

ISSUE 60

EXPLOITS

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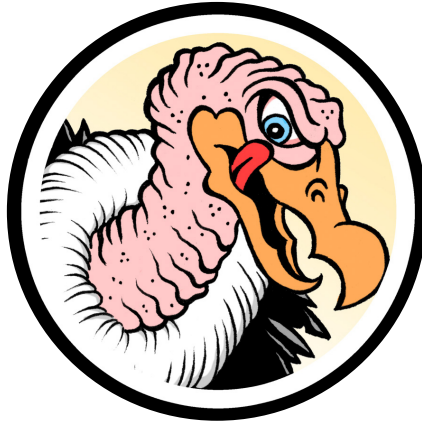
an UNWINNABLE publication



Stu Horvath on
RESERVATION DOGS

HAWKGUY • AFTER BLUE

**• MAX PAYNE 3 • LIZZO and HARDCORE •
CLIVE BARKER'S DARK WORLDS**



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

A LOSER SAVED MY LIFE

by Shelby Lane

I'm not ashamed to admit that my favorite superhero is a loser. He makes his entrance in the first issue of his 2012 comic book series falling out of a window over a busy New York City street, firing a grappling hook to ease his landing and admitting as he falls that "this looks bad." Even though his injuries from the fall land him in the hospital, he recovers well enough to be released six weeks later. He later adopts a one-eyed dog, fights off an army of tracksuit-wearing Russian mobsters while naked and fights to save his neighbors from eviction. The mobsters kick him in the face, he walks over broken glass while missing a shoe . . . yeah, it looks bad, but he always gets up again.

I started reading Matt Fraction and David Aja's *Hawkeye* comics in 2015, and they struck a chord with me. Though I'd tried to save it, my military career had met an arbitrary and stupid end the year before. I'd suffered a brain injury during training that affected my ability to talk, I had a nasty case of post-traumatic stress and I couldn't find a job. When I finally got work at a store that I nicknamed the fluorescent hell pit, I snapped a photo on Halloween of me dressed as Hawkeye checking out the arrows in the sporting goods section. I found joy where I could.

Here's the thing, though. While it's okay to grieve the loss of a better life, it's not healthy to stay that way. My retail job was penance for failing to do better, or so I thought – but it really wasn't. It was a dumb excuse for inertia. Clint's protégé, Kate Bishop, calls Clint out in the comics for not facing his problems, and after watching me spin my wheels for eight months, my loved ones did too. "What are you doing?" they asked. "Get off of your butt and do something with yourself." So I did.

I met Matt Fraction at Emerald City Comic-Con in 2017. I had my battered copy of the final *Hawkeye* trade paperback with me, and when I got to the front of the signing line, I stammered out a confession that the story had inspired me to keep going after my life imploded. Fraction asked me what I was doing now and I told him how I was kicking butt in college. "Look at you," he said. "You got up again."

That beat-up *Hawkeye* book is my most treasured collectible – not for its contents, even though they’re good, but because of who it inspired me to become. I got my bachelor’s degree, spent a summer working for retired astronauts, wrote my master’s thesis about Captain Marvel and got a decent job that pays the bills. Life isn’t perfect, but it’s better, and it’s only better because I face my problems even when it’s painful. A stubborn loser with a one-eyed dog showed me how, and in doing so he saved my life. 🍷



MUSIC



LIZZO and HARDCORE – Hardcore has been a haven for outcasts since its inception in the early 1980s. As an offshoot of punk rock, it has thrived as a genre and a community by speaking to an audience of misfits who aren't used to being spoken to by mainstream culture. Values that are common to the scene – strength, positivity, community – provide a sense of social structure and support for those who might not have those things otherwise.

The first time I heard Snapcase's *Designs for Automotion* when I was in high school, I could tell there was something different about this music compared to the inwardly focused nu-metal and alternative rock that I was into. Its lyrical emphasis on independent thinking and self-actualization gave me a sense of empowerment that I wasn't getting from anywhere else in my life. That album, without question, made a more lasting impact on who I am as a person than any other.

Hardcore's abrasiveness and insularity mean its message rarely reaches beyond its own boundaries. The genre's potential to make a positive change on the world is often hamstrung by (amongst other things) this intense insularity. Its rigid rules around what

can and cannot be considered hardcore combined with youthful shortsightedness often leads adherents to outgrow its confines.

Once, when driving around with my wife when Lizzo's third album *Cuz I Love You* came out in 2019, I said something to the effect of, "She's a better motivational speaker than Bane." I meant that halfway as a joke, but the more I thought about it, the more that sentiment seemed on point. Like most traditional HXC acts, Lizzo delivers an uplifting message and does so with an undeniable "fuck you" energy that invites the listener to feed off her confidence.

Lizzo has shown that artists can achieve superstardom with a message and a mission centered around self-empowerment rather than self-absorption. It's a message and a mission that isn't dissimilar to a lot of the hardcore records I grew up on, but it's also one that is in too short of supply, particularly within music that a more masculine audience might be naturally drawn toward. I wonder where we could be if we normalized making music that's more than just music, united by purpose, regardless of style and without regard for rules.

– BEN SAILER

MUSIC

PLAYLIST



“About Damn Time,” by Lizzo

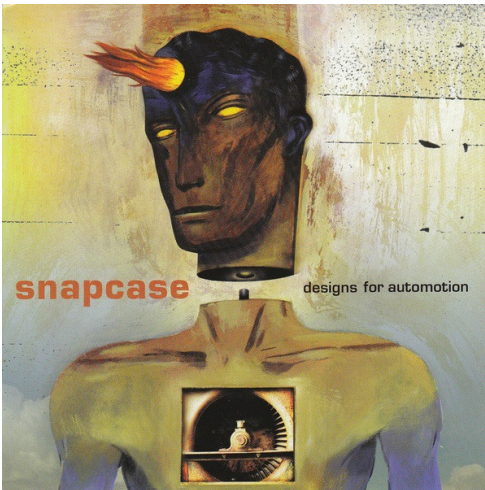
“Real Thing,” by Turnstile

“Truth Hurts,” by Lizzo

“For My Enemies,” by Madball

“Juice,” by Lizzo

“Pain into Power,” by Terror



“2 Be Loved (Am I Ready),” by Lizzo

“Human Carrying Capacity,” by Harms Way

“Good as Hell,” by Lizzo

“Typecast Modulator,” by Snapcase

“Tempo (feat. Missy Elliott),” by Lizzo, Missy Elliott

“Toxic Boombbox,” by Angel Du\$t



“You Can’t Kill Integrity,” by Throwdown

“Special,” by Lizzo

“Can We Start Again,” by Bane

“Lions And Lambs,” by Have Heart

[LISTEN ON SPOTIFY](#)



CLIVE BARKER'S DARK WORLDS – Over the years, there have probably been more non-fiction books published about Clive Barker and his work than the total number of fiction books he ever wrote. Which maybe shouldn't be surprising. Barker exploded onto the scene seemingly fully formed, with Stephen King declaring him "the future of horror" when he had only a few short stories under his belt. And for at least a decade, it seemed that he really *was*.

What may be a little more surprising is that Barker is one of the biggest influences on my own writing, even though he is inextricably associated with both erotic and splatterpunk and I . . . am not. But his work has been huge to me my whole life, and it remains so to this day, which means that I have read many of those nonfiction books I just mentioned. None of them are quite like *Clive Barker's Dark Worlds*, from Phil and Sarah Stokes, though.

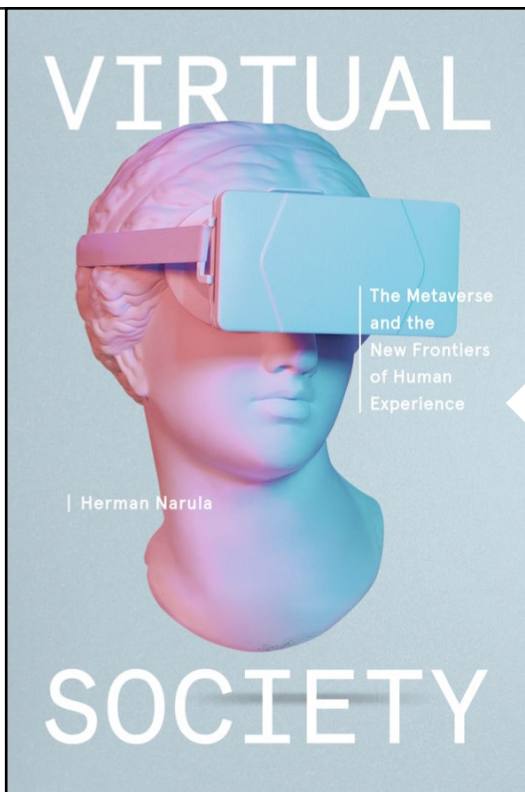
For starters, most of those other books were published during Barker's heyday, which means that they are necessarily incomplete.

They also tend to focus on the work itself, containing either behind-the-scenes anecdotes or Barker's own words on his inspirations and obsessions. *Dark Worlds* has plenty of both of those things, but it takes a more far-reaching view, telling the story of Barker's life *through* his work, leapfrogging (more or less chronologically) through not only his major accomplishments, but pretty much everything he has ever done, from his early work in the theater, to his art, to his short stories and novels, to movies and videogames and comic books and toy lines – oh my!

It is fair to say that just about every creative endeavor to which this wunderkind has ever turned his hand is represented somewhere in this coffee table tome, which has chapters on everything from his collaborations with Marvel comics to the toys he helped design and much, much more. It's a fascinating approach to a fascinating creator, and one that should please both old hands like myself and new devotees eager to learn more.

– ORRIN GREY

BOOKS



VIRTUAL SOCIETY: The METAVERSE and the NEW FRONTIERS of HUMAN EXPERIENCE –

This title by Herman Narula, the co-founder of Improbable Worlds (a VR software company he plugs at least once or twice per every chapter), is an oddball. On the surface, Narula claims he will dispel fears and raise optimism about the nuanced possibilities of a virtual society. But soon after the introduction things start to get suspicious. My earliest red flag was when Narula cited military campaign improvements as a positive feature of future metaverses. He then goes on to paint a vague yet overly optimistic paradigm where people live in what sounds like the VR-equivalent of Mastodon, of people all living in the VR world in many different silos. He also believes that *Roblox* and *Minecraft* are awesome examples of virtual societies and marketplaces (which seems odd given all the info we're now privy to specifically about the former's exploitation of user-created content).

To quell naysayers, Narula then relates the tired as heck Allegory of the Cave, and essentially chalks most reservations up to people being unenlightened or narrow-minded. All the above and more makes this book come off as an insincere pitch disguised as a philosophical discussion.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

AMERICÓN – We're deep into my mid-Winter poetry reading group, and as in years before my scattershot assemblage of grad school friends has delivered. Last week we read *Americón* by Nico Vela Page, a luxuriously designed collection that shimmies around place and body and family. The poems echo around each other without becoming staid, drifting through language without feeling peeled to the bone. Page gives of themselves and their family, painting New Mexico and more with the right detail rather than too much, constantly crossing itself in every meaningful way. By the end when I read the dedications to C. D. Wright and Forrest Gander and more the lineage made sense, though page branches off towards their own light in every way.

– LEVI RUBECK





AFTER BLUE (DIRTY PARADISE) – Audiences these days accept so many contemporary films with mediocre, dim, flat digital video and computer-generated effects that it is easy for us to forget the wild and radical possibilities that cinema has to offer. This is why Bertrand Mandico's *After Blue (dirty paradise)* feels so refreshing, with its vibrant cinematography and set design offering up a post-apocalyptic future that is captivating and feral in its bleakness.

After Blue is about an androgynous young French woman named Roxy (Paula Luna), living on the titular planet, and her quest to find and kill an elusive anti-hero named Kate Bush – short for Katajena Bushovsky (Agata Buzek). Roxy's mother Zora, a haggard hairdresser played by the always interesting Elina Lowensohn, goes along for the hunt across the amazing frontier of *After Blue*. It is a planet where all of the biological males died after their hair began growing backwards, inside them, leaving only women and the occasional android.

This is the kind of film where the journey is far more important than the destination,

and each scene adds some new aural or visual wonder to behold. While *After Blue* shows us an ethereal future world, it is one that is still very much organic. This is reflected in the production of the film.

Shot on 35mm and using effects done either in-camera or with many practical, creative flourishes, *After Blue* brings to life a world that is ecstatic and deadly at the same time. The camera is attracted to lens flares and glorious bokeh, further encouraged by excessive glitter, random crystals, pink smoke and trees that ejaculate weird, viscous fluids. It is a similar palette to Guy Maddin's techni-candy-colored gems *Careful* and *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*.

After Blue is the kind of film that is unafraid in its indulgent violence and sexuality. It is the kind of film where a character will just have a boob out for no reason, yet Mandico's gaze gives us an unapologetically queer world to sink into. It is an odyssey that inevitably calls you back for multiple viewings.

– JOSEPH DWYER

MOVIES



SCREAM 4 – Sometimes one needs to wind down from the suffocating weight of prestige TV, and some folks do that through campy horror. Not usually my first choice, particularly with this series so dedicated on folding into itself you'd think they were crafting the knife that appears in every installment. For a genre meant to embody transgression, it sure does like its rules. Feel like Neve deserves more, and it was nice to see a Culkin out and about. Was more excited to learn that the character Kirby lived and was meant to be in the next movie but the actress had dropped off the Hollywood grid so completely so as to be unreachable. The only way to survive this sort of thing perhaps.

– LEVI RUBECK



PROMARE – This is such a vibrant, interesting anime that manages to cover morally ambiguous characters, homoeroticism and power, all while being sleek and stylish.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



CRIMES of the FUTURE – Cronenberg must have the weirdest sex ever, or the most vanilla sex ever . . . there's no way its anything in between.

– NOAH SPRINGER

HOW to TRAIN YOUR DRAGON – The visuals may not hold up as well as the later movies, but the first has such a heartfelt story it's impossible not to love it. Even 12 years later.

– ROB RICH



TELEVISION



RESERVATION DOGS – There is an interview with Sterlin Harjo, the co-creator of *Reservation Dogs*, in [The Hollywood Reporter](#) that has a quote that stuck with me. The writer asks if it's true that FX originally wanted to shoot the show in New Mexico and Harjo says that was the case, but it thankfully didn't happen, "I couldn't have spent four years faking New Mexico for Oklahoma. I wouldn't have been happy. I wouldn't have been proud."

Reservation Dogs is about life on an Oklahoma reservation and all that comes with it, good and bad: confusing family trees, painful pasts, weird happenings, hijinks, love, hope, despair. Funerals. From the very first episode, the four central teenagers feel present in a way few characters on TV ever do. We only learn a little about them, honestly, episode to episode – I don't feel like I got the measure of Cheese until almost the end of the second season. Rather, the focus constantly shifts to the people around them, family, friends, enemies, oddballs passing through. It's a show about a community, really, one of a sort that never

gets this kind of attention, made by folks who lived there, or somewhere very like it. It presents an astonishing kind of authenticity, makes other TV feel as vibrant as stiff cardboard. And while it's often sad, it never feels somber or dreary, the way so much Very Serious Prestige TV often does. It's quick to wipe away the tears and call you a shitass.

It'll kick your ass though. I thought I had a firm handle on the show's mix of funny, sad and weird when the creature with the glowing red eyes showed up, but then there was the Tom Petty thing – and sure, I've long thought Tom Petty's music is a cure for every bit of bad mojo the spirit world could throw at a person, but never expected a TV show to use this secret truth to make my heart ache so perfectly? Consulting with other friends, it seems the show is littered with these sorts of resonances, the sort that sideswipe you with a devastating meaningfulness, the sort of things that resonate when a show and its makers refuse to be anything other than themselves.

– STU HORVATH

TELEVISION

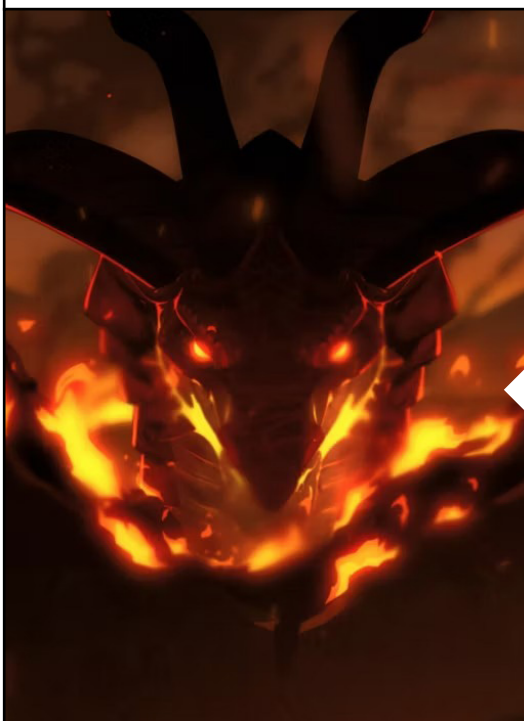


PARTY DOWN (SEASON THREE) – Season three of *Party Down* goes down as smooth as the first two, at least for the first episode. Go pick up your Starz subscription and maybe we can make this live on just a bit longer together

– NOAH SPRINGER

The MUPPET SHOW – As blasphemous as it is for me to say I prefer ABC's 2015 outing over the classic series (mostly because of character development and modern jokes), the original *Muppet Show* will always be worth watching. It's complete anarchy with loads of memorable musical numbers and guest spots, plus it's kind of cool to see how Kermit et al have changed over the years – both in looks and voice.

– ROB RICH



The LEGEND of VOX MACHINA (SEASON TWO) – I think the strength of *Vox Machina* as an adaptation of a tabletop live-stream is that its lead writer, Meredith Keckskemety, is proficient at balancing fan favourite moments that were born of improv with more fixed plot points and lore from the first campaign. There's also some smart revision of moments that were funny in the campaign, but lasted a bit overlong for snappy TV pacing. I'm glad they kept in a couple of the guest characters, Kashaw and Zahra, as well as their attendant actors too from the *Slayer's Take* run. Check out the *Battle Chasers* cameo in the scene they show up! Loving the whole remix so far this second season!

– PHOENIX SIMMS



MAX PAYNE 3 – I recently wrote a retrospective about the games of 2012 and how under-appreciated they were, but I avoided this one because when it first came out, it was a little over-appreciated. It was a Rockstar studios game that cost well over \$100 million to make, it capped off one of the most revered franchises of the 2000s and it even had a soundtrack composed by HEALTH. Calling *Max Payne 3* a cult classic doesn't feel right considering the hype and the resources that went into its development and yet, ten years later, no one really talks about it. The writing and graphical fidelity it was initially praised for are now the weakest aspects, and back then I too thought those were the best parts about it, as I found the gameplay immensely frustrating.

The funny thing though is how this title feels like it predicted where AAA games would go over the following decade, relying on hyper realistic graphics, ever soaring budgets and “mature storytelling” at the cost of experimental gameplay and even presentation that could take risks. With so much money now riding on these kinds of games, they have had

to increasingly play it safe. Prestige games like *The Last of Us*, *Death Stranding* and other titles that feel like they're movies hammered into the imprint of a videogame – *Max Payne 3* kinda feels like their forebear. But weirder than all of this, is that *Max Payne 3* feels better to play now more than ever.

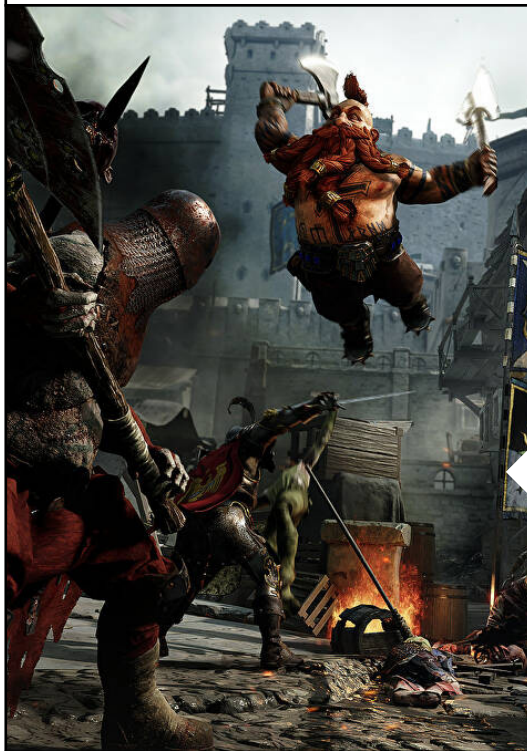
The series' bullet time gameplay has few modern day counterparts, and the game *finally* clicked for me once I stopped treating it like the cover shooters that were ubiquitous during the Xbox 360 era and instead tried it with a more aggressive playstyle that relied heavily on its shoot-dodge mechanic. At its core, *Max Payne 3* knows you're here to have a good time: Seeing guys get their bodies riddled with bullets in slow motion while listening to noise-rock blast during a firefight in a neon nightclub (and HEALTH's soundtrack has aged into possibly one of the most underrated soundtracks in gaming history). Underneath all the swearing, hidden deep within the Brazilian underworld, is a game that knows you're supposed to have *fun* with it.

– VAN DENNIS

GAMES

CALICO – A soft and gentle board game about cats and quilting, *Calico* is the perfect game for a cozy night in.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2 – I actually like the gameplay formula in *Warhammer: Vermintide 2*, but something which consistently bothers me about the cooperative survival genre is the inability to finally move beyond *Left 4 Dead*. I mean, each new game in the genre definitely moves things forward by introducing a new mechanic or something, but the overall experience just winds up feeling like *Left 4 Dead*, *Warhammer: Vermintide 2* included. That said, I'm a fool for games that suck you into their world and this particular game does it with gusto.

– JUSTIN REEVE

The **STANLEY PARABLE: ULTRA DELUXE**

– Not as *Ultra* nor as *Deluxe* as advertised, but that's the joke. It's all jokes, many of them funny, but at this point the washcloth is pretty rung out. Followed a flow-chart to experience most of the content I couldn't be bothered to rewind back and forth through myself, surprised to find that I didn't really miss much. Probably an unfair comparison but having just seen some tweet about how *Metal Gear Solid* knew if you were playing on an older mono TV set and shamed you for it, would have like more of that level of player roasting.

– LEVI RUBECK



HOROSCOPE

THE CLOSER YOU GET, THE
FARTHER THEY ARE. 🍷