

ISSUE 71

EXPLOITS

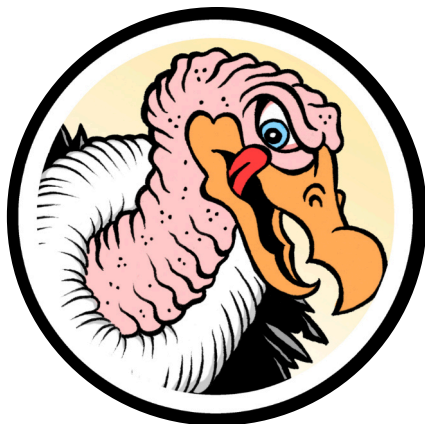
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Elijah Beahm on
CALL of DUTY

MODERN LIFE is WAR • CRITICAL HITS
• DREDD • ARCHER •
GIRLHOOD in VIDEOGAMES



Publisher | Stu Horvath

Vice Publisher | Sara Clemens

Editor in Chief | David Shimomura

EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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Unwinnable
820 Chestnut Street
Kearny, NJ 07032

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This machine kills fascists.

IS it ALT to LIKE CALL of DUTY THESE DAYS?

by Elijah Beahm

What was in vogue one minute becomes passe or retro in the blink of an eye. No matter how such brands and ideas remain steady in the halls of capitalism, their cultural role can shift in a heartbeat. The bold becomes mundane. The mundane becomes obscure and niche. And I'm beginning to wonder if we've reached the point where even a financial juggernaut like *Call of Duty*, with its intensely divided fanbase, never-ending vitriol and splintering creative focus . . . can be considered *alternative*.

It sounded like madness when I first considered it. Then I considered the entries in the series that have resonated with not only myself, but friends of mine who otherwise weren't huge on the franchise during its purported heyday on the Xbox 360. *Black Ops 3*, *Infinite Warfare*, *Cold War*, *Vanguard* and now Sledgehammer's *Modern Warfare 3* (2023) are all fascinating games – but if you ask most of the *Call of Duty* fandom, they regard them as the red-headed stepchildren of the franchise. It doesn't matter that they came from studios beloved for past titles, or how they build upon the foundations of what was enjoyed before. The fact they dared to push the creative needle at all in the AAA space is something to be . . . disparaged? Why not, instead, encourage it and appreciate what's been accomplished?

Black Ops 3 is effectively the best *Ghost in the Shell* game we've ever received. *Infinite Warfare* easily has the meatiest campaign in years. *Cold War* is a choose-your-own-adventure spy thriller. *Vanguard* offers an anthology of meaningfully distinct microcampaigns. Now *Modern Warfare 3* offers an unparalleled amount of player agency in a franchise often derided for deprioritizing agency for spectacle. Most missions, even the more scripted ones, take more after *Dishonored* or *Sniper Ghost Warrior Contracts* rather than *Uncharted*.

Most of these could easily be standalone IPs if brand recognition alone wasn't used to sell them. If anything, the *Call of Duty* name is beginning to feel like an

albatross around their necks, restraining their true potential under the weight of conflicting fan expectations. *Call of Duty* is just *so damn big* that it's literally impossible to please everyone. *Modern Warfare 3* is sitting at "Very Negative" on Steam, yet I can find a match in any mode fully populated. I've had heady conversations about *Black Ops 3* and *Cold War* years after the fact. *Infinite Warfare* has reached the point in its cultural bell curve where it's finally getting loving retrospectives from the sort of people you didn't even think *played*, much less *cared* about *Call of Duty*.

And as such, I cannot avoid pondering the unexpected reality that perhaps, despite selling gangbusters as always, and being under the menacing grip of Activision's infinitely greedy executives . . . has the mere act of liking *Call of Duty*, especially when it bothers to try something new, become alternative? Is it punkish to enjoy this now?

While others obsess over minutia like whether their pretend soldier men can run on walls or jump from a slide like a baby seal, is it bolder to just appreciate that someone is still trying to have an ounce of creativity in a monolith – especially one that realistically doesn't need, let alone deserve, that energy? In a world that's already so angry? Maybe. 🍷





MODERN LIFE IS WAR – Modern Life is War are a hardcore punk band that was built by and for the Midwest. Formed in 2002 and based out of Marshalltown, Iowa (population: 27,388), their sound is inseparably infused with a brand of desperation and angst unique to flyover country. Their trademark anthem “D.E.A.D.R.A.M.O.N.E.S.” from 2005’s *Witness* and surprise cover of the folk standard “Stagger Lee” from 2007’s *Midnight in America* encapsulate two halves of this identity; the former an ode to getting in the van and getting out of your hometown, and the latter a grim murder tale from the seedier side of history in the American heartland.

I’ve never been to Marshalltown, but when I listen to Modern Life is War, I can see, hear and feel the weight of its atmosphere in frontman Jeffrey Eaton’s lyrics. Sometimes this is in a literal sense, like in the opening line of “Young Man Blues,” (“I’m walking past liquor stores and immigrant homes / Check into cash and men with eyes like ghosts”) or in titles like “Night Shift at the Potato Factory,” or in the first verse of “Hair Raising Tales of Restless Ghosts” (“I can feel the steel mill’s rust / But I’ve been doing my time and I’m thinking about getting out”). Recurring themes of

thinking about leaving and dwelling on the reasons why. Metal and dirt. Open space but not enough to fit the size of your dreams.

In other instances, it’s not the lyrics, but the instrumentation itself that reflects the surroundings in which their songs were written, where the rhythm section is locked into a mid-tempo groove, but the guitars feel like they want to move just a little bit faster than the drums will allow. Urgency turns into tension that’s looking for release, but unlike many of their coastal compatriots, they’re content to turn inward and examine that discomfort rather than explode at breakneck tempos. There’s nowhere else to go but here anyway.

On *Tribulation Worksongs*, a recently released compilation of a series of 7” EPs of the same name, there’s a somewhat subtle ode to the Midwest that feels like it ties a thread through the band’s own history to the progenitors of punk itself. Their cover of “I Wanna Be Your Dog” by The Stooges, a band with blue collar roots in Ann Arbor, Michigan of the 1970s, channels the spirit of an act that showed that not only could this music come from anywhere, but that sounds from the roads less traveled can punch above their weight.

– BEN SAILER

MUSIC

PLAYLIST



"Feels Like End Times," by Modern Life Is War

"Doublewhiskeycokenoise," by Dillinger Four

"East End Hollows," by Braid

"Don't Want to Know if You Are Lonely," by Hüsker Dü

"Fuck This, I'm Out," by Off With Their Heads

"Under the Flyover," by Nato Coles and The Blue Diamond Band

"Constructive Summer," by The Hold Steady

"Uncomfortably Numb (feat. Hayley Williams)," by American Football

"Michigan Hammers," by Protomartyr

"Her Majesty's Midwestern Islands," by Defiance, Ohio

"Quality Revenge at Last," by Hey Mercedes

"Artificial Confidence," by Direct Hit!

"Red & Blue Jeans," by The Promise Ring

"Seeing Double at the Triple Rock," by NOFX

"Dolores & Kimberly," by Advance Base

"More Blood," by The Casket Lottery

"West Side Summer," by Signals Midwest

"Atlas Fractured," by 84 Tigers

"Ice Heavy Branches," by The Appleseed Cast

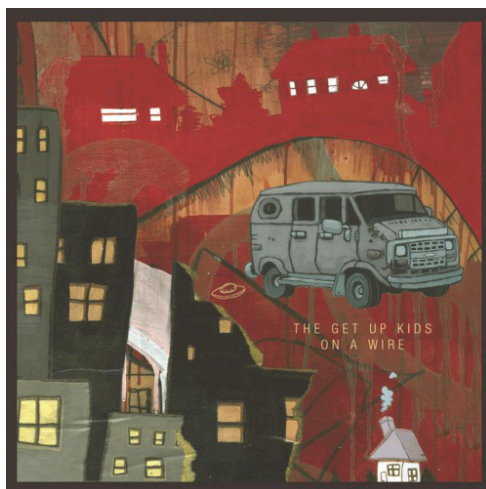
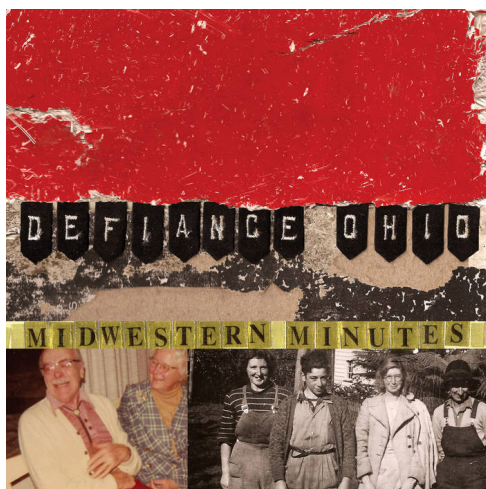
"Skeleton Key," by Banner Pilot

"Logan Square," by Into It. Over It.

"Crop Circle Nation," by Tenement

"Bastards of Young," by The Replacements

"Campfire Kansas," by The Get Up Kids



[LISTEN ON SPOTIFY](#)

BOOKS

CRITICAL HITS – If there is one thing you should take away from *Critical Hits: Writers Playing Video Games*, it is that a lot of different people enjoy or have enjoyed videogames. If there's a second, it's that those people all "get" a lot of very different things out of that play. Too often, playing videogames is portrayed as an insular, obsessive activity based in escapism. *Critical Hits* wonderfully demonstrates that yes, playing videogames *can* be insular or escapist, but it can also be a great many other things all based on the person coming to a particular piece of media.

The greater portions of the pieces collected here reflect each writer's preoccupations and concerns in a way that sparked numerous conversations for me over the last several weeks. The ways in which the pieces are personal and revealing is deeply powerful.

That personal quality is important to keep in mind. Travel memoirs are often not written to be fact-first endeavors. Minds are faulty. Emotions can be unrefined. A thing experienced is often first *felt* and as memory forms around such a feeling the sense of a thing often diverges from the *facts* of that thing.

All of that to say, there are a lot of places where specific details won't cleanly line up with your experience of any specific game, depending on your preexisting knowledge. The blurring of specifics is first evident with the notion that the book itself a first-of-its-kind anthology, despite not being even the **first of its name**. It later takes shape as errors in things such as history (both in-game and outside) and geography (again, the same) that begin to undermine the credibility of the writers and the work as a whole.

I'm of two minds here. Certainly, most of my friends who do not avidly play games

won't notice these misses. But equally, most of my friends who do play games, will. I don't believe any of these errors take away from the meaningful, personal experiences here, but they do exist.

Which is a shame. It's the goal of many critics and writers to shine light where few others venture, and to invite readers to new places. That's successful here, highly so. But I wish, as a traveler who has spent much time in these places, that more *care* was given to depicting the spaces that I know so well.

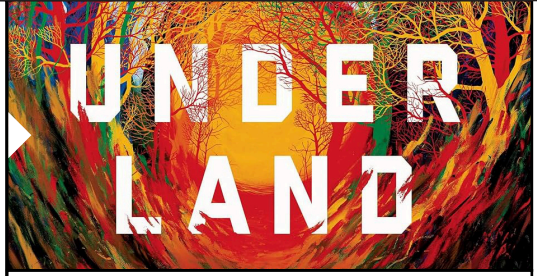
– DAVID SHIMOMURA



BOOKS

UNDERLAND – Robert Macfarlane’s exploration of our relationship with the subterranean world is wondrous early, but drifts a bit towards the end as the author’s avowed obsession with climbing reasserts itself. Still, the good bits, particularly his week in the Paris Catacombs, will linger.

– STU HORVATH



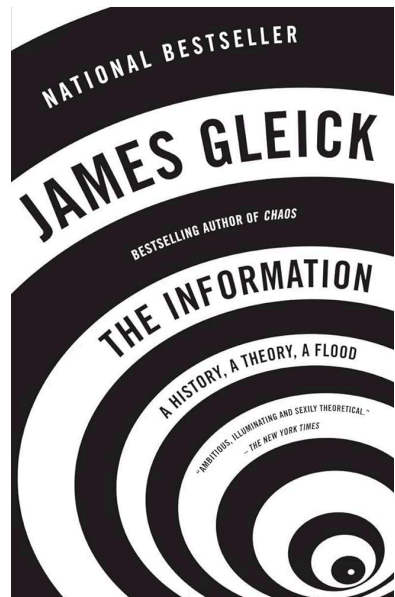
IN COLD BLOOD – Is this wildly unethical from a journalistic perspective? Yes! Is Capote far too in love with the killers? Also yes! Is this an incredibly compelling narrative brimming with humanity that every subsequent true crime girlie has been begging to produce a fraction of? Absolutely!

Truman Capote is truly a land of contrasts.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE

The INFORMATION: A HISTORY, A THEORY, A FLOOD – The poet Cody-Rose Clevidence has a wide-ranging Instagram feed, from holler dogs to off-the-grid life chaos to a wild array of books being read, which is where I caught wind of 2012’s *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* by James Gleick. I don’t go for a lot of these pop-sci historical summary books, but when they hit, the juice is sweet. This book rides the appeal of looking at macro things through a well orchestrated microscopic lens, in this case the idea of Information. Starting off with a gumbo of bits, words, sounds, poetry and history, it then blew my mind with the idea of talking drums (I need to find an entire book or more on just this subject alone) and moving through language and words and just the notion of impermeability in a completely permeable word. Ultimately it’s the kind of book that teaches and leaves the reader feeling like something was truly learned, which is a nice feeling.

– LEVI RUBECK



MOVIES



DREDD – In their essential guide covering the mechanics of composition, *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White lay down a set of writerly commandments, the most important being the thirteenth rule: “Omit needless words.” Though written with the ink-slinger in mind, this dictum can be applied to anyone who creates. In sum, get rid of the boring stuff.

Pete Travis’ *Dredd* (2012) has no boring stuff. Any needless words that might have sunk it have been surgically removed. Credit that to screenwriter Alex Garland (*28 Days Later*, *Men*), but truthfully, the whole package sings with a unity of vision that propels the film forward right from frame one.

What we have here in a post-Marvel world is a rare thing indeed: a comic book adaptation that eschews universe-building and apocalyptic stakes for a relentlessly furious siege adventure that stands on its own two bloody legs.

Everything you need to know about Mega City One is delivered via action in the first few minutes: it’s the future, everything is shit and

the police force, including our snarling hero (Karl Urban), is the only thing keeping the shitty future together. Don’t go in expecting cutesy cameos or Easter eggs; there are, like, four people in this cast who don’t eat a bullet right after we meet them. After Ma-Ma (Lena Headey) locks Dredd and rookie-in-training Anderson (Olivia Thirlby) inside her crime compound, the Judges have to blast their way out of there. And that’s it. That’s the movie.

Which is not to say that this is a film without depth. There’s plenty of mental fodder here related to class and law and order and the general human condition should you like to dig in. But also, guns go pew-pew and bad guys go boom. It’s the best of both worlds.

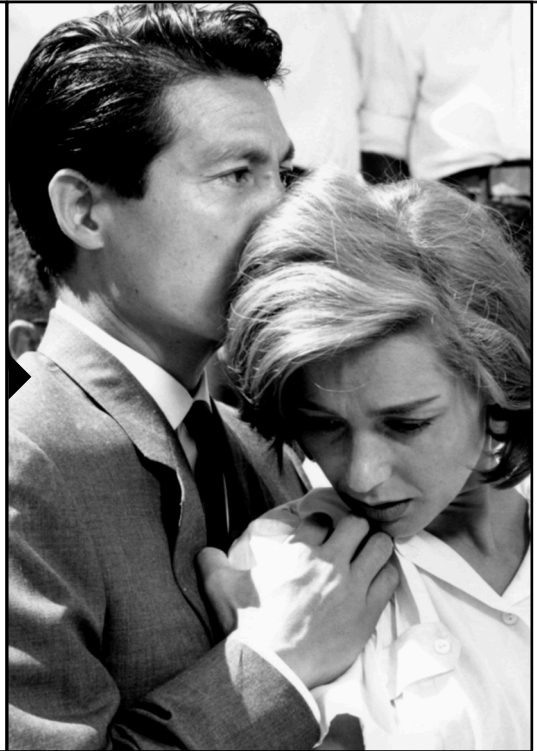
Truly what *Dredd* is, is a delight. It moves like a Swiss watch from one sweaty set piece to the next with Aristotelian urgency. You can’t help but get caught in the grip of it. When it comes to thrills, *Dredd* is a film that omits nothing.

– JOSE CRUZ

MOVIES

HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR – A film that one can't really be prepared for, which I suppose was the mode of operation for French new wave cinema. Billed as a romantic drama, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* starts off with almost 20 minutes of dialogue over some truly horrific footage of the aftermath of the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No single shot lingers too long, but neither are they swept away for the convenience of the viewer. Eventually these images are intercut with lovers and their sweaty embrace, to the eventual end of this coupling. Everything that follows is the romantic drama, all an ingrained metaphor on the attempt to heal something like these bombings, an impossible but necessary healing, only possible through the passage of time.

– LEVI RUBECK



The ZONE of INTEREST – Even if you draw the curtain you can still hear the shots, even if you cover your ears you still feel the rumble of the train.

There's something extremely pressing and relevant about focusing on this genocide through its inanities and the everyday happenings. The violences done in our name bleed into our realities, even when we don't notice it. And when we understand fascists as evil people with everyday lives, we are less able to exceptionalize and more able to see the ways that fascism enters our everyday.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE

TWILIGHT – A03 is free.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



TELEVISION



ARCHER – Fourteen years is a long time. Since 2009, I have lived in four different states, I have moved ten times, gotten two degrees, gotten married, had a baby, bought a house and, all the while, *Archer* has been on the air.

With showrunner Adam Reed behind the wheel, the steadfast FX spy sitcom has felt like something of a constant for me, a little bright spot to look forward to. I remember being excited about the show premiering way back when because it seemed like it might be an accessible change of pace from Reed's previous oddities, *Sealab 2021* and *Frisky Dingo*. Plus, H. Jon Benjamin was getting more work and, as an avid *Home Movies* fan, I knew this had potential, but maybe not 14 years of potential. Yet, here we are, 14 years later and we finally are saying goodbye to our gallery of vagabonds.

This isn't to say the show was perfect. The middle seasons were lacking in some of the finery of the early work, and the coma seasons

were certainly . . . a choice. But since Archer woke up, the show has been on an upswing and has fallen back on its basics. Characters felt real again, substantive. Even with Jessica Walters' death, they seemed to be able to keep things together and the stories felt cohesive. In this final season, they were able to even bring in a new character who felt natural to the world and blended right in with the rest of the crew, and the hour-long series finale tied the whole thing together. Archer ending up with both Katya and Barry feels only right.

All around, watching the band of miscreants who populated ISIS for the better of a decade-and-a-half has been a pleasure for the most part. And, even as a proponent of the "five season TV show," when all is said and done and I watched the elevator close on Archer for that final time, I couldn't help but feel like I still kind of wanted one more episode.

– NOAH SPRINGER

TELEVISION



INVINCIBLE (SEASON 2) – After season one, I thought this was the anime version of *The Boys*. After two episodes of season two, I actually began to think that it's the Marvel version of *The Venture Bros.*, but like, in a good way.

– NOAH SPRINGER

SQUID GAME (SEASON ONE) – LISTEN. I knew I'd love this one, but late Capitalism has been an absolute beast to me in recent years and I was not ready for a deep dive on its truths and recurrent themes when it first came out. I still wasn't ready when I watched it now, but I've come to terms with a lot since then and have better tools for managing my stress. The writing of this show is phenomenal and any YouTuber who rode the hype train for Google AdSense views is laughably part of the commentary (and the problem).

– PHOENIX SIMMS



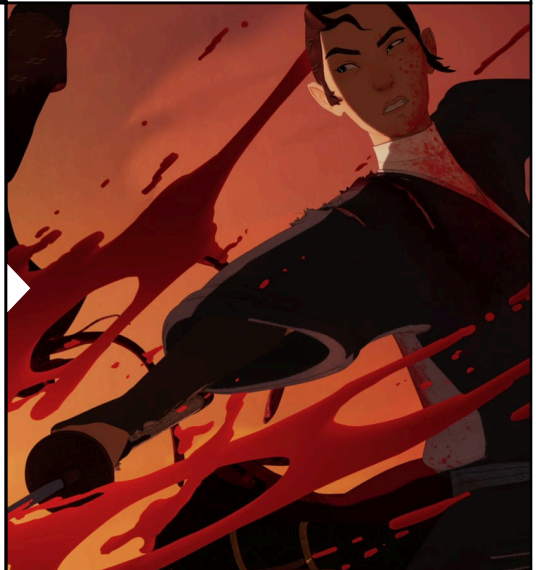
TRUE DETECTIVE (SEASON 4) – Should I move to Alaska? 24 hours of night for two months a year? I think I'm moving to Alaska...

– NOAH SPRINGER

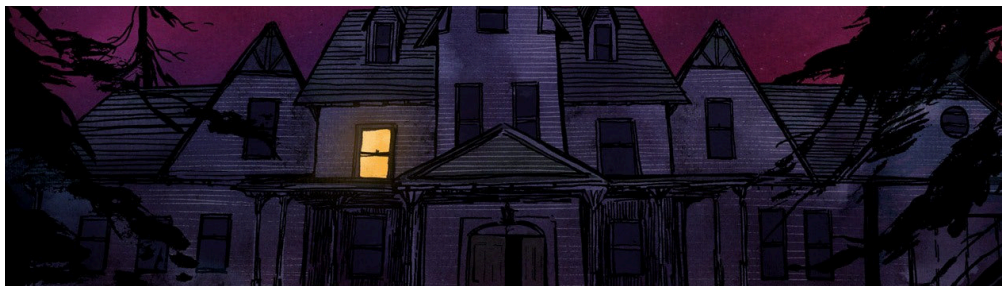


BLUE EYE SAMURAI – Big sucker for this shit over here. Promo materials give away what the first episode plays with till the end, which isn't exactly a shame, but just left me mildly confused. After that though, every element of this show is a feast. No hemming and hawing on the damage a sword or a bullet can do. The price of revenge, finding control over your life however you can, liberation in large and small ways, it's all here. Great swords and ninja action as well. Supposedly well-researched and to my limited knowledge it shows, but if you feel otherwise, hit up the pitch box.

– LEVI RUBECK



GAMES



GIRLHOOD in GAMES – A haunting can be a lot of things. A haunting is a brush with the other – the thing we’re not – and, therefore, a way for us to put a name to something we couldn’t prove, but knew was there.

“Is the house in *Gone Home* haunted?” begs the question, what do you consider a haunting? What do you consider a ghost? Your answer is going to depend on what your experiences are. How you grew up. What you fear.

If you were a teenage girl with parents who didn’t even try to understand you, you probably know the house is haunted. The oppressive atmosphere, the feeling that something could be waiting for you around every corner, in every shadow – it’s easy to imagine how Sam felt there.

On the other end of the scale, you have *Night in the Wood’s* Mae. Mae just wants to reconnect with her friends and family. She’s not ready to figure out her role outside of the passiveness of girlhood, and sure there might be a cult in the mines and old gods talking to her in her dreams, but what does that have to do with her?

Max, from *Life is Strange*, is a promising young artist at the beginning of her career. She’s a sweet kid, liked by her teachers and makes her parents proud, but when she awakes with the power to rewind time and gets herself involved in a murder mystery in an attempt to help her friend, she suddenly finds that for all of the time she put in being good, she isn’t rewarded with any amount of belief from anybody.

The real specter haunting these three games is girlhood. Girlhood isn’t something you do. It’s something that happens to you. Women are to be passive, pliable, yielding – and much of a girl’s childhood is spent learning this role. You’re a girl. You wait your turn. You speak when you’re spoken to. You aim to please. Any attempt to be anything but this is met with ostracization, ridicule or violence.

Can you fight this? Can you even make an attempt to escape the ever-present eye of the patriarchy? The truth is, you don’t have a choice. Any act of autonomy is a threat. Any refusal to let others be the arbiter of your life exposes the cis-normative, bio-essentialist underbelly of society.

Sam escapes her haunting by just leaving. She just packs up and leaves a note for her sister, refusing to sit around and let her parents decide who she is. Mae escapes her haunting by accepting that ghosts are always going to be around, but if they’re going to do something they need to hurry up and do it because she has band practice later. Max decides to fight. If she escapes, she subjects every girl she leaves behind to the continued haunting of a prowling killer. If no one is going to believe her, she’ll handle it herself.

In a way, every story is about ghosts. Every game is an attempt to name something we can’t see. Every book is a plea to be believed about what’s haunting you. Every movie is a horror movie. Every girl is a final girl.

– MARANZIE RULLÁN

GAMES



JUSTIN'S GAME CORNER

MARIO + RABBIDS: SPARKS OF HOPE – *M+R:SoH* flew slightly under the radar last year, but it's a well executed tactics game with tons of personality and character. Pick this one up if you have a moment or two and still can't forget *XCOM*.

OVERCOOKED – I might be getting a divorce and we're not even married yet.

– JUSTIN REEVE

DRAGONBANE – Pitched a play-by-post (or rather, Discord) sesh for *Dragonbane* to my usual Pathfinder group, and for the most part it feels like it's been going pretty well. I relish my job of bothering them but try not to abuse this power. And though *Dragonbane* flips more than a few core tenets from our usual game of choice, it's still fantasy role-playing and with a lot of energy coming from the '70s/'80s watercolor art that's gnarly and cute. With some cheat sheets in hand we're weathering the rules pretty nimbly, and the by-post playstyle allows for more wiggle room in the improv and delivery of information. If nothing else though, it allowed one of my players to describe a goblin kill as a bulls-eye on a boil bursting with brains and pus, which, isn't that kind of shit the whole point of all this?

– LEVI RUBECK



HEAT: PEDAL to the METAL – A board game about F1 racing should not be as clear and easy to understand, as good at creating tension and as fast to learn as *Heat*, but here we are. *Heat* is all of these things and more, a great theming for a fantastic rule set.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

HOROSCOPE

DO NOT INTERACT WITH STRANGE MACHINES.
YOUR SKIN MAY FALL OFF. 🇺