

FUCK!

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WARRENS

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**DAVID SHIMOMURA BEN SAIER PHILIP RUSSEL OIUWATAYO
ADEWOIE EMILY PRICE PHOENIX SIMMS MATT MARRONE LEVI
RUBECK NOAH SPRINGER JUSTIN REEVE ROB RICH**

This Machine Kills Fascists

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for another subscription drive! As can never be said enough, you all really make this possible and we absolutely love you for it. Unwinnable has long (now) been a bastion of culture, ever supported by its dedicated readers. You're all the best.

Onto features! This month we've got Orrin Grey who has a bone to pick with the Warrens. RIP. Also this month is Clint Morrison, welcome back Clint, on fragmentology.

For this month's Funeral Rites, brought to you by Exalted Funeral, Emily Price talks to Momatoes about her apocalyptic yet hopeful RPG, *ARC*.

Onto the regular drum beat! First up is Oluwatayo Adewole going back to 1979. Matt Marrone is back, featuring Wife of the Year! Emily Price on mountain goats. Weird pick for a gaming magazine but we all stan Black Phillip here. Justin Reeve starts on the paleo diet. Rob Rich Hunts Monsters, on his phone! Levi Rubeck goes on a Grails quest. Phil Russell watches that new Martin Scorsese movie, the long one! Ben Sailer gets his immoral soul redeemed by rock and roll. Phoenix Simms is the only one of us who played *Baldur's Gate 3*. Noah Springer expensed a bunch of food to his other job.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

Give yourself the pleasure of casting off the chains of global oppressors. Also, big congrats to our friends, readers and enemies in Ohio!

David Shimomura

*Chicago, Illinois
November 13, 2023*



NOISE COMPLAINT | **BEN SAILER**

ON THE OUTSIDE **LOOKING INTO** CHRISTIAN **HARDCORE**

During my early college years, Christian hardcore was nearly synonymous with hardcore itself. For context, I went to a small liberal arts school in the upper Midwest, an area that was once a hotbed for spirit-filled bands. They often shared stages (and floors) with secular bands, and even at shows with exclusively Christian lineups, the audiences were always mixed. I had a lot of personal misgivings with religion at the time, but I never thought twice about going to see heavy Christian bands. It was all just music, and I believed everyone belonged in the scene, regardless of religious affiliation.

I didn't grow up in a church-going household, but I did have friends in middle school who were the sons of a pastor, and so I was exposed to plenty of Christian rock. I thought all of it was terrible and I wasn't shy about saying so (even though it was the only music they were allowed to own, and in retrospect, I wish I had been more mindful of that fact). It gave me a look into an insular musical world that wasn't accessible from

the outside, one that claimed to be about ministering to the masses, but while mostly preaching to the choir.

I didn't "get" Christian "rock" until I got into hardcore halfway through high school. The early waves of Christian hardcore bands were different. They weren't universally awful, and they didn't wall themselves off from the rest of the music industry. Starting in the early to mid-90s, bands like Embodiment, Living Sacrifice and Zao emerged from the underground and showed that Christian bands could match their secular peers in brutality and sincerity, rather than pushing second-rate product to a captive audience. While occasionally ostracized both by the church and the heavy music community, they ultimately won the battle to be taken seriously, and were instrumental in shaping metalcore's evolution from VFW basements to the forefront of heavy music.

My listening rotation for much of my freshman year of college included a lot of those



bands. Norma Jean and Underoath were ascending in popularity and seemed to influence every other band you'd see at all-ages shows. Labels like Solid State, Tooth and Nail, Facedown and Blood and Ink were at their peak. At the time, Christian hardcore was actively driving the growth of the hardcore scene in general, especially across the American Midwest and along the Bible Belt. It isn't hyperbolic to say that metalcore would have evolved much differently without the Christian scene's influence.

As happens with most trends, the early 2000s metalcore scene hit critical mass and became weighed down by copycat bands. Around the same time, most of my friends who were Christian either left the church, or at least became less hardline about their evangelicalism. Christianity, hardcore and Christian hardcore stopped being recurring points of conversation amongst my social circles. Eventually, something that once seemed like the exception (heavy and explicitly Christian music that wasn't trash) had become so much the norm that I didn't notice when it faded away.

Until recently, I never spent much time wondering what happened to the Christian hardcore bands that used to be so dominant when I was younger. Aside from long-running heavyweights like The Devil Wears Prada and August Burns Red – both bands

that started to take off around the same time my tastes drifted elsewhere – I couldn't name more than a couple current Christian metalcore bands. But as someone prone to going down musical rabbit holes, I was curious to find out how a movement that once seemed immovable had lost its perceived relevance, and so I turned to Google.

I had some assumptions about what led to the Christian scene's retreat from mainstream visibility. The most obvious is that the specific subgenres of hardcore and metal that were most closely aligned with Christian bands went through a natural boom and bust cycle. As the scene started to attract trend-chasers, faith became a marketing tool, rather than a sincere expression of belief. As Few Left Standing drummer Jon Keegin [told Christian culture magazine The Plough](#), "All of this stuff began when a bunch of working-class kids like us started bands in the service of ministry. But when it got big, the scene flooded with kids from the suburbs who used the appearance of ministry in service to their band. The fame took over."

If you subtract the religious references, parts of this quote could describe the rise and fall of any movement in punk, hardcore or metal that ever emerged from the basement scene and gained mainstream acceptance (see also: nu-metal, emo, pop punk). Youth counter-culture movements change quickly,

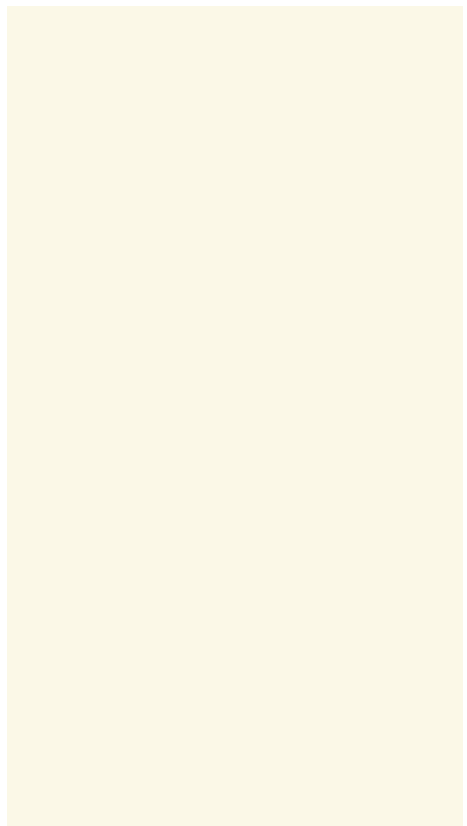


and by the time they hit the suburbs, there's already something new looming on the horizon. This is the circle of life. But when trends are tied to convictions, moving on can be more complicated than simply changing the cut of your jeans.

In a video titled [“What Killed Christian-Core,”](#) The Punk Rock MBA host Finn McKenty (in a fair and even-handed way) points out that a lot of the bands that drove the Christian hardcore boom were in high school when they started their careers. They were born in church-going homes and likely got into heavy music through whatever CDs they could find at Christian bookstores. Some of those bands were clearly riding a gimmick as far as they could until the whole thing crashed. Yet others were just following the spiritual direction they were led in since childhood, not realizing they could choose their own music and beliefs. At least not until they reached actual adulthood.

When the Christian hardcore scene lost its grip on heavy music, I didn't notice because I'd mostly outgrown the broader styles it was most closely associated with. There was never a moment where I decided I was done listening to music that carried a certain message or came from a specific belief system. But I also wasn't brought up to exclusively listen to music that spread any specific message either, and as such, I never considered

how the question of what happened to Christian hardcore could sound much different to someone who was raised within the faith. Nor had I fully considered that there is not one singular answer, but many different converging, complex personal experiences at the intersection between faith, commerce and the power of the riff. [U](#)





EYEING ELSEWHERE | PHILLIP RUSSELL

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

We're in an age where streaming has slowly, meticulously, descended upon the film industry like a carrion bird to a corpse. As more films are released on the various streaming services I forget I subscribe to until they ping my bank account each month, it's definitely become more of a deliberate choice to go to the movie theater than it used to be.

I love watching movies from the comfort of my own home. I get to make my own popcorn, season it with soy sauce, butter and whatever ever else I want. More importantly, pause the film and use the bathroom without missing a beat! The added convenience of it all has made it harder for me to want to venture into the world and go to a movie theater.

It doesn't help that the films that seem to last in the theaters today are either schlock or three plus hour long epics without an intermission. Despite all of that, after more than three days of trying to find the time for it, I sat down in the theater – popcorn in hand – for Martin Scorsese's newest picture, *Killers of the Flower Moon*. The runtime was my

biggest obstacle to seeing it. Living in Seattle, especially during the fall months, allotting almost four hours of your time to seeing a movie could mean you miss a whole day's worth of sunlight. It's a costly choice, mentally *and* monetarily. So, when I go to the theater now, I hope to feel as if the spectacle of the big silver screen is worth it.

By and large it has been! Seeing *Oppenheimer* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* in IMAX were both well worth my time, and in fact, added a bit to the experience that if I were to watch it at home, I wouldn't have gotten. Maybe that's why *Dune* didn't hit for me . . . Something about watching the sands of Arrakis sway across a 40-inch television doesn't have the same effect. *Killers of the Flower Moon* grounds the viewer so deeply in Oklahoma that you can practically smell the oil at the thrust of its violent history.

* * *

Killers of the Flower Moon is a complicated film, less so because of the story it tells, and more so with how it's told and by whom.



The film centers around a series of murders in the Osage Nation in Oklahoma during the 1920s, after the discovery of a vast supply of oil on tribal land. Through this discovery, the Osage nation people became some of the wealthiest individuals in the country, going so far as even having white maids, drivers and attendants. This immensity of wealth also attracted bad actors and a systemic slaughtering of many Osage people by white settlers hoping to capitalize on their land rights and wealth.

The film follows the character of Ernest Burkhart (Leonardo DiCaprio), as he and his uncle William Hale (Rober DeNiro) carefully execute a years-long plot to systematically infiltrate and murder the affluent Osage family of Mollie Burkhart (Lily Gladstone) in pursuit of their wealth. It's a harrowing piece of history that many – myself included – will not have heard of prior to the film. While I enjoyed the film quite a bit, there is a lot to be said by folks more equipped than me (check out Osage language consultant [Christopher Cote's](#) perspective on the film) about who it chooses to focus on and how that might undermine its message.

Given my ignorance of the history at play in the film, I appreciated the lengths through which Scorsese goes to ground us in Oklahoma during this time period. While there is certainly a more briskly paced ver-

sion of this film that could exist, I found myself admiring just how slow it was. I felt as if my boots were on the ground getting to know the large cast of characters we meet throughout the long runtime. I find that when I watch historical films, a recent example being Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, the narrative is easy to follow but outside of the titular characters, it's hard to really remember one person from the next, let alone their names. In *Killers*, I was surprised just how deeply rooted I felt in getting to know the characters and their backstories. However, I do find it odd to center the narrative so thoroughly within the white people instead of the Osage.

As Cote's points out, the message of the film largely becomes that of how long people in positions of power – whether they realize it or not – will allow themselves to be complicit in the upholding of racism and settler colonial violence. While this is an admirable message, it leaves a well of space for us to empathize with Burkhart, a man who systematically helped murdered his family through gaslighting and abuse. I'm not sure if he should be shown such grace (although, I *do* think Scorsese is delicate enough with his portrayal to not have the audience root for Burkhart's final decision by the end). While the film we got is engrossing, there seems to be a much more interesting angle through placing us in the



perspective of Mollie, the Osage woman Ernest Burkhart marries.

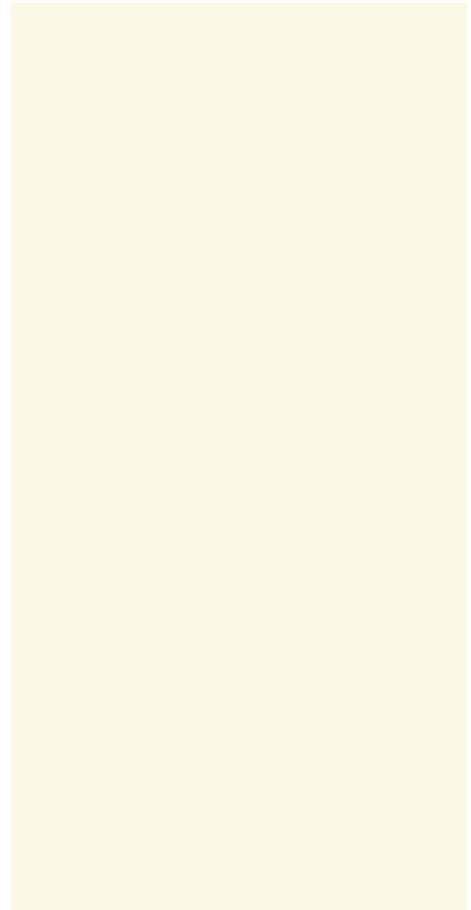
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There is much reverence shown throughout *Killers* to that of the Osage tradition and culture, but sometimes it can come across a bit ethnographic instead of intimate. While broad sweeping cultural scenes are shown and Osage are given a voice, the Osage “characters” like Mollie and her family, feel a bit underwritten themselves. The placement of perspective being from Burkhart’s point of view certainly works in that the Osage always feels a bit untenable, outside the realm of his understanding despite his attempts, I’m not sure if this is ultimately the kind of narrative framing I would have liked.

From Mollie’s perspective, *Killers* would transform into that of a detective horror film as Mollie slowly uncovers the true culprit of her family’s murders. In turn, I think we’d have a better understanding of her and the Osage nation as a whole, how these murders permeated outwards and through their community and ultimately how these murders cause complex emotions outside of the anguish that’s clearly displayed in the film.

While the film as a whole feels largely grounded in depicting the atrocities of these murders at the hands of Ernest Burkhart and

his colleagues, I would have loved to see the final moments of the film show just how far he’s fallen, and the courage it took for Mollie to forge ahead and imagine a new life for herself and her family. [U](#)





RUN IT BACK | **OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE**

1979 2019

This month we turn our attention to Coppola's 1979 epic *Apocalypse Now*, and more specifically to its 2019 Final Cut.

Amid a sprawling epic I want to narrow my attention to a part which wasn't in the theatrical cut but is essential to the film working as an anti-colonial narrative. In the back half of the journey, the central group of American soldiers we follow arrives at a plantation in Cambodia still owned and operated by a wealthy French family who have held the land for decades since the French officially handed over control of the state. The land is guarded fiercely by a group of French soldiers/mercenaries and maintained by Cambodian servants. Once they recognize them as Americans, they give the young Clean (Laurence Fishburne) a proper military burial – what does it mean for a Black teenager a few generations removed from freed slaves to be buried on the ground of a colonial plantation under a flag of stolen stars?

That we are on a plantation specifically is essential for the understanding of what's

happening here. With the development of the plantation in the 16th century from Wales to Ireland to the Caribbean, we move from subsistence farming to highly controlled productions of cash crops, all of which serve to build up Capital(ism) as a system. It's a form of land use that disregards the needs of both the land and the people beyond a small few – only being created and perpetuated through coercion.

What follows in *Apocalypse Now* feels almost farcical but cuts to the heart of the colonial mind, perhaps more so than Kurtz's sprawling monologues delivered by *Marlon Brando* doing his best American Shakespearean. At the plantation, dinner is delivered by the servants on a long table trying to embody the splendor of a traditional European dinner party for the visiting American soldiers as well as the French living there. It's a sharp contrast to the explosions and blood we've been inundated with, and the place feels like wandering through a dreamer's corpse. The lighting is dim and sickly, entering in shafts from unflattering angles. You can feel the



humidity seep through the artifice of control and you see that paralleled in the conversation at the table.

Dressed in an obviously uncomfortable suit, Christian Marquand's performance as Hubert de Marais holds this together, moving from faux civilized reminiscing and showboating to frothing vitriol about communists as he laments how far he feels his people have fallen. Specifically, he positions the anti-war protestors back in France as killers of young French men off at war for their refusal to give full support. His performance becomes increasingly desperate feeling, like a vein is about to burst from the stress and hunger of it all. As with the actual France, the conversation at the dinner table makes it clear that there may be room for surface-level disagreement, but ultimately imperium cannot be challenged. All are referred to as "family" by the patriarch, but in reality, only the "true" family (the white English and French) actually speak. Though as has extensively been pointed out by anti-racist critics (Vietnamese ones in particular), some of the same critique can be leveraged at Coppola who mostly treats Asian people as objects through which Western amorality can be skewered – something I would say is the problem reflected in all true *Heart of Darkness* adaptations when it

comes to their treatment of those indigenous to "the Heart."


In any case, with the frothing anti-communist vitriol the mask falls and so do the myths. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. Government by consent. E Pluribus Unum. Plus Ultra. Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. All becomes dust and rubble to coat bodies without headstones.*

To these imperial powers, the world is their plantation. Racialized people become bodies to do with as they please and exist for the purposes of production and little else. "Family" (or the "global community") is recreated in the worst sense of the word, a means of ownership masquerading as love and connection. A fraternity with real winners and losers.

I write this as journalists report the IDF dropping white phosphorus in Palestine with planes paid for by the US government and civilians being killed en masse is overlooked by most governments in the West for the sake of protecting their strategic interests in Southwest Asia. I write this as the Congo becomes a battlefield for precious resources because of the



greed of local elites and the corporate hand that feeds. I write this as militias in Sudan are armed and given free rein to repeat the ethnic cleansings of less than two decades ago.

If the world is a plantation, then its soil is sick, fed with blood that rots the fruit we eat till the poison makes us lose whatever humanity we had to begin with. Yet still the plantation's proprietors cling to its persistence even as it destroys over and over. How much blood has to be shed? How many bodies have to be buried under rubble, empty epitaphs and stolen stars for it to be enough? 





PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

REVIEW: JENNY FROM THEBES

Jenny from Thebes is a throwback in multiple senses. Most basically, it's an album that intentionally draws up the imagery of ancient Greece. It's also a sequel to the Mountain Goats' 2002 album *All Hail West Texas*. And for a lot of people around my age, it's also a return to the discography of a band who was formative of our middle or high school years.

This was certainly true for me: the Mountain Goats have followed me from middle school to college, and nearly a decade after that. I tell the story of when I met John Darnielle at Powell's Books often, although nothing interesting happens in it (short version: I got a book signed). I don't think about the Mountain

Goats often, but that's because I periodically find them again, almost inevitably.

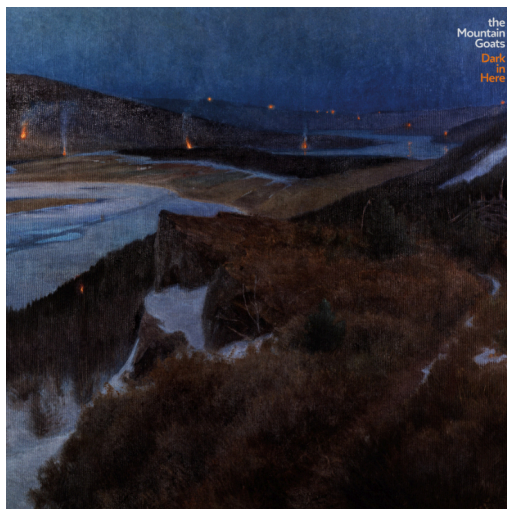
My favorite album of theirs in the past ten years was *Dark in Here* (2021). Apart from that, their recent albums have been one hit wonders for me, for songs like "Clemency of the Wizard King" and "January 31, 438." *Transcendental Youth*, which came out when I was in high school, is what I regard as the last classic Mountain Goats album, and coincidentally it's also the second predecessor to *Jenny from Thebes*; the first one, of course, is *All Hail West Texas*, the other contender for THE Mountain Goats Album (with the other option being *Sunset Tree*).



The choice to make a sequel to two out of three of a band's most esteemed albums opens *Jenny from Thebes* up to comparison. Indeed, several times on my first listen of the album, I found myself opening one of its predecessors instead. This album is made for the many people who have been with the band for a while, but that can also make getting into it more difficult. If the Mountain Goats are a formative part of your life, like they are for me, it can be hard to listen to something new without immediately wanting to go back to the old.

If you listen to the 2000s output of the Mountain Goats enough, you realize there are a couple types of songs. There are "Going to —" songs, and conversely "getting out of this place" songs. There's now "Jenny" I and III. The other type present on this album is historical songs. Pairing something contemporary with something old subtextually is nothing new for this band. There's "The Anglo Saxons" and all of *Songs for Pierre Chuvin*, which tells the story of pre-Christian pagans in the Roman Empire ("Notch some wins, take some losses / Be nice to the guys who wear necklaces with crosses"). This is territory *Jenny from Thebes* goes into, but not as directly. I couldn't tell you, after my first listen, what ancient Greece has to do with this album; close reading of the lyrics

offers clues, but it needs further study. This is exactly what I like about the Mountain Goats: their best songs ask you to do research.



That requirement might seem more present than it's ever been in this album, which is the most straightforward sequel they've ever made and requires listening to *All Hail West Texas*, at least, to fully appreciate. But in fact, everything you need to know is spelled out more clearly than ever. The thread between *All Hail*

West Texas and the second "Jenny" album, *Transcendental Youth*, was incredibly thin. Any connections are subtext. I like it that way, and I much prefer the songs on *Jenny from Thebes* that have nothing holding them to their predecessors besides a few simple themes, pending a diligent study of the previous albums. "From the Nebraska Plant" removes any mystery by making one of these straightforward connections;

"Same as Cash", the next song, does a much better job of communicating a theme of the album, exhaustion, without all the verbal touchstones.

This was a common experience for me and this album: one song would fall flat, and the next one would save it. There's another brand of Mountain



Goats song where everything hinges on the strength of a particular phrase, and if you don't find that phrase compelling, good

luck. “Cleaning Crew” is an offender here, where “Murder at the 18th St. Garage” pulls out a much stronger refrain.

And this is when I realized I was supposed to be thinking not of a generic crew and a garage, but a crew and a garage in West Texas. Many of the best Mountain Goats songs have some way of situating you in space, whether through a chronological story (“I wish the West Texas Highway was a Mobius strip; I could ride it out forever”) or back and forth in time like “San Bernadino”. *Jenny from Thebes* is trying harder than maybe any previous album to create a specific place, but it still feels unmoored, somewhere between Greece and Austin. And not in a past-in-the-present way, but like the album can’t decide where it is.


I find myself wishing *Jenny from Thebes* weren’t a rock opera, weren’t a sequel at all. I had by far the most enjoyment out of it when it wasn’t diving back into its own past. But besides the question of if it’s fair to compare this album to its predecessors – if you’re not doing that, you’re lying – I’ve got to judge the album on its own terms, as a story about a collective house and the person who runs it. It’s also the story of a songwriter aging twenty years and imagining their characters doing the same.

Mountain Goats fans, and I say this as one, are insufferable in their own special way. “Game Shows Touch Our Lives” was a John Green epigraph, for instance. The original “Jenny” was the Tumblr bio of every teen ten years ago: “you pointed your headlamp toward the horizon/ we were the one thing in the galaxy God didn’t have his eyes on”. To love some-

thing truly is to be a little cringe about it. These songs don’t land for me, but I know they will for many of the people who

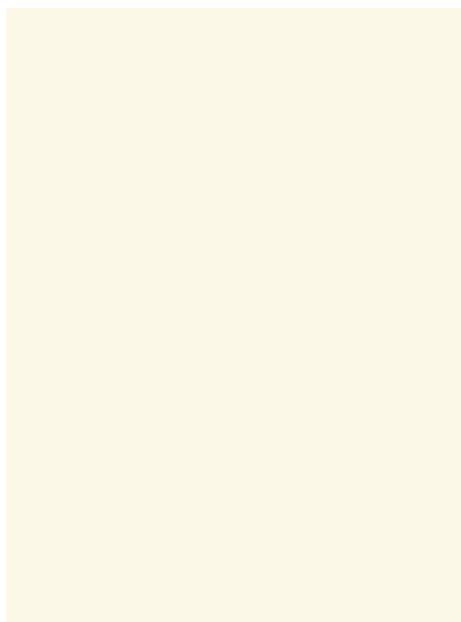
appreciate the band the most. And I can’t be too mad, because they’ve put out five albums in three years, and I like some of those albums much more. I can’t fault them for not just doing more of the Mountain Goats, but I also feel the lonely irony of wanting exactly that while I look at an album that is basically the Mountain Goats boiled down

to its component parts.

If nothing else, *Jenny from Thebes* got me to go back and listen to two of my favorite albums of all time and made me reflect on how my enjoyment of this band’s music has changed over the course of fifteen years. I hope John Darnielle et al keep making music forever, and I hope they continue to experiment and evolve. The opposite of living, as “Jenny” 1.0 reminds us, is stagnation. 

THE MOUNTAIN GOATS ALL HAIL WEST TEXAS

fourteen songs about seven people,
two houses, a motorcycle, and a locked
treatment facility for adolescent boys.





INTERLINKED | PHOENIX SIMMS

PERSONAL EMERGENCE

I think a lot about Astarion lately (it didn't help matters that I just finished writing a piece on the tortured vamps of *Soul Reaver* for last month's issue). I'm sure a lot of *Baldur's Gate 3* players fixate on the rakish Vampire/High Elf Rogue, whose voice actor I swear is paying homage to Tim Curry as Frank-N-Furter. There's something irresistibly charming about how openly manipulative, self-serving, cruel and petty Astarion is and for my playing experience so far, he's the life (err or would that be unlife?) of the party. Not to mention how poignant his intermittent moments of deep insecurity are, betraying his true feelings about being a former slave of 200 years to the Szarr family. I definitely feel an affinity towards this charismatic vamp in some regards, but often my desires as a player aren't so much about possible romantic/sexual attraction as they are about friendship. Much to Astarion's disappointment, which is often severe and punishing.

Yes, I've already decided that Astraea – my sheltered Forest Gnome Conjuraction Wizard/Guild Artisan – who often engages

with Astarion's flirty banter, and who is beguiled by how different he is from her, is not going to be romancing the bad boy. I've decided that while the two have indeed a lot of chemistry, it's not the sort that leads to them eventually becoming lovers. What I find most rewarding (at least in Act 1 so far of my first playthrough) is that there's a level of naturalistic unpredictability to the dialogue between your protagonist and a mercurial fellow like Astarion. Such ambiguous interaction emphasizes how unlikely yet strangely believable their friendship is. And how that friendship grows and blossoms slowly over time. No matter how tenuous or cautionary that friendship arc might be.

Astarion and Astraea follow what has become an accidental tradition or pattern for me as a player of conversation- and relationship-heavy RPGs. I'm prone to having at least one character in the cast who follows an enemies-to-friends or at least begrudging allies arc with my protagonist (who are often based off characters from my fiction projects). In the past, for



instance, I've had a *Dragon Age 2* playthrough that had my smuggler-origin Hawke, Tora, run the gauntlet of reconciling and winning back Fenris' trust after three quarters of my playthrough was spent with them being the bitterest of rivals. My Inquisitor started off as a spoiled Circle mage Trevelyan who traded barbs and misgivings with Solas, yet eventually became close enough with him that he viewed her as a respected mentee during her Rift Mage subclass training. I don't know if my fascination with rivals to friends or allies arcs says anything about me, because as far as I can remember I haven't had many instances of such relationships in my own life. I also don't often play an extension of myself in RPGs where you can customize your character, though I have nothing against it.

Getting back to *BG3*, the vamp and the forest gnome clashed straight away, with Astraea's initial alignment being a sort of wavering between neutral good and chaotic good. I don't believe in static moral alignments – it's a bone I've had to pick with D&D for quite some time, and I prefer to think of what dynamic mix of archetypes suits my character's creation best. For Astraea, I envision her as Kaylee Frye from *Firefly*-meets-Princess Lily from *Legend* – she has a naive streak but she's also highly intelligent, has a knack with gadgets and a

pendant for emotional negotiation. She communes with animals and often supports actions that seem analogous to nature's progress. Astarion is, well, you know how you meet him. In most instances, he manages to wrestle the protagonist to the ground after a cheap ruse and puts a blade to their throat. Not so with Astraea, whose perception check was high enough for her to remain in a wary standoff with him, unpinned. The two then proceeded to disagree on everything in camp conversations, from what to do with the Mindflayer's tadpoles to what tack to take regarding sharing and caring for other party members.

I built an emergent narrative from the lead up conversations to the bite scene, where Astarion's vampirism is officially revealed (though how anyone didn't see it coming in the party is beyond me). Just prior to Astarion attempting to bite Astraea in her sleep, they had a fractious exchange about what manner of death the latter would choose if she was given a choice. Shocked and appalled, Astraea dug her heels in and refused to give the vamp an answer. He chastises her at first, but when he sees she won't back down or give into his whims, Astarion ends the conversation by saying "Don't worry – I like you, darling. I'll make sure you get a special death" or something along those lines. So, you can imagine that



when Astraea awoke to him trying to bite her. To put it mildly— she freaked out.

But then the weirdest thing happened. She still let him drink her blood in spite of threatening to defend herself and although she remained wary of him after that night, the two started to become friends. My take on this is, beyond my curiosity as a player to see another side of Astarion, is that Astraea realized that his vampiric burdens weren't in and of themselves aberrations of nature. She also learned of his happiness to be free of his former life as a tormented vampire spawn and his revels in receiving a rare second chance at living like an unturned being made her develop a protective streak for him. They still had their differences, of course, but now the two seemed more like confidants. Astarion began to show a sort of affection for Astraea, especially as she began to lean more into her cunning side as a Forest Gnome and a scholar who was more willing to get her hands dirty than she first let on. But any attempts at flirting with her only end in his utter frustration, because Astraea is not only uninterested in him romantically, she's often inquisitive about his past (though never forceful).

During the camp party scene with the Tieflings after choosing to save the Emerald Grove, Astraea finally struck upon Astar-

ion's last nerve and was insulted by him for her naivety. At first, I was shocked at how the rogue had reacted to her trying to keep up his sulky spirits, but the more that time has passed from that scene I realize I'm in fact delighted by that altercation. The two are still friends somehow by the way (Astraea's even killed a vampire hunter to protect him), and I appreciate Larian for keeping realistic tensions in the relationships of this game. Although I do have a criticism of the relationship progression in that regard as well— a lot of the other characters I feel have been heavily engineered to fall for or lust for your protagonist. Especially Gale. Yes, hopeless romantics and unrequited love exist, but you can't tell me that just from a few early encounters every other party member would suddenly have the hots for Astraea (and they did all express rather deep feelings for her during the party scene). Other than Astarion, the only character she's openly flirted with is Halsin. But I digress.

When I play games like *Baldur's Gate 3* or any *Dragon Age* entry, games that emphasize building relationships through conversation, my favorite aspect of those relationships is how my personal canon for my character creates emergent stories of how *exactly* any character in the game connects with mine and whether it's a deep connection or not. Most often I've found that I



have more satisfying character relationships in games that allow for deep friendship or platonic arcs of some sort. That same smuggler-Hawke I mentioned earlier? She's the platonic wife of Sebastian Vael and was happy to let him live his priestly life, having grown exhausted with all the toxic men she'd encountered during her years in the underground of Kirkwall. I loved that there was an option to have the focus of a relationship be about something other than strictly sexual or romantic attraction, although I head-canon that Tora and Sebastian love each other deeply.

A lot of games still haven't quite struck the balance, in my opinion, of portraying nuanced relationship paths that don't boil down to "courting-then sex-then-never-speaking-to-each-other-again". That's why, as much as I still find some typical romance paths fun, I often prefer deep platonic relationships in games. My choice to not romance Astarion isn't because I want to be unique or don't believe his romance path wouldn't be worth it, it's because in addition to it making a lot of narrative sense for my first protagonist, I crave more uncertainty in ludic relationships.

Games are often, especially at the AAA level, power or pleasure simulators. I want more RPGs to offer a middle road for players like me as well as for asexual or aro-

matic people who want more nuanced options. There's nothing wrong with exploring sex and romance in games, but there's so much more to attraction than just bonking or finding a romantic soulmate.

I feel like hearing of more players' emergent narratives and head canons is a good start for this and perhaps a way that RPG developers could consult for future relationship narratives. Perhaps they are already doing so behind-the-scenes? The less relationships feel like formulas that can be easily captured by guide writers and wiki stats, the better. 🍷



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR | **MATT MARRONE**

MY RICH LIFE

There is a Netflix reality show *The Wife of the Year* recently asked me to watch with her. It's called *How to Get Rich* and its mantra is "live your rich life."

What is your rich life? The answer, we quickly learn, is different for everyone. Is it freedom from crippling debt? The ability to travel on a whim? To buy your dream home? To open a successful restaurant? To finally sell the \$60 microwave you're paying thousands of dollars to keep in storage? To actually trust your spouse enough to help handle the finances?

We follow as best-selling author Ramit Sethi meets a series of real-life people willing to let the world take a peek into their bank accounts and relationships. He breaks down their debt, their spending habits, their quirks and attempts to help them understand their mistakes and start building up to their rich life.

I find it a nice guilty pleasure and I'm glad to have something to watch with *The Wife of the Year*. She laughs at it with me, but she

also takes it very seriously – I haven't asked her outright, but I'm positive she has a major crush on Sethi, which is understandable given his line of work and the way the show constantly has him slow-walking into hip places as he crisscrosses the country. He'll take, say, calls from California on speaker phone from the back of a New York City cab after just being at that person's home in the previous scene, because . . . well, it's never quite explained. But it makes him seem cool.

I'm pretty sure his book is going to end up in our house if it isn't already and I'll be filling out a worksheet with *The Wife of the Year* answering questions about our rich life and what we want it to be. I keep telling her I'm already living my rich life – I'm typing this, after all, on my iPhone while on a flight to Miami with my dad for a three-game weekend series between the Marlins and Yankees. As a Disney employee, I get into Disney World for free. As a member of the Baseball Writers Association of America, I get into baseball games for free (not a perk I am using for this weekend's pleasure trip, of course). And whenever I think of other



things I want, they're typically free as well, if too often elusive — sex, peace, quiet.

But, as I said, that worksheet is inevitably coming, and I suspect my current level of satisfaction won't be considered sufficient by my significant other. In order to get ahead of this latest potential marital argument, I decided to use this month's column to throw things at the wall and see if they stick. Do they? Judge for yourself.

The Rookie of the Year's Rich Life: Five Goals

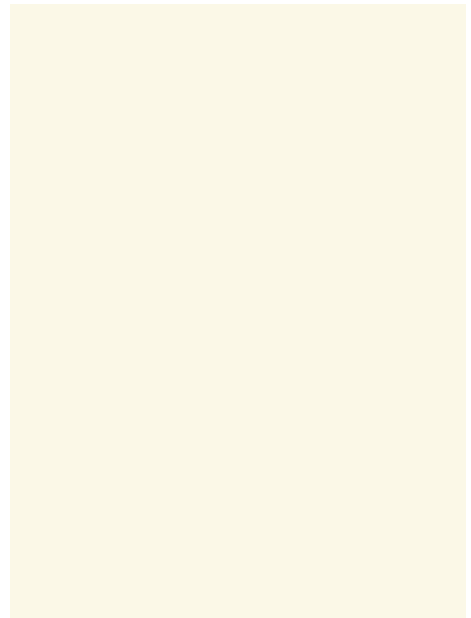
1. Move up the ladder here enough to get access to the Unwinnable company jet. The car Stu bought me is nice, but flying commercial as I am this very moment is part of the non-rich life I am now supposed to be working so hard to put into the past.
2. Win \$2,000 a week for life via scratch-offs.
3. Help both my elementary school-aged children find amazing careers and move into their own apartments down the street, preferably within the next six months.
4. Never do a household chore ever again.
5. I can't think of a fifth.

OK then. Now that you've read what I have, what do you think? I need you on my side

here because I think these goals will infuriate The Wife of the Year, who will a) conclude I'm not taking this seriously and b) argue No. 4 already exists.

So, I'm stuck. As I said, I'm more or less already living my rich life, but it can't be truly achieved/maintained unless The Wife of the Year is happy. But she might not be happy unless I have a fresh plan for said rich life, one that will look great on her crush's worksheet. Which means I need at least one of my above goals to be attainable.

Stu, can you gas up the jet? 





CASTING DEEP METER | **LEVI RUBECK**

GRAILS SCORES THE THEATER OF THE MIND

Listening to the new Grails album *Anches en Maat*, my head echoes the word “cinematic” but my heart wonders if that’s a compliment, a cliché or a curse. Possibly all three.

It’s the first and possibly easiest impulse, and through several listens I’ve tried to divest from the framing, but I’m uncertain of that instinct as well. Grails is a long-running force in instrumental music, post-rock adjacent along the lines of Mogwai or Do Make Say Think, but with this album drawing in the likes of The Budos Band and The Black Heart Procession and music that doesn’t require sheets or equations. Songs that build, repeat, breakdown, hit crescen-

dos, going on a journey, but this time for Grails the toybox is flung open. Everything except wordy vocals is fair game, from strings and synths and percussion of every flavor from electric to acoustic.



GRAILS

Anches En Maat
was

Produced by
Grails

Engineered by
Grails

Mixed by
Grails

Mastered by
Grails

So, orchestral in a lot of ways, which is again often the remit of a cinematic soundtrack. Not lesser music in any way, but part of the larger creative ecosystem of a film. *Anches en Maat* does not accompany a film though, so unlike scores, it needn’t feel incomplete without the

visuals. Again, my foot inches towards the trap though, as I do not necessarily believe film scores only work in conjunction with



the films they're tied to, a position impossible to defend. As such it's settled; despite the entangled genesis of most cinematic music, the work itself is often clearly as moving if not moreso when cut from the knot of its film. It tells a story regardless, or at least many of the best ones do, as all music does, and *Anches en Maat* accomplishes this with grace from track to track.

Without poster or plot, Grails creates music that thrusts forward. More than curtains cut for mood or ambience, *Anches en Maat* begs the listener to simmer in their own headspace for a while, whether it's an act of warm reminiscence or inspirational mosey. In my own listen I hear Curtis Mayfield's soundtracks through chirping upstrokes and probing horns, but also keyboards that delightfully remind me of the *Chrono Trigger* score, an admittedly personal seed of nostalgia. "Sisters in Bilitis" builds out a heist scene, and then later "Evening Song" has me under tungsten streetlights in a dry-air contemplative drive. And the twelve minute closer brings it all together, yarn-strung from beat to beat, emotional and rhythmic. There are swells of jazzy noir, eddies of wandering bass, and then a slowly receding tide that sits like corpse pose. An album that has spent all it has to spend, not in the service of maximalism, but execution. A plan that has come together, even the moments of surprise, and never in disarray.

Grails has spent their entire career whittling away at these sounds and vibes and has succeeded from multiple directions. But this backend resurrection evolves past their already impressive catalog without compromising on their instrumental vision. Where so much of this type of music is content to unspool in the comfort of drawn notes, *Anches en Maat* is keener to play through dub, tripling down on tectonic shifts but making each second count in between as well. There's no fat to trim, no deleted scenes, no sound that can't be considered vital to the entire edit. [U](#)





NOAH'S BEAT BOX | **NOAH SPRINGER**

FINE PHILLY DINING

In October, I was fortunate enough to attend the release party for Stu's new book in New Jersey, a happy accident that was made possible by pure coincidence. I happened to be attending a conference in nearby Philadelphia literally the same week, so a stop through New Jersey seemed only responsible. While Stu's party was a highlight of the weekend, it was not the last highlight because I got to achieve one of my longtime goals in Philadelphia.

Of course, Philly is known for all sorts of things – a bell, a boxer, a sitcom – but I know it by reputation as one of the better food cities out there, specifically for sandwiches. Before we get to the sammys though, I will be honest and confess that I ate more than hoagies while in the City of Brotherly Love.

I had an amazing Mediterranean meal at Barbuzzo that included a mortadella pizza that was overloaded with amazing pistachios and one of the best salted caramel desserts I've ever tasted. I also had a unique short rib grilled cheese at Huda, which while a bit bready, was truly delicious. They grilled

some of the cheese on the outside of the bun. It seems that a trick I invented when I was twelve has become haute cuisine.

I also got a chance to stop at McGillin's Olde Ale House, the oldest pub in Philly. Having lived in Boston, I have eaten in older establishments (brag) but McGillin's was cool. I ate some of the saltiest mussels I've ever eaten. I mean, they were delicious, and I ate all of them and drank the broth, but I also Googled salt overdose afterwards. The Wisconsin in me dictated that I get an open-faced roast beef sandwich with gravy, and while not everyone's

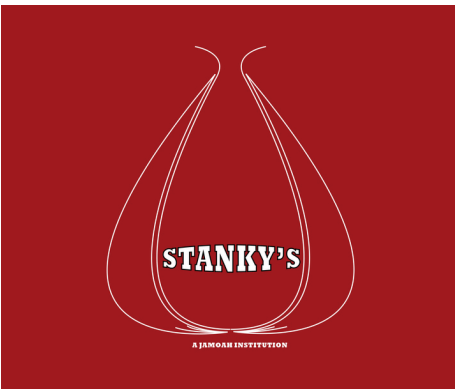




cup of tea and certainly not a Philly specialty, it did hit the goddamn spot.

I also found a great, relaxed vibe at a bar I walked into because the sign – whomst amongst us can resist a neon sign saying “Graffiti Bar” pointing down a dark alley. After coming from the amped up, sports bro, “Go Phillies” vibe at McGillin’s, it was nice to be able to hear myself think. Lest you worry, the giant TV on the wall still played the Phillies game, but there was much less chanting here. I will say though, it could have used more graffiti.

But the real reason I was excited about heading to Philadelphia wasn’t for Mediterranean food, or mussels or cool bars. No, I was excited for a single, legendary sandwich – one that has been on my mind for a decade: Tommy DiNic’s roast pork with broccoli rabe.



To set some context, I consider myself somewhat of a sandwich connoisseur. For a while, in an earlier life, I contemplated opening my own sandwich shop called *Stanky’s* that would have been devoted to the best sandwiches with the smelliest ingredients: blue cheese steaks with arugula and garlic butter; anchovy pizza subs; onion and chicken liver on rye. You get the picture. Nobody would have left the place without wreaking of garlic. I even made a logo.

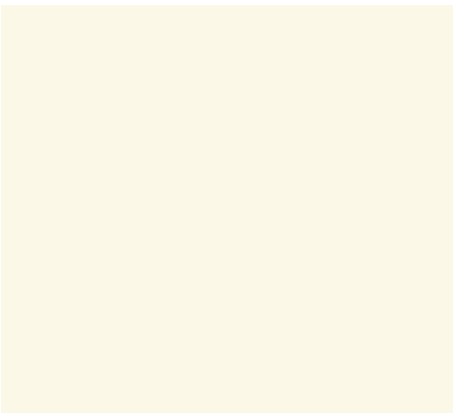
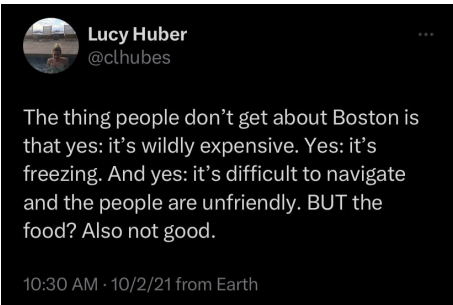
When these dreams were percolating, back in 2012, I was still living in Boulder, CO, and Adam Richman, still the #1 binge eater of all time, proclaimed this roast pork sandwich the best in America. I have never forgotten. It’s been there, sitting in the back of my mind, waiting, calling me.

Now, as I write this sitting on the steps of the Philadelphia city hall, I can say my dream has been fulfilled. I had to walk ten minutes just to find a seat, but when I finally did get a chance to dig in, it was 100% worth it. The pork was juicy and the bitterness of the broccoli rabe complimented its rich flavor with some creamy provolone to top it off. It all rested on the Platonic ideal of a hoagie roll, one that was soft but still held up to the meat and cheese. Now my wife might slap me for not getting the hot peppers, but to me, this blending of ingredients is ideal, and I am in bliss. Is this the best sandwich I have ever



had? Maybe. Can I think of a better one off the top of my head? No.

My food experience in Philadelphia was truly exceptional. It is definitely now one of my top food cities in the US. I also settled a tiny debate that I had in my head: despite living in Boston for the better part of a decade, Philly is clearly the superior city. As Twitter told me:





FORMS IN LIGHT | JUSTIN REEVE

PRIMAL PROBLEMS

I'd like to discuss a topic that you're not likely to ever have come up in regular conversation: the Upper Paleolithic Period. Stretching from around 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, the Upper Paleolithic Period was a pivotal time in human history during which people achieved significant progress in terms of culture, technology and social structure. The leaps and bounds came in the following Neolithic Period, but these all began in the Upper Paleolithic, most notably animal and plant domestication, along with a shift away from hunting and gathering towards sedentarism. The somewhat unloved *Far Cry Primal* in fact portrays this rather captivating chapter in human history quite well, with a few exceptions.

The architecture of the Upper Paleolithic Period was marked by simplicity, resourcefulness and a close connection to the surrounding environment. This primarily consisted of temporary shelters, communal spaces and possibly simple fortifications. The architecture in *Far Cry Primal* closely mirrors the structures and techniques used

in the Upper Paleolithic Period, providing a pretty good picture of the past. The game features a range of shelters ranging from small, makeshift huts to somewhat more substantial, permanent structures. These dwellings were typically composed of wooden frames, animal hide or bone, materials which provided insulation and protection from the elements, ensuring survival in the unforgiving environments of the Upper Paleolithic Period.

The strategic use of caves represents one of the most iconic features of the architecture from this time, offering protection from the elements and of course predatory animals, including dangerous megafauna. *Far Cry Primal* accurately represents the use of caves as both shelter and spiritual spaces, highlighting the deep connection between people in the Upper Paleolithic Period and the world around them. These often served as shelters but were also used for artistic expression, most famously in the form of intricate cave paintings, perhaps an early form of religion. People made use of painting for aesthetic value, but also for commu-



nication, storytelling and possibly spiritual or ritualistic purposes. The game captures the multifaceted role played by caves, depicting them not only as a form of shelter but as places of substantial cultural significance. You can explore several different caves in *Far Cry Primal*, discovering various tools and artifacts, along with experiencing some of the cultural practices that were common around the world in the Upper Paleolithic Period.

While this particular point of time in human history was by no means characterized by conflict, you can still see signs of social tension, perhaps even warfare. *Far Cry Primal* represents this in the form of wooden palisades and fortified outposts, a creative liberty given their scale and complexity, but the game at least conveys the necessity for protection within a hostile world. This aligns with reality, safety and security in the face of potential threats including rival groups and of course predators being a major concern across the board.

Tools were a central part of daily life in the Upper Paleolithic Period, allowing people to hunt, gather and process food, among other things. *Far Cry Primal* does a pretty good job of capturing the essence of this primitive technology, providing you with a variety of different tools that

closely resemble those used in the Upper Paleolithic Period. Stone implements like hand axes, knives, spearheads and scrapers are practically synonymous with the Upper Paleolithic Period and the game accurately portrays the importance of them. *Far Cry Primal* meticulously recreates a lot of these tools, showcasing their primary role in hunting and processing food, as well as their use for a variety of other common tasks.

The depiction of stone tools in the game is actually one of its bigger selling points, at least in my personal opinion. You can fashion your own stone tools in *Far Cry Primal*, crafting of course being a fairly common mechanic in videogames these days, but in this particular case, crafting is an effective representation of reality, knapping being an activity practiced by just about everybody in the Upper Paleolithic Period. *Far Cry Primal* also introduces flint and pyrite as tools for starting fire, faithfully reflecting their importance during the Upper Paleolithic Period. The ability to start and control fire was a defining technological advancement which provided much needed warmth, protection from predators and the ability to cook food. *Far Cry Primal* successfully captures the significance of these materials, emphasizing them as implements that were absolutely essential for survival, offering a tangible sense of



the challenges and innovations that marked the Upper Paleolithic Period.

Far Cry Primal takes all of this a step further by incorporating a crafting and repairing mechanic. This allows players to maintain their tools, mirroring the practices of people during the Upper Paleolithic Period. Stone tools were often reshaped, resharpened or put to other purposes, a necessity given the scarcity of high-quality materials including chert, flint and most famously obsidian. The game forces you to engage in crafting and maintaining tools, reinforcing the need for adaptability and resourcefulness during the Upper Paleolithic Period, offering some insights into the various trials and tribulations of people at the time.

Hunting and also defense were common concerns during the Upper Paleolithic Period, as reflected in the diverse range of weapons available in *Far Cry Primal*. Spears were of primary importance, but the game depicts a couple of other interesting inventions including the atlatl, a ranged weapon which allowed for greater throwing force and accuracy than a spear. You can make use of spears and atlatls to hunt and fight in *Far Cry Primal*, accurately showcasing the challenges and techniques involved in the wielding of these weapons.

Bows were highly versatile weapons in the Upper Paleolithic Period, being used for both hunting and combat. *Far Cry Primal* features a variety of these, each with distinctive characteristics. You can choose from various bows along with several different kinds of arrow, something which accurately represents how much the technology was developed throughout the Upper Paleolithic Period. This actually represents one of the main criteria for dating archaeological sites. In any case, bows required a high level of skill and ability. You have the opportunity to master the bow and arrow in *Far Cry Primal*, experiencing the precision of what remains a deadly weapon even today. The inclusion of several different kinds of arrowhead allows you to adapt your tactics to different situations, closely mirroring the challenges faced by hunters and warriors during the Upper Paleolithic Period.

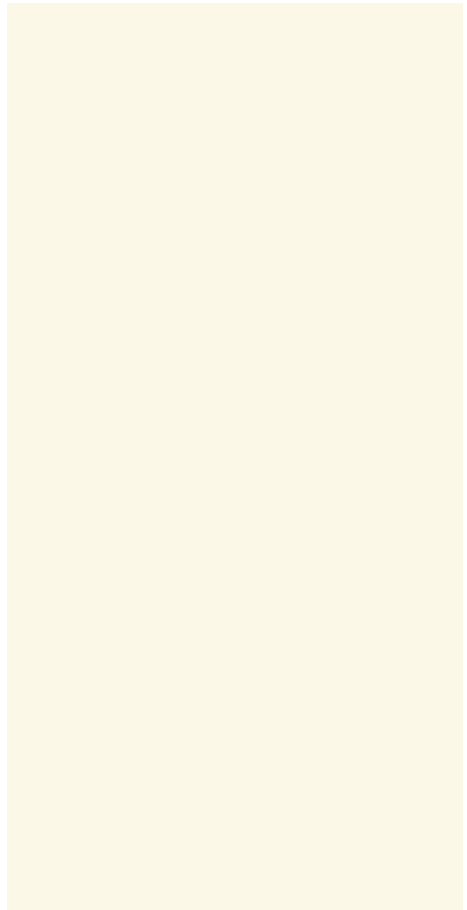
The most notable historical discrepancy in *Far Cry Primal* is the inclusion of pottery and ceramics, materials that were not commonly used in the Upper Paleolithic Period, depicted in substantial quantities throughout the game. This inaccuracy is a surprising departure from the reality of the Upper Paleolithic Period, as pottery and ceramics truly emerged in the much later Neolithic. You might say that people were only just beginning to experiment with pottery in the



Upper Paleolithic Period. *Far Cry Primal* features an abundance of pottery and ceramics, a notable departure from the material record. This may be attributed to the limitations of historical research or the creative liberties taken during development in the name of player experience. I personally think that given the ubiquitousness of ceramics these days, a world without pottery would be difficult to imagine for a lot of people, whether developers or players.

Far Cry Primal offers you a journey back to the Upper Paleolithic Period, a relatively unusual experience in the world of contemporary videogames. *Far Cry Primal* successfully captures the architecture, tools and weapons that were instrumental to the daily life of people during this pivotal period in human history, allowing you to experience their struggle for survival within a harsher and more unforgiving environment than we currently have in the world around us. The emphasis on shelter construction, tool use and hunting technique provides a remarkably accurate picture of the challenges of life during the Upper Paleolithic Period. The inclusion of pottery and ceramics, materials that were not yet in widespread use at the time, represents a notable departure from our current understanding of the material record, but at the very least, the architecture, tools and weapons give you some insight into the

overall experience, bridging the gap between the ancient and modern worlds, teaching players a thing or two about this fascinating and relatively underappreciated chapter in human history. [U](#)





HERE'S THE THING | **ROB RICH**

THANK YOU MONSTER HUNTER NOW

Here's the Thing is where Rob dumps his random thoughts and strong opinions on all manner of nerdy subjects - from videogames and movies to board games and toys.

As despised as mobile adaptations of popular games may be, Rob has a particular appreciation for *Monster Hunter Now* and how it got him back on the hunt.

People love to whine and whinge about mobile games and how they're "ruining" this and that. Hell, I've rolled my eyes at more than a few mobile adaptations over the years. Sometimes they're actually good, lots of the time they're cash-grabbing bullshit, but I've learned over the years that I really need to try them for myself before assuming they're soulless monstrosities. Because here's the thing: As much as I was worried about how *Monster Hunter Now* would translate one of my favorite franchises into a *Pokemon GO*-esque augmented reality scav-

enger hunt, it's actually done a really good job of pulling me back in.

The *Monster Hunter* series has been a videogame staple in my life for almost 20 years, but unlike other series I've stuck with, I tend to pop in and out semi-regularly. I'll always get the newest one when it comes out (as long as I own the console it releases on), and I'll inevitably play it for dozens of hours within the first month or two. But I also inevitably move away from it for one reason or another. Maybe a new release pulls me over; maybe I get frustrated with a particular hunt; maybe I just put it down for a week and I blink and that week becomes six months. Even so, I always come back.

What ties all of this to *Monster Hunter Now* is the way it made me realize I'd been avoiding *Monster Hunter Rise* for some reason. I fell off of it after around 50 or 60 hours and I honestly can't explain my thought process. It's just that every time I thought about playing it, I decided it would be too much effort




to remember the intricacies of the various monsters and re-familiarize myself with the controls – which is even more tricky when you main (or really, exclusively use) a complex weapon like the Charge Blade.

Out of curiosity and an appreciation for the series as a whole, I dipped into *Monster Hunter Now* on launch day and was not surprised in the slightest to find that it's basically *Pokemon GO*, but now you're hunting and slaying large monsters to use the spoils for crafting new weapons and armor. It's a distillation of the series that's definitely a lot less intricate but does retain some of the key elements like reading a monster's attacks and knowing when to strike being more important than your gear (mostly).

But it's the daily missions that really got my mind racing. Not because they're particularly fancy or challenging, but because they encourage using different weapon types from time to time. It's a level of combat variety I haven't experienced in a *Monster Hunter* game for years. I mean it's entirely my own fault because I got some weird satisfaction and sense of pride from seeing my weapon use stats showing only the Charge Blade, but mixing it up in the unassuming mobile side game suddenly had me thinking about trying out every other option in the "proper" game.

Sure, I've got a pretty solid understanding of the sword and shield combo that turns into a giant axe (that can double as a buzzsaw if you know the right moves), but what about the Great Sword? I used to main that back in the early '00s and it's undoubtedly been expanded in the years since. Or how about the Gunlance? I used to play around with that and thought it was really interesting, so why not revisit it? Even ranged weapons, which I used to avoid, seem more promising to me now. I really want to see what kind of ridiculous nonsense I can pull off with the Bow – especially now that they did away with having two separate armor classes for melee and ranged.

In truth, I still haven't actually made good on trying out any other weapons in *Monster Hunter Rise* yet. Both because it's still difficult to convince myself to break my 100-percent Charge Blade usage stat, and because most nights I don't have it in me to try to learn an entirely new approach to combat in a High Rank quest. But I'm still thinking about it. And every time I open up *Monster Hunter Now* to battle the Cliffs Notes version of a monster I've come to know all too well; it entices me even more. One way or another, I'm going to go through with it. But for now, I'm happy just to be back. 



ARC TURNS DISAS- TER INTO A FIGHT- ING CHANCE

FEATURING MOMATOES

by Emily Price

This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Exalted Funeral. While Exalted Funeral puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story.

There are a million and one ways the world can end. We see this daily, and in the deluge of books, movies and games about the apocalypse. But these specific apocalypses often don't capture what's so conceptually upsetting about the end of the world: that it's always coming closer. That realization, of course, obscures the other side of the coin: that we're not doomed to inaction, and that we can choose what we do with our time, even if it's impossibly limited.



ARC was created by Bianca Canozo, also known as **momatoes**, who started making games with the goal of welcoming players in with curiosity. While it's a TTRPG about the end of the world, it uses humor and warmth as often as horror to imagine what responding to the apocalypse actually looks like.

What's her favorite mechanic?

"Definitely the mechanic to replenish spells. I had always wanted to sneak in a way for people to eat doors."

momatoes studied industrial engineering in university which exposed her to systems design. In 2019 she began making games with the support of fellow Filipino game designers, who aimed to represent meaningful cultural touchstones in their work. ARC begins with a tribute to this community:

"From the queer travails of coming out to Asian parents; to 1990s action heroes in bombastic Philippine cinema; to crocodile chieftains, mosquito witches and patchwork-reality gods in a monsoon village; even to simpler things like the ordeal of Malaysian traffic – RPGSEA embodies the deep diversity of its creators' perspectives and experiences."

momatoes also maintains [Across RPGSea](#), a database of Southeast Asian tabletop games, which was nominated for the ENNIEs and the Diana Jones award. She says the encouragement of Filipino players and designers got her started, while expanding to the rest of the SEA community "made it feel like my game could have a purpose in connecting people together – which made the game design process truly rewarding."

The idea for ARC came in 2020, when **momatoes** was feeling hopeless during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I remember, at the time, feeling helpless against this



pressing situation that affected every aspect of my life.” This was the inspiration for **ARC**’s structure as a game where you fight against the apocalypse. Over one to three sessions, you work together to resolve the issue, which can be as big as a world-ending tsunami or as small as a bad breakup. The only requirement? That it be devastating to the characters’ lives.

The creator’s goal was to make a game she wanted to play. “I am the sort of player who’s always asking, ‘what is this?’ ‘what happens when I do this?’ ‘why does the game react this way?’ I felt like I wanted to welcome that kind of fresh-eyed curiosity and willingness to engage with **ARC**.”

Part of that mindset was making the game friendly to someone who’d never played a TTRPG before. “Looking at RPGs through the lens of a beginner was a great starting point to make an accessible, playable game that I could be proud of.” **ARC**’s manual starts with a set of guidelines for telling good stories, so the game master – called the Guide in **ARC** – can be prepared. It provides the mandate to “create beginnings” and collaborate in storytelling with your players, framing that as a process of providing suggestions. The art (also by **momatoes**) is another form of welcoming storytelling, rendered in deep blues, oranges and bright whites. The creatures are cute and their descriptions also add to the texture of the world (Skeleton: “Bony. Those willing to talk tend to have a drier version of their living personality”).

Some games describe themselves as beginner-friendly, but don’t do the work to onboard a true beginner to TTRPGs. **ARC** defines terms like “d6” and “skill check,” and I thought of several people I know who’ve never played any tabletop games before who could start with this quickly. There are a lot of affordances that make the game easier, maybe too many for such a short game. While characters can die if they get below 0 HP (“Blood”), you can choose to resurrect them with a consequence; it’s only when a given character gets six consequences that they’re gone for good. As with most of



the mechanics, though, you could make things harder on yourself by just choosing not to use it.

One thing that doesn't disappear is the Doomsday Clock. It advances every hour to half-hour (depending on the number of sessions), counting down to when the apocalypse happens. According to the manual, "The Doom is determined by the Guide and players. It can be large in scope – for example, a world-sundering earthquake triggered by a goddess' death – or more intimate – the departure of beloved spirits, a cruel heartbreak or the farewell of an era."

My favorite mechanic in the game is Omens, which are subplots that foretell the apocalypse that's coming. There are three for the players to solve, represented by things like "The local cult is hoarding gold and gems" and "The wedding planner is going around town, inviting utterly ill-advised guests." These have something to do with the Doom, and addressing them slows it down. It's a way of sending out the tendrils of the main threat to affect the rest of the world more subtly, in the way the apocalypse surely would.

Doom and Omens might be large or small, but they give the game a sense of loss while making players feel time is always running out. The Doomsday Clock in the game is inspired by the Doomsday Clock created by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, who measured how close the world is to man-made nuclear destruction. You could be forgiven for thinking this was [Metronome](#), the representation of the Doomsday Clock that runs next to NYC's Union Square and shows the time left to 1.5 C (currently, 5 years, 36 weeks, 3 days, 18 hours, 52 minutes and 59 seconds).

ARC's inspirations are heavy, understandably so. And it's the consciousness of this real-life mirror that sets a serious tone whatever the scope of the apocalypse you choose. In some senses, this makes escapism impossible: even in the most mundane settings, you're playing with a rule set that moves inexorably towards destruction of the world you built.



But there's a reason **ARC**'s subtitle is "Slay the Apocalypse" – "I felt the need to fight back," says **momatoes**, describing the game's genesis in 2020. "I siphoned this feeling into **ARC**, that desire to take destiny into my own hands and wield it against factors that threatened to suffocate me."

The biggest feeling **ARC** wants to give its players is agency, in storytelling and result; goals take sacrifice, but they can be achieved even at great cost. Agency in macro-level narrative, and agency in small decisions like player safety checks and deciding how to divide tasks in the group. And even agency in rejecting or accepting the world's end. That doesn't mean guaranteed success, but it does mean acknowledging failure isn't the end of everything.

"It's possible for the heroes to do their best and still fail," says the manual. "Stories, however, can live on."

* * *

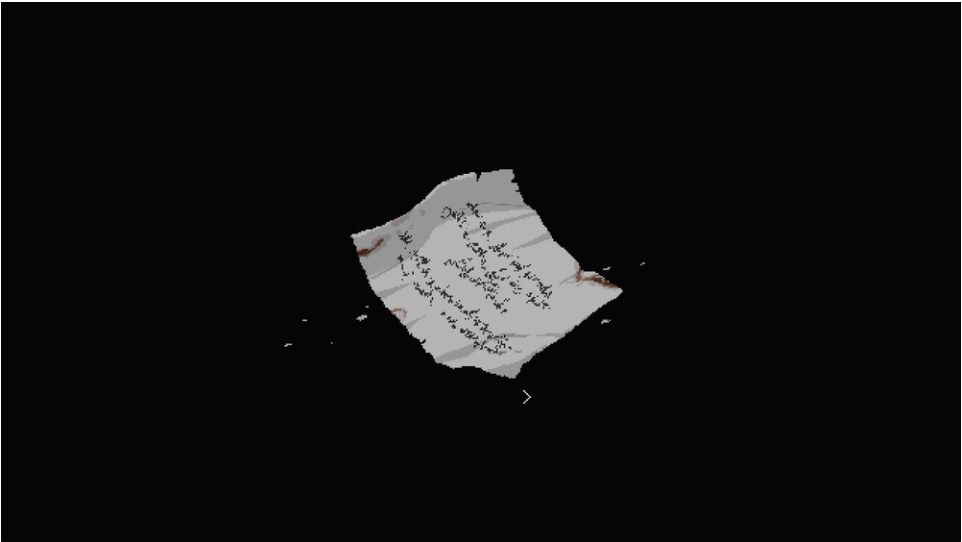
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EATV VIROVI
NO ABIT IN CO
SILO IMPROBIM
VIA PECCATO

THE STORIES OF VIRTUAL FRAG- M E N T S

by CLINT MORRISON JR.

M
G O I T



I stumbled upon a single-sided document during a recent replay of Remedy's *Control*'s AWE DLC. The document belongs to the files of ID AWE-10. Its more complete title is "Bright Falls (1976) Supplement." Finding documents like this one, lightly redacted, is not uncommon in *Control* – they litter the Oldest House – but the content of this one fragment gave me pause.

ID AWE-10 narrates the events of a flood in Bright Falls during a rehearsal of a rock band, the Old Gods of Asgard. When the narrative finds the band, the document reads:

"Tor Anderson had been struck by lightning and Odin Anderson had cut out his own right eye (a possible ref. to Norse deities [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]?)"

The redaction of the references does little here. The Andersons share their names with Norse deities whose names may be redacted but are pretty clearly Tor (or Thor) and Odin. The brief narrative intersects with familiar characters and moments from Remedy's *Alan Wake*, where players find the now former rockers undergoing treatment at the Cauldron Lake Lodge.

The document creates connective tissue in the Remedy Connected Universe. The clas-

sified, redacted, imperfect single page belongs to a collated group of documents. Theoretically, these pages were once potentially bound or filed together.

Player choice and time limitations mean there are never any guarantees that players will find the unbound documents within the game. Within a save file, they may remain apart, separated. Similarly, players are never guaranteed that these fragmented pages will ever lead to a complete story even if they collect them all.

Control, like Remedy's *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break* before it, tells some of its most interesting stories through these fragments of digital ephemera. Of course, Remedy isn't the only studio to include such documents as collectibles. Most modern games often present players with three forms of narrative: the main story, the side quests and these collectible, fragmentary documents. They present the latter form of narrative as a series of (non-linear) stories and – except for when they become intertwined with the main or significant side quests – often as wholly optional content. These collectibles sit awaiting completionists, trophy and achievement hunters or the curious to find them.



These fragments coalesce into digital ephemera, left obscure or abstract in incomplete collections. Here, I consider these pieces of digital ephemera in relation to the living collections of physical fragments, specifically medieval fragment collections.

The study of medieval manuscript fragments is called fragmentology. Fragments, like collectibles found in videogames, come in all different shapes, sizes and conditions. They also have had varying purposes or are the result of different historical events. A manuscript fragment is the potential result of multiple realities. For instance, a medieval manuscript may have been taken apart during the Middle Ages or Early Modernity for its pages to serve pragmatic uses from binding support to book covers. They may also be the product of manuscript breaking, where a modern collector has broken a codex like a medieval bible or liturgical manuscript to sell off one page at a time. Once broken, it is difficult to recollect and reassemble the once-whole book.

In videogames, the breaking of narratives into fragmented ephemera serves a mostly pragmatic purpose. They act as worldbuilding tools to flesh out the histories and lore of our favorite digital pastime. Fragmentology usefully provides a lens to approach these documents within games. Like frag-

ments once belonging to larger manuscripts, digital fragments sit in the corners of narratively driven worlds, such as those belonging to the Remedy Connected Universe, Arkane's *oeuvre*, Guerrilla Games's *Horizon* series and even in Naughty Dog's more linear *The Last of Us*. They are intentionally broken texts.

They aren't always as bureaucratic as ID AWE-10. Article #27 in *The Last of Us* enjoys a little more fame than most videogame fragments. Not because it is a beautiful illumination or postcard – in fact, it becomes a missable collectible further crumbled and thrown aside. Article #27 is the infamous handwritten letter from Frank to Bill that outlines the end of their relationship from Frank's perspective. The letter is but one clue of Bill and Frank's relationship, ending it in a heart-wrenching couple of paragraphs.

Article #27 was popular enough to become tied to the trophy "In Memorium" in the Playstation 5 Remake *The Last of Us: Part I*. More significantly, the story contained in the fragment spawned Frank and Bill's own episode "Long, Long Time" in the HBO show. The writers and showrunners of the show revise their love story, ending with a very different note with a different readership as it ultimately depicts a different trajectory



for Frank and Bill's love story. Article #27 becomes a variant story, kept only in part.

Some fragments of digital lives live on in gaming communities by getting copied across remakes and sequels. These copies, like their medieval counterparts, are imperfect, containing infamous mistranslations, revisions or redactions. Take, for instance, the "Itchy. Tasty." note in the original English localization of *Resident Evil*. The story of an Umbrella Researcher who prepared animals for experimentation devolves into the two words in the final entry of his diary, archived as "The Keeper's Diary." The translated story is re-recorded, re-tweaked a little bit in the 2002 remake, and then again when the diary finds its way in *Resident Evil 5: Lost in Nightmares*.

The rare game narrative is made wholly of fragments, or nearly. [Games that are occasionally thought of as postmodern in their disruptions of narrative and traditionally structured gameplay loops](#). Rose-engine's *Signalis* is part *Metal Gear Solid* and part *Silent Hill*, wearing its influences on its sleeve. The story of *Signalis*' Elster and Falke survives in fragments.

[A dance between decay and love](#), Elster and Falke's story decorates the corners of *Signalis*'s unnerving world, from poetry on

beaches to letters and bureaucratic documents scattered. Rose-engine's characters and the messages they leave behind center its incompleteness and lack of wholeness. The fragmentary documents, poetry and prose, fill in gaps haunting the game's design. Even at their most complete, they remain enigmatic.

The popularity of Article #27 and the Keeper's Diary are the exceptions, not the standard. Many of our games are filled with fragmented stories, but these two pages survived. They have been repackaged and translated across time and genre. Most fragmentary stories, however, will sit decayless in games rarely or no longer played – or worse not at all accessible on modern gaming rigs.

Arkane filled critical darlings *Dishonored* and *Deathloop*, as well as the cult favorite *Prey*, with ephemera containing the little stories of the world. These stories included how folks within these game worlds cope and respond to the tragedies and changes around them. Arkane Austin's *Redfall* similarly contains scattered ephemera – letters, notes and Grave locks – that tell some of the most interesting stories in the vampire loot shooter.

Devastatingly, as of writing, *Redfall* isn't doing well. With Steam concurrent player

Bright Falls (AWE-35)

DETAILS:

Alice Wake, Mr. Wake's wife, was found during the Bureau investigation. She was interviewed and evaluated. She showed signs of severe mental trauma in the form of [REDACTED] memory loss. She was later directed to treatment. It was concluded that she had been trapped in the Threshold during its manifestation.

Notable individuals still missing after the Bright Falls event are FBI Special Agent Robert Nightingale and Dr. Emil Harman (refer to "The Creator's Dilemma" and the file re: the Cauldron Lake Lodge).

Bureau researchers believe this event was the result of a forceful

ID

AWE-35

EVENT DATE

09/01/2010 – 09/14/2010

EVENT LOCATION

Bright Falls, Washington


counts in the single digits mere months after launch, I worry that the live game's digital world isn't long for this world, like Crystal Dynamic's *Avengers* or Bungie's Red War campaign in *Destiny 2*. The stories of Redfall's residents, vampires and small town hero(in)es are interesting, compelling and at risk of being lost. Fragments in digital decay.

Redfall – not to mention other live or always online games – is not the only kind of game at risk. The letters that quietly remain in Silicon Knights's *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* aren't as numerous as modern games, and not even other early aughts horror games. The Gamecube game takes place largely in the Roivas Family Estate in Rhode Island, featuring some scares, a little time traveling and a few letters that help tie everything together. Except, if you don't have a Gamecube, not only is the game stranded on the hardware but these letters – little fragments within the larger story – are stranded in the past.

It is difficult not to think about fragments and not relate their survival to game conservation. The material objects inspiring this reading of virtual fragments survive their strange and complex histories. [Many reside in public university libraries](#). Each fragment tells a multitude of stories – not only the words or illustrations on the page but stories of pragmatic use, circulation, trade and sometimes tragedy. Each survival of weather, accident, use or time is a little miracle.

Of course, in some games, fragments serve more pragmatic purposes. Bethesda games allow players to sell and sometimes use them. But just like the stories and games we play run the risk of getting lost to time due to hardware limitations, so too do the fragmentary stories of digital lives contained in each of them. The stories within them are often some of the strangest, most experimental, and human writing across videogames. The little guys are worth saving too.

Otherwise, these fragmented narratives are obscured or abstracted in their incompleteness, left to be little more than memories of Trophy hunters seeking out these *mere collectibles* to finish up that Platinum trophy. What might be lost is how these stories help us "everyday" gamers and laborers connect to the digital worlds our protagonists inhabit.

The stories found in fragments are of humans and their use of and interactions with objects. From Frank's crumpled letter in *The Last of Us* or the rewriting of notes across versions of other games, they contain the little stories that humanize characters and the world around them. The fragmentary stories create mirrors reflecting back how we organize, maintain, privilege and catalog the objects and ephemera containing our own stories, lives, rituals and memories. 



WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE WARRENS

by **ORRIN GREY**





For years, Ed and Lorraine Warren were known predominantly by those who had a particular interest in ostensibly real paranormal phenomena. They were notorious for their involvement in some of the most famous “true” haunting cases (Amityville, Enfield and so on), for their Occult Museum (which, in reality, looked more like a garage sale for a Halloween haunted house than the very cool museum in the movies) and for the fact that they were probably full of shit.

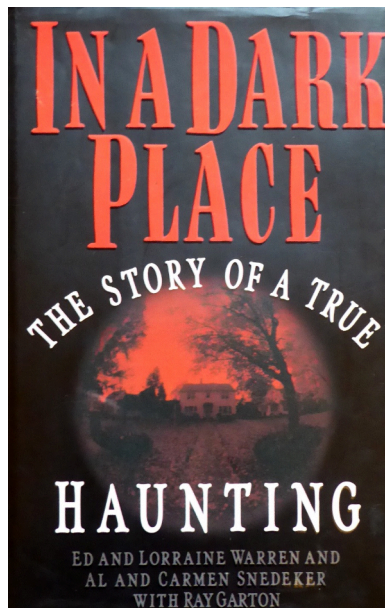
There is plenty of evidence that the Warrens were hucksters who exploited vulnerable people for their own profit. Ray Garton, a horror author who was hired to write the book *In a Dark Place* for them, has gone into some rather scathing detail about their activities. It’s easy enough to find more online, but you can get some of Garton’s side of things in [this interview](#) or on [his website](#). A 1997 investigation on behalf of the New England Skeptical Society, meanwhile, found that the Warrens may have been pleasant enough people to chat with, but they were also “at best, tell-

ers of meaningless ghost stories, and at worst, dangerous frauds.”

Ed Warren died in 2006, Lorraine in 2019. So why do we need to talk about them now? Even if they *were* dangerous frauds while alive, their lives are over now and, since ghosts probably don’t really interfere with the living, they can no longer hurt us – or can they?

In 2013, Ed and Lorraine Warren became household names. Where their exploits had previously been largely unknown outside the circles of so-called paranormal investigations, *The Conjuring* made them the heroes of one of the most successful horror franchises in history. And while there is no doubt that the “based on a true story” logline of that film helped to propel the franchise to success, it is equally true that the real-life Warrens have cast a necessary pall over their cinematic counterparts.

I know plenty of people who refuse to watch *The Conjuring* or any of its various spin-offs on the





grounds that the Warrens should not be lionized and, while Lorraine was still alive, certainly should not be able to profit from this bowdlerization (at best) of their legacy. And even though I enjoy (most of) the *Conjuring* films, I can't say that those people have the wrong idea.

Hollywood movies that embellish supposedly true stories are nothing new. But there is something particularly egregious about the way that the *Conjuring* films transform two people who, in reality, were more than likely con artists at best and predators at worst, into figures so heroic as to be almost saintly. And that's not even getting into the dangers inherent in championing the Warrens' quasi-Catholic worldview, which posits dangerous spiritual warfare behind everyday activities.

One need look no further than the third film to officially bear the *Conjuring* moniker (and, massively, the seventh in the franchise) to see the peril here. Subtitled *The Devil Made Me Do It*, the film took inspiration from the real-life murder trial of Arne Cheyenne Johnson, in which the defense attempted to claim that their client was demonically possessed – according to some of those involved, a story cooked up by the Warrens in the first place.

Not only does the film massively repurpose the actual events of both the murder and the

outcome of the trial, it also does something far more dangerous – it suggests that the Satanic Panic of the 1980s was fundamentally correct, rather than a vicious lie that destroyed far more lives than nefarious Satanists ever could have.

This revisionism is ahistorical, but it is also reckless and hazardous, especially today, when our very own new Satanic Panic is brewing, targeting teachers, librarians and perhaps most especially trans people and other vulnerable members of the LGBTQ community.

With all this groundwork having been laid, it would be easy to advocate, as many others have done, chucking the entire *Conjuring* franchise in the bin, and the Warrens with it. But there's a problem with that, and it isn't just that the *Conjuring* movies are mostly actually pretty good, or that they keep making money hand over fist – at the time of this writing, the latest installment has already raked in over \$200 million in just a couple of weeks.

It's that, regardless of the baggage of their real-life counterparts, the on-screen Warrens, as played by Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga, give us something that we desperately need. Something that movies in general – and horror in particular – has been missing.



The Warrens on the screen are good guys. They are (ever so slightly) flawed, sure, but they are ultimately good people trying hard to do the right thing. That's not really it, though. A few years ago, in *Nightmare* magazine, I [wrote an essay](#) about the difference in horror between "victims" and "volunteers."

The Warrens, as they are portrayed onscreen, represent an important swing back toward those "volunteers," individuals who place themselves in harm's way for reasons of their own, rather than being preyed upon by vicious and often random outside influences. It's part of a larger course-correction in horror that is bound to happen after decades of films swinging the other way.

Even that isn't really it, though. I think what it is, more than perhaps anything else, is that the Warrens in the film are happily married, still very much in love, and they support one another in their endeavors. There is no hint of infidelity or strain within their marriage, there is no one-upmanship or bickering between the two, and their plots usually revolve around their work, not their kids or stress within their relationship – though their daughter does occasionally get put into ghostly peril.

It's a dynamic that is surprisingly rare in film, and one that is, I think, extremely welcome

for a lot of people, whether they fully realize it or not. I think it is that need for representation of healthy, stable, supportive relationships in media that drives a part of the importance of the Warrens as fictional objects, despite the problems inherent in their less-than-fictional origins.

So, what do we do with them, given all that? It's not easy to say. Whatever we may think of them, odds are the cinematic Ed and Lorraine Warren are going to be with us for some time now, and their fictional adventures will continue to obfuscate the truth of their real-life counterparts – which is almost certainly a bad thing. But since we're stuck with them, at least they are providing something of value, too.

Whenever I find myself struggling with my conflicting feelings about the whole situation, I think back on a credit at the beginning of *The Conjuring 2*, which states that the picture is "based on characters created by" Chad and Carey Hayes, the screenwriters of the first film. Given that virtually the only recurring characters are Ed, Lorraine, and their daughter, I think this says a lot about their relationship to the real Warrens – and the relationship between the movies and any kind of reality. [U](#)

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