in middle school and loved it, but haven’t revisited it since. I just got the audiobooks and I’ve been pulled back into the world of light and dark and have a distinct impulse to visit Cornwall!

– NOAH SPRINGER



# MOVIES



**BLOOD BEAT** – Wisconsin is known for their cheese, which must be why this chunk of cinematic cheddar tastes oh so good! College students Ted and Dolly arrive home with Ted's girlfriend, Sarah, in tow. Right off the bat, Sarah and Cathy (the mother) have a bizarre staring contest, evidently mutually distrustful of each other due to their individual psychic intuitions. Or something like that.

Gary (Cathy's boyfriend) on the other hand gets along with all the kids it seems. Well, that is until they all go hunting along with Uncle Pete, who they refer to by his CB Handle: The Red Baron(!), and Sarah scares off the deer when she tweaks out and runs off screaming into the woods. She runs quite literally into a guy who's got a gaping hole in his gut. In true slasher movie fashion, he dies immediately.

This is all too much for Sarah and back at home, Ted puts her to bed, where she stays for a good portion of the film. She has a dream about a trunk next to the bed that contains samurai armor, a helmet and sword. Simulta-

neously, a samurai is stalking the countryside and killing folks with his sword. Sarah appears to be psychically linked to this mystery killer and becomes sexually aroused and orgasms whenever he kills.

Sound strange? Friend, you haven't seen anything yet. From a sequence featuring everything in a kitchen going absolutely bonkers with oatmeal and Nestle Quik flying off the shelves while the wall phone bursts into flames, to Cathy gyrating in the living room while her hands glow with psychic powers that look like public access television level special effects.

"Okay, sounds fun, but I thought you said it was a Christmas horror flick," I hear you say. Well, I'll tell you, it's more of a film that just *happens* to be set around Christmas. Either way, this ultra-wonky flick has a permanent slot in my holiday cinematic rotation and it should have a spot in yours too!

– MATTHEW A. ST. CYR

# MOVIES



**IL DEMONIO** – Dahlia Lavi's performance as a woman possessed is second only to Isabelle Adjani. Brunello Rondi's script and direction push our notions of morality through a rich tapestry of rural Italian mysticism. Why isn't this move more widely praised!

– NOAH SPRINGER

**BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER** –

This film is at its best when it's a rumination on grief and the scars it can leave behind, generationally and to a man. Chadwick Boseman's untimely death looms large over this film, and it's a mess at times when it's beholden to the franchise it's a part of, but it is worth a watch.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



**BEFORE SUNRISE** – Much like the genesis of these movies, one's reaction to viewing them really depends on their current status in life and love. 90s as hell, but not in a cigarettes and coffee way, more like how the kids actually were, young and dumb and stuck between hope and fallen scales. Can't really make a movie that wanders like this anymore, or rather, can't find them in the theater or streaming to much acclaim. Without genre or guile, Linklater drops a two-hander as earnest as the stars, with a cameo from two absolute Austrian lads.

– LEVI RUBECK



# TELEVISION



**The ESSEX SERPENT** – Clio Barnard’s adaptation of Sarah Perry’s novel, *The Essex Serpent*, is typical fare for an Apple TV+ mini-series, but only regarding its stunning production quality. The gorgeous late Victorian set design and gory special effects deserve any accolades they might garner, particularly for scenes depicting the victims of the eponymous “serpent” out on the desolate estuary and open-heart surgeries on London’s operating tables. Even the title sequence, lush with William Morris-inspired floral designs and morphing symbology, perfectly encapsulates the way religious and scientific discourse on faith overlap and diverge.

I’m getting ahead of myself, but not by much. *The Essex Serpent* is about a widow, Cora Seaborne, of a misogynist prick who’s made most of her adult life a living hell. Mr. Seaborne even branded Cora’s neck with a fireplace poker, leaving her with an S-like scar. On his deathbed he refuses the help of a young premier doctor, Luke Garrett, saying he’d rather die a natural death. The way God intended, so to speak. Shortly after this scene, as Cora is being consoled by her Marxist maid Martha, it’s

revealed that the widow is a passionate amateur paleontologist.

She catches wind of a rumor that there’s a fabled serpent out at the Essex Estuary and decides on a whim to pack up with Martha and her young son Frankie to relocate to a village nearby. Cora is determined to closely study what she thinks might be evidence of a plesiosaur (possibly still living). Shortly after the party’s arrival, a young girl who’s gone missing out on the estuary turns up dead on its shores and the widow finds herself suspected by the townsfolk. Luckily, she finds an unlikely ally in the town’s grumpy yet pragmatic pastor, Will Ransome. Or perhaps not so unlikely – most viewers will spot the forbidden romance tropes from miles away.

For some this period drama will be too slow or too predictable. For others, especially those who are coming to the mini-series knowing that it’s a rather faithful adaptation of the novel, this is a visual poem about the many transformations underway in the late Victorian period. Realizations about socialism, feminism, queer identity, religion, medicine and more are touched upon rather eloquently for a mini-series. The aerial shots of the vast and winding estuaries, the snakes carved into the pews of Will’s church, Cora’s serpentine scar – the show’s direction is skilled at provoking observant viewers’ pareidolia. Combining this with a hypnotic soundtrack with a sinuous leitmotif by Dustin O’Halloran and Herdís Stefánsdóttir, and *The Essex Serpent* effortlessly sets the mood and mind for meditating on the deconstructive nature of the tale. But your mileage will vary. Especially if you wanted something spicier (a la *Bridgerton*) or more supernatural from the series.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



# TELEVISION



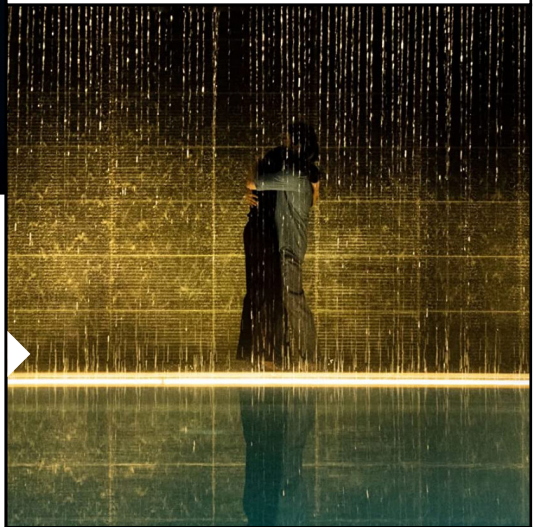
**KINNPORSCHÉ: LA FORTE** – This year needs more dumb-as-rocks mafia AU’s that rely heavily on the visual language of *John Wick* and are almost militantly horny. Give yourself the gift of horny Thai men who communicate via tasers to the private parts. You may regret it, but literally there is nothing else remotely close to this on American TV.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



**ANDOR** – I assume that it’s going to pick up at some point, but I’m not quite there yet.

– JUSTIN REEVE



**DRAGON AGE: ABSOLUTION** – Beware, the first few episodes are poorly-paced and the characterization is flat to start. But what I’ve watched so far is promising, particularly with regard to having a real sense of place and letting you know early on that this series is definitely directly tied to the next *Dragon Age* title (which may be delayed until at least 2024). The environmental art is gorgeous and actually makes the character animation look cheaper than it probably is. Media tie-ins like *Absolution* are often huge juggling acts, considering how much lore they have to cover to bring outside viewers up to speed. A classic case of wanting to snag a broader audience and being spread thin, narratively-speaking. I have faith that things will pick up a little after all the table dressing is finished. If you have little patience for exposition, however, perhaps you would prefer *Dragon Age*’s novels, short stories or comics instead.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

# GAMES



**UNPACKING** – When it comes to video-games, one of the most fundamental aspects of immersion is storytelling. It is easy to fall in love with a game when the story is interesting, well-written and totally riveting. For many of the titles I played in 2022, this came through a combination of oral narration and cutscenes – each of which directly feeds the story to the player. There is one game that I fell for, however, that puts its own unique spin on storytelling: *Unpacking*.

Developed by Witch Beam and published by Humble Games in 2021, *Unpacking* was a game unlike any other I have played. There is no verbal narration, and very little written storytelling – there are only the captions of photos taken after levels and a final image at the end. Otherwise, the protagonist's story is told only by the objects they have owned throughout their life. The ones they keep, the ones they don't and the ones they acquire throughout explain how they have grown and changed – no dialogue is necessary.

The game begins in their childhood bedroom. The unboxing of their stuffed animals, toys and more gives players the foundation of their personality. As life goes on, players follow the protagonist as they move from their family home to college dorms, apartments

and eventually homes of their own. We watch their fashion sense evolve, their developing love for yoga and we can even see their relationships with those they live with in the way their belongings mesh together. We witness their triumphs and mistakes, and it feels as if it was happening to us or someone we love.

My first full playthrough of it occurred alone, in my room, in the span of one night. I started up the game with expectations of a calm, relaxing way to end the evening. While it helped me relax, I wasn't prepared for how it would make me feel. I spent that night living out their life as if it was my own. I watched as they grew into hobbies I loved, like gaming and D&D, and I felt so happy as they traded in their dorm for an apartment full of friends with the same interests. I looked on as they managed to fall in love with the person of their dreams, and cried as I watched them move into their final home with the job they had been working on their entire life.

Of course, there were sad times, too. I despaired as I watched them move into an apartment with a partner who wasn't putting in enough effort for them. I watched how they had to move back home, and watched as their physical health declined. I felt so sad watching these things happen, and yet I was cheering

# GAMES

(continued from previous page)

them on from the other side of the screen, hopeful for them to receive something more.

In its unique, silent storytelling, *Unpacking* shared a lifetime of emotions and experiences with me solely through the protagonist's possessions. It gave me abundant sadness and joy that I don't believe would have been possible if it had been simply written out for me. Not to mention – and what brings the most joy to me – is that no matter how many times I replay it, I will always discover a new object or connection that will tell me more about them.

– KRISTA MCCAY

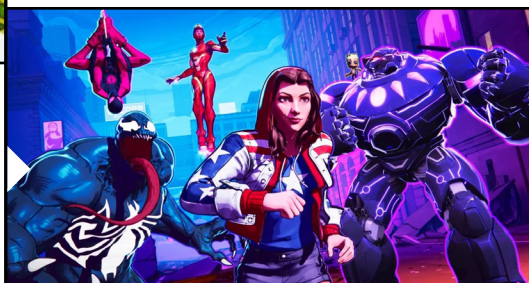


**GOROGOA** – Continuing to work through my games backlog and finished *Gorogoa* with the help of a friend who finished the puzzler recently. Coming back to a saved file in this sequential art-inspired game is definitely a challenge. Yet the narrative design is so strong with that once I was re-oriented I was able to finish it in less than a day. I love how *Gorogoa* lets its tale of moving through the different stages of grief remain mostly symbolic and up to the player's interpretation. On the surface of it one could say this is a tale about experiencing a war and how that affects one's dreams and sense of self. But you could also view the protagonist's journey here in a number of different ways, depending on when you play it. I'm sure this is a game I will return to in the years to come to see what it means to me then.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

**MARVEL SNAP** – An addicting, collectible card game on my phone featuring ranking systems and trademarked characters? Count me in baby!

– NOAH SPRINGER





# HOROSCOPE

THERE WILL COME A TIME  
WHEN ALL YOU NEEDED WERE  
GENTLE HANDS, AND SOMEONE  
WILL INSTEAD COME TO YOU  
WITH KNIVES. YOU WILL SUR-  
VIVE. 🗡️