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EXPLOITS

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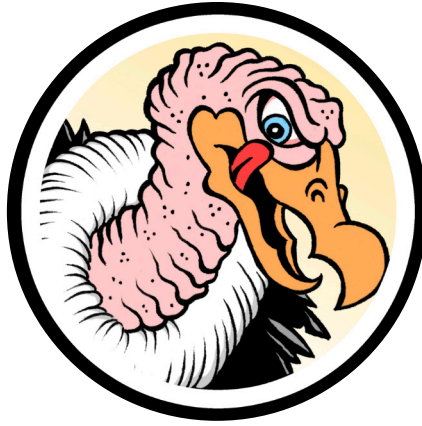
Orrin Grey on
**A CORPSE for
CHRISTMAS**



MECHA • ALAN WAKE • DBSK

• PEE-WEE'S PLAYHOUSE CHRISTMAS SPECIAL •

The INVENTION of MOREL



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

STOMPY vs. BOOSTY

by Ultraviolet Combat

The recent release of *Armored Core VI* has made me fixated on mecha – not like that isn't my default state, but even so, the game has lived up to its subtitle and lit a fire in my brain and my heart. Being my first *Armored Core* title and my first FromSoftware game, I loved it to bits from start to finish.

The emphasis on the incredible mobility available to the game's titular mecha got me thinking. I reckoned, "Hey, sometimes giant robots just kinda jet around instead of using their legs for their intended purpose. Why is that?"

For those like me who become obsessed with giant robots, particularly of the "Real Robot" persuasion, one might notice something about this genre. Mecha tend to be split into two categories: mecha that are functionally tanks on legs, and mecha that are functionally planes on legs. For convenience's sake, I'll refer to these as Stompy vs. Boosty. Of course, there are exceptions, not everything fits into neat boxes, but I've noticed these patterns across anime, tabletop games and videogames, to name a few media.

To understand this, we must go back to something that Real Robot enthusiasts should be all-too-familiar with: the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* from 1979. This anime series birthed the Real Robot genre, its titular Mobile Suits drawing inspiration from the power armor of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*.

In the show, the iconic RX-78-2 Gundam and other Mobile Suits used back-mounted thrusters to sometimes overcome Earth's gravity; the Guntank was literally half-robot, half-tank; the MS-09 Dom featured massive legs and an over-sized skirt that concealed powerful thermonuclear jets, giving it hovercraft-like mobility.

This was the birth of both the Stompy and Boosty archetypes. Soon enough, more mecha anime followed in *Gundam's* wake. *Fang of the Sun Dougram* would lay the foundation for the Stompy archetype with its grittier combat and characters. Some of its mech designs were even borrowed, in a sense, for the tabletop wargame *BattleTech*, the long-running paragon of Stompy media.

There was another series that emerged in the zeitgeist borne by *Gundam: Super Dimension Fortress Macross*. One of the most iconic designs from that series was the transforming Variable Fighter, the VF-1 Valkyrie. The Valkyrie boasted three forms: a plane form, a bipedal robot form, and a hybrid mode known as the “Gerwalk.” This third form, allegedly inspired by a flaw in a toy prototype, could slide around with jet propulsion, literally resembling a plane with reverse-jointed legs.

The show’s director, Shōji Kawamori, did the mechanical design as well, and the success of the *Macross* franchise contributed to him becoming the mechanical designer on the *Armored Core* series years later, while *BattleTech*’s early dabbling with the aesthetics of mecha anime eventually led to the *MechWarrior* series of videogames.

Both of those franchises, in both their gameplay and aesthetics, champion their respective archetypes. Like with the mecha anime that inspired FromSoftware, *Armored Core*’s mecha live for speed, with altitude leading to advantage. *MechWarrior*’s BattleMechs, by contrast, reward calculated piloting and a touch of luck, mirroring the turn-based wargame they originated from. Both require finesse and mastery of controls to pilot, but in different ways.

Though mecha has diverged in such a way, there is no proscription against enjoying either or even both styles. I certainly enjoy both, and I hope, Dear Reader, that this glimpse of history has proven edifying. 🍵



MUSIC



DBSK – When I was 14 years old, I turned on the family computer to watch “Last Angel,” the newest single from one of my favorite Japanese artists, Koda Kumi. Despite the low-res pixelation of the music video, five boys got my attention on the second chorus and bridge. I thought “*Who were those guys? They sing and dance well. That blonde one is really pretty too!*”

Thus, I discovered the Korean group, Dong Bang Shin Ki (DBSK for short). Internationally, the group is known as TVXQ, but in Korean their name was a self-fulfilling prophecy when translated into English - Rising Gods of the East. And they did rise.

Originally a five-member group consisting of Kim Jaejoong, Jung Yunho, Park Yoochun, Kim Junsu and Shim Changmin, the group’s musical integrity stood the test of time following their debut in 2003 and it still holds up two decades later.

Their vocal and dance abilities were unparalleled during the second generation of K-Pop. What made them so special was that each member was capable of being a main vocalist, regardless of whether they were positioned as a main rapper or lead dancer. As they were known as an acapella-dance group, the harmonization of R&B-like favorites such as

“Million Men” or up-tempo bops like “Purple Line” was proof that they knew how to pour emotion into each lyric and dance move.

In the summer of 2008, during the lazy days of my uneventful school holidays, I found myself searching for what crumbs of information I could find on them. Before personalized “for you” recommendations dominated social media, forums such as DBSKnights and the fan-subbing group Gods of the East in the early days of Dailymotion and YouTube were the saving grace for me to learn more about DBSK through translated episodes of shows like X-Man and Banjun Drama.

And not gonna lie – it worked on me.

By the end of that summer, I designated myself as a full-blown *Cassiopeia*, the official fandom name, based on the five-star constellation which represented each member of the group. My admiration for DBSK ignited a determination within me to discover more. I threw myself headfirst into a rabbit hole where I found myself consumed by the “Hal-lyu Wave” – the export of South Korea’s soft power through cinema, fashion and music.

In the early 2000s, South Korea was still recovering from a nationwide crisis of economic depression that began the previous

MUSIC

decade. The Hallyu Wave became a way to accelerate economic recovery. So, after DBSK debuted in December 2003 with their first single, “Hug,” the group slowly became an influential and versatile powerhouse for SM Entertainment, one of South Korea’s top four entertainment companies.

Over time, their achievements, talents and contributions to music catapulted their status and made me feel the immense influence they had over my generation. Remember *Fast and Furious 4*? Their song, “Rising Sun,” was played in the movie. Guinness World Records? They had the world’s largest fan club with over 800,000 official members in 2008.

DBSK’s influence wasn’t limited to Korea, either. They were the first Korean group to popularize K-Pop, smash records and lead the Hallyu Wave in the second generation. In Japan, they were the first Korean group to hold a two day-concert at the prestigious Tokyo Dome, and they also won MTV Video Music Awards for Best Buzz and Collaboration Video in 2007 and 2008 for their songs, “O-Jung.Ban.Hap” and “Last Angel.” DBSK’s hard work allowed their successors to enter the Japanese market.

I remember buying their Japanese EP, *SUMMER: Summer Dream* two years after its release

with the pocket money I saved up and getting a photocard. Puzzled, I scoured the internet and learned that this was something new. DBSK were the first K-Pop artists to do this in 2007, but it’s not something acknowledged today.

There was also something so exciting about the release of “Mirotic” in 2008 and watching the music video for the very first time. Before I went to school that day, I screamed after listening to the song and saw how good the members looked. Dare I say, it was life-changing for me.

It’s sexy, it’s catchy, the choreography is memorable, and Changmin’s high note is the iconic climax of “Mirotic.” The album was one of the bestselling of the year, exceeding over 500,000 copies and winning Album of the Year. *Mirotic* cemented the group as one of the top second-generation idols of K-pop. On December 31, 2009, tvN ENEWS Black-box revealed the top earners that year in Korea with DBSK ranking 1st, generating revenue of \$109M USD.

Even now, in my 30s, I feel the impact DBSK has had on my life. I used their song “Darkness Eyes” for my GCSE Dance exam, I met friends within the fandom on Facebook and discovered “shipping” through fanfiction



sites like Winglin, which was dominated by the popular pairing of Yunjae, consisting of members Yunho and Jaejoong.

Their influence is still reflected in K-Pop today. Idols such as Moonbyul of the girl group, MAMAMOO did a cover of “Rising Sun” during MAMAMOO’s 2019 concert tour, and boy group TXT performed “Mirotic” at the KBS Song Festival in 2021. DBSK also impacted the business of K-Pop. If it wasn’t for Jaejoong, Yoochun and Junsu filing and winning their lawsuit against SM for the 13-year slave contract the company imposed on them, future idols wouldn’t have been able to advocate for their own needs and wants.

This December is DBSK’s 20th anniversary, and I can’t help but go down memory lane. Whilst **Jaejoong has hinted at a 20th anniversary album on his cooking show, DBSK has recently announced their next album will be released on the day of their debut** and I can’t help but wonder if a surprise is in store, or even a reunion.

But most importantly, I hope their legacy continues to live on and that fans – now and in the future – don’t forget the path DBSK paved for K-Pop.

– NYASHA OLIVER



PLAYLIST

“TRI-ANGLE,” by DBSK

“Keep Your Head Down,” by DBSK

“Dangerous Mind,” by DBSK

“Get Me Some,” by DBSK

“Our Game,” by DBSK

“The Way U Are,” by DBSK

“Million Men,” by DBSK

“Hey! Girl,” by DBSK

“Doushite Kimi wo Suki ni Natte Shimattandarou?,” by DBSK

“SHE,” by DBSK

“Bolero,” by DBSK

“Love In The Ice,” by DBSK

“Destiny,” by DBSK

“Phantom,” by DBSK

“Rising Sun,” by DBSK

“O-Jung.Ban.Hap,” by DBSK

“Purple Line,” by DBSK

“MIROTIC,” by DBSK

“Balloons,” by DBSK

“HUG,” by DBSK

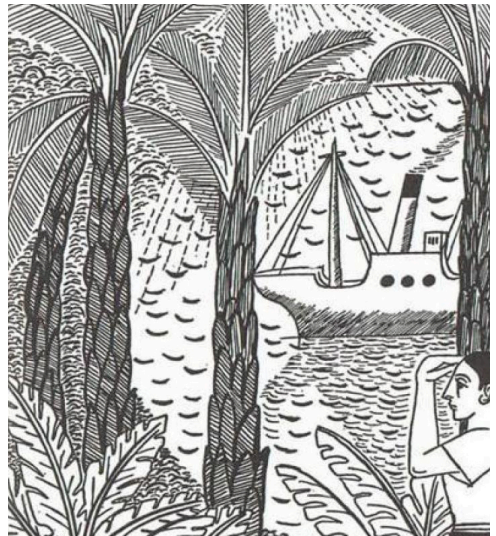
LISTEN ON SPOTIFY

The INVENTION of MOREL – Amidst an awkward press conference or as a talking head on cable news, the tech-bro CEO rhapsodizing about a proprietary revolution can cut a Gothic figure: as if a flash of lightning might rev to life a grotesque cybertruck, or a smoking vial might transform its drinker into an uncanny Metaverse avatar. But whereas Frankenstein, Moreau and Jekyll aimed their ambitions at the secrets of life itself, today's set of self-important innovators for the most part seek markets to disrupt and gizmos to platformitize. In this long tradition of the eponymous evil genius, one lesser-known name bridges the gap between the natural philosopher and the entrepreneur – the name, Morel, and the novel, *The Invention of Morel* by Adolfo Bioy Casares, published in Spanish in 1941 and republished in Ruth L. C. Simms' translation by NYRB Classics in 2003.

The short book takes the form of a diary, written by an unnamed fugitive who discovers that his desert island hideaway doubles as a vacation spot for a band of bon vivants led by the mysterious inventor Morel. The fugitive observes the group initially from a distance, but closes in as their strange behaviors emerge: repeated conversations, sudden disappearances. The island, the fugitive realizes, is haunted by uncanny reproductions of its last visitors, their every moment having been recorded by secret machines, such that their projected likenesses may live out their last week in paradise together, again and again, forever. The fugitive watches one reproduction of the scene of Morel's confession, the inventor revealing to his horrified companions that they were part of his invention's final test. "Don't you see," Morel asks, "that there is a parallelism between the destinies of men and images?"

Less than a century later, we inhabit that parallel destiny. The story is striking to a contemporary reader because the mystery of the island's machinery comprises a time-loop narrative *avant la lettre*, presaging films like *Groundhog Day*, *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Infinity Pool* (the novel itself was a loose inspiration for Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*) and videogames like *Majora's Mask*, *Deathloop*, and *Outer Wilds*. Yet Casares' prescient portrayal of an advanced full-body recording and reproduction apparatus is the most unnerving aspect, complete with an enterprising inventor content to capitalize on an unsuspecting public's participation. *The Invention of Morel* captures an anxiety of "innovation" that has only deepened since its writing, as digital recording technologies like facial-recognition, body-scan likenesses and always-on wearable computers proliferate. The book incisively depicts that, in the face of these ethically ambiguous developments, what is perhaps worst of all is the realization that you are always already part of the test.

– PATRICK FIORILLI



BOOKS

KAKEGURUI: COMPULSIVE GAMBLER VOL 1

– There are plenty of manga's about high schools; even manga's about high schools where the teens have created horrific caste systems. I'm not sure if there's another about a school whose caste is determined by the skill the teenagers have at doing gambling stunts at each other. It's a strangely compelling, if unnecessarily horny, series.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



CITADEL of the AUTARCH – Really hitting a down slope on this one. Probably gonna pick up now that I'm out of the nun hospital, but wild that it took so many pages for Wolfe to start thinking about his trauma in Korea. Still, lots more going on in that, but definitely bored of these fables, ready to get back to it, and then finally move on from Urth, despite the additional 8 books or whatever.

– LEVI RUBECK

MAKING LOVE with the LAND – Joshua Whitehead's critique of how everything, including writing genres, is influenced by colonialism in Canadian literature is elegant, cerebral and more than necessary. My only caveat is that in demonstrating how he struggles to break free of academic jargon, he sometimes gets a little too entangled with theory. Still, this is an accomplished piece of creative and decolonial non-fiction.

– PHOENIX SIMMS





A CORPSE for CHRISTMAS – When I say that David “The Rock” Nelson throwing plastic insects at the camera is the best part of Brewce Longo’s shot-on-video sleaze fest, it’s not a dis. David “The Rock” Nelson (I’m going to use his full name every time, so be prepared) throwing plastic bugs at the camera is something I could watch all day.

Filed in and around Philadelphia’s metal scene, as well as the Miracle on 13th Street holiday light display and other local haunts, the rest of *A Corpse for Christmas* is a loose retelling of the crimes of the real-life Sunset Strip Killers. Billed in the trailer as a “sexy, sadistic metalfest,” the flick features appearances and songs from a variety of local talents including bands like Acid Witch, Devil Master, Savage Mystic, Unreal City and others. Never heard of any of those groups? Don’t worry, I hadn’t either.

Just as I didn’t know who David “The Rock” Nelson was before he showed up on screen, even though he’s apparently something of a fixture – and maybe even a folk hero – in a certain sub-set of the SOV horror

community. The point is that you don’t actually *need* to know any of this to pick up what *A Corpse for Christmas* is laying down, because the film is more than just an opportunity for SOV horror nerds, metalheads and Philly locals to perform that “DiCaprio pointing at the screen” meme.

It may feel like a lot of weight to lay on a picture like this, but *A Corpse for Christmas* is ultimately about traditions, both the pre-Christian ones that inform the holiday and the modern ones that we make out of the commercialization of the season. Even if it’s also about necrophilia and serial killers and filming some guy’s Krampusnacht party and seeing metal bands performing at PhilaMOCA and watching David “The Rock” Nelson throw plastic bugs at the camera. And, more importantly than *any* of that, it has an affection for everything you’re seeing that is real, and obvious, and inescapable.

And maybe *that’s* ultimately what Christmas is all about.

– ORRIN GREY

MOVIES

LEGEND – I revisited this all-time favorite on Blu-ray and found that, besides the fake sparkly snow, the tale, set in an immersive sound stage, holds up. I wish it was possible to have a LARP experience in place like that. Lily's scenes with Darkness are still the best and if you don't prefer the theatrical cut with the Tangerine Dream soundtrack, I'm judging you. Not many things turn me into a movie snob, but that score and how it enmeshes the storytelling experience in an ethereal atmosphere does.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



NOAH'S MOVIE CORNER

The KILLER – *Up in the Air* meets *Le Samourai*.

The SHINING – Imagine this same movie, but with Charles Grodin as Jack Torrance. He's got some of the best "I'm losing my goddamn mind" eyes of all time.

– NOAH SPRINGER



HEAT (The FIRST HOUR or SO) – Trying to finally make my way through this '90s masterpiece but I have to do it on my own time which is fleeting and scant. Can't write all the other blurbs if I just focus on this one three-hour epic. And you probably already have your idea about it figured out. Stacked cast, Italian-American thespian heavyweights going toe-to-toe (well, not from what I've seen so far), young heartthrobs going milliseconds between 0 and 100, fuckin' pre-silver fox Henry Rollins, young warrior Wes Studi. Guns that sound deafening like they should. Drop off suspense! All the references from *Payday 2* and *3* that I now get! Can't wait to finish this one then read the sequel.

– LEVI RUBECK





PEE-WEE'S PLAYHOUSE CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

— When DVDs became a real “thing” in my mid-teens, I was completely enamored with commentary tracks. I thought getting the inside scoop on the creation process from the writers, directors, actors, etc. was endlessly fascinating and the best kind of bonus content offered by the newfangled medium. A bit odd, then, that it took me 19 years to listen to the commentary tracks for *Pee-wee's Playhouse Christmas Special*, a show I've watched at least once a year for the past 35.

Featuring co-writers Paul Reubens (Pee-wee) and John Paragon (Jambi, Pterri), Lynne Marie Stewart (Miss Yvonne) and animation producer Prudence Fenton, the main DVD commentary track is not only a fresh way to watch an old favorite but a bittersweet one considering Reubens' and Paragon's recent deaths. I had done enough of my own research into everything Pee-wee over the course of my decades-long obsession with the character that I didn't get a lot of new info from their commentary — though Fenton telling the story of how a small earthquake ruined 12 hours of filming the stop-motion opening to the special made my heart

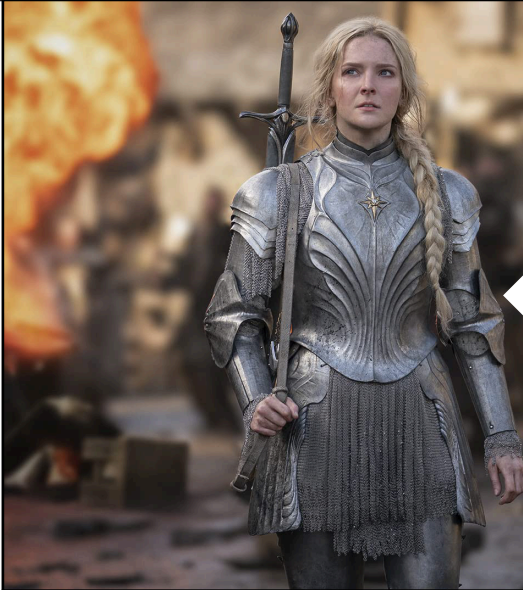
bleed anew. The funniest recurring bit is either Paul or John or both saying, “I don't remember this part at all,” and meaning it. The commentary was recorded a good 15 years or so after the special aired and I guess they didn't religiously watch the special every year on Christmas Eve? Some folks have no sense of tradition.

The puppeteers' commentary is equally fun (and I daresay funnier). Alison Mork (Chairry, Magic Screen, et. al.), Wayne White (Randy, Dirty Dog, et. al.), Ric Heitzman (Mr. Window, Cool Cat, et. al.) Kevin Carlson (Conky 2000, Clocky, et. al.), George McGrath (Globey, Cowntess, et. al.), and John Paragon (hi again!) have a lively time talking about shooting the special and while their conversation skews a bit more technical than the other commentary track, they frequently crack each other up with asides about their interactions with the celebrity guests, including McGrath making a dope of himself in front of Cher. Their track highlights just how much collaboration went into the making of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, and what better time of year to celebrate teamwork making the dream work? As Pee-wee puts it, Christmas is the time we should be thinking about what we can do for others, like sitting on a sandbag and operating the mouth of a turquoise armchair with your feet or having steel bars dig into your shins as you embody a robot made of boomboxes in order to make a classic Christmas special.

So, if you're looking for a new spin on Pee-wee learning the true meaning of Christmas, be a fly on the wall while a group of old friends reminisce about making an iconic bit of children's television. In the meantime, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year (screams real loud)!

— SARA CLEMENS

TELEVISION



JUSTIN'S TV CORNER

SUITS – How did I not know this existed for so long?

The LORD of the RINGS: The RINGS of POWER – Pretty good show, really long title.

ONE PIECE – How did this go on so long?

TED LASSO – I once met a guy who looked exactly like Ted Lasso. I said, “Hey, Ted,” and he replied, “My name is George.” So, I said, “Is your last name Lasso?” and he said, “How’d you know?”

– JUSTIN REEVE

LIGHTNING ROUND

ER – I’m watching all of *ER* again.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA

LOVE is BLIND (SEASON 5) – Send this show to the farm already. The producers are psychopaths. The “experiment” is a fraud. We are all human beings until the camera warps us inside and out.

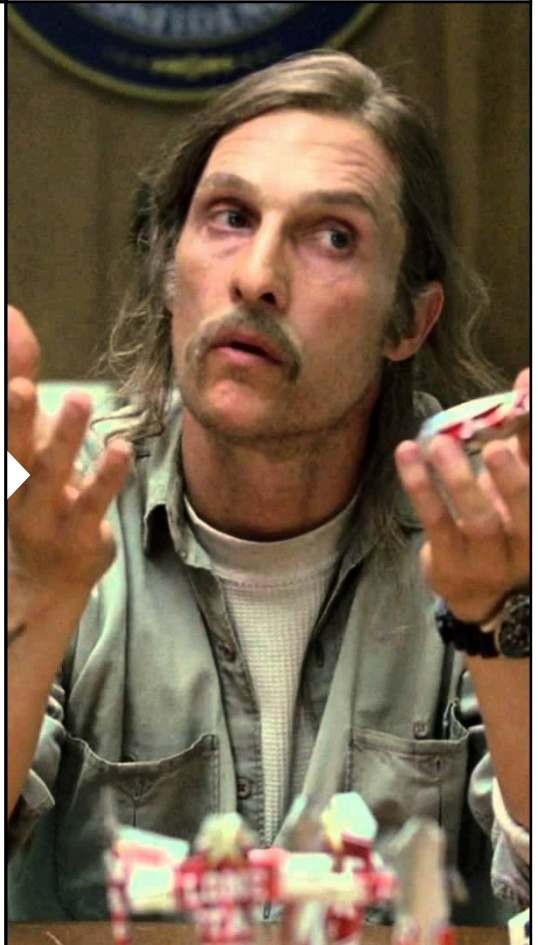
– LEVI RUBECK

JUNIOR BAKE OFF – Where do they keep finding straight British men that can set off fire alarms?

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

TRUE DETECTIVE (SEASON 1) – Yes, this still rules. But, the last scene is so weak! The closest analogy I have is the end of the studio version of *The Magnificent Ambersons* – an angelic exit after a well-thought-out, nihilistic appraisal of the human race. Why the fuck would Chole think the light is winning?

– NOAH SPRINGER





ALAN WAKE – Yeah, this worked a lot better for me the second time through.

I already liked the original *Alan Wake* when I played it for the first time back in 2016, although I fully recognize why it's viewed as a messy cult classic. Everything about it can be love or hate: the writing, the graphics and especially the gameplay. Remedy's one of the vanguard studios when it comes to third-person shooters, but *Max Payne* this ain't. In fact, I'd compare this more to *Max Payne 3* than to Remedy's own entries, as this is a game that can easily alienate players due to its rough shooting mechanics, and it has a story that basically requires you to "just roll with it" as you'll probably be asking "what the heck is going on??" half the time. And yet, its truly unique tone, setting that oozes atmosphere and a sense of self-aware fun is what's helped it cut out a space for itself over a decade later.

Which brings us to the remaster that came out a couple of years ago and, thanks to graphical overalls that make the spooky town

of Bright Falls *much* better looking (ditching the early 2010s grays and overused shadows for some greens and vastly improved lighting), the second go-around finally got this game to fully click for me. Going in knowing a few key plot points helped me better notice some vital trees in this dark forest, and the story gelled with me much more this time.

I know that there are people who can't stand Sam Lake's style, but me personally, the fact that this game *has* a style that hasn't been replicated in the 13 years since it came out is what's held it up. The quirky strangeness, its love for Stephen King that it wears on its sleeve, the set-pieces that make it come alive in the second half and gun play that gets the lizard part of your brain *going* when you use a flare gun as an improvised grenade launcher against a group of ax-throwing shadows. While the long-awaited sequel might fully realize the depths this game had hoped it could have dived to, there's still just enough oddball charm to be found in this lake.

– VAN DENNIS

GAMES

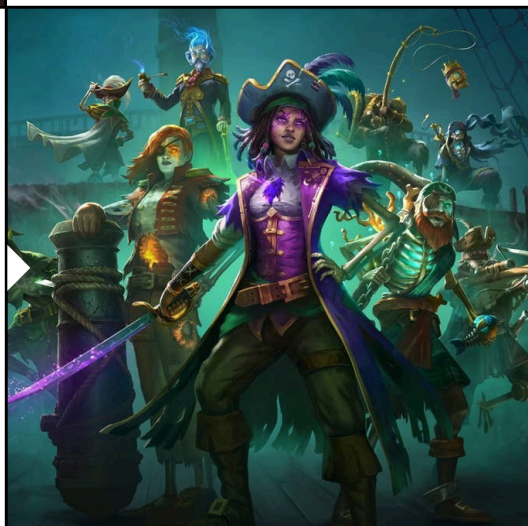


BALDUR'S GATE 3 – I have mixed feelings towards this game. It's super ambitious and I love the voice acting, not to mention the attempts to make a more organic and dynamic feeling narrative. But there a lot of moments where I feel so mired in resource management I'm getting flashbacks to why I've often felt at odds with D&D's system in its original tabletop format. Cognitive overload is definitely something I have to manage whenever I sit down for a play session.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

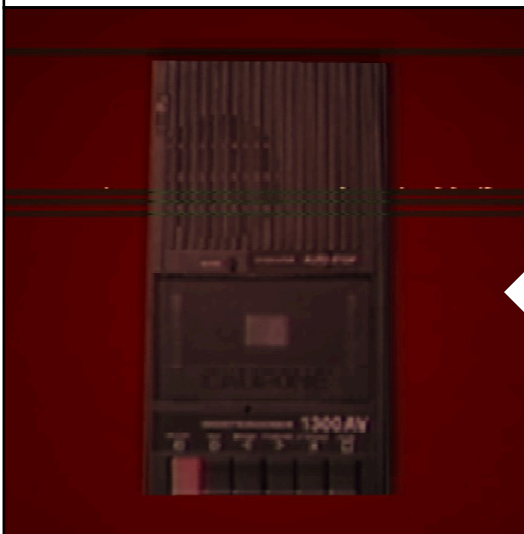
SHADOW GAMBIT: The CURSED CREW – I've played a lot of these isometric stealth games by Mimimi and while most of them are a little bit clunky in terms of design, requiring lots of save scumming, I'd be reasonably comfortable recommending it to anyone, even a first-timer. The design is rather elegant and the encounters are well engineered. The story and setting are worth sticking around for until the end as well. In brief, despite this being a busy one for games, don't skip out on *Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew* this year.

– JUSTIN REEVE



ANATOMY – What do I do with the feeling that my body is a house that is rejecting me? That every morning I wake up and it gnaws at me from the inside? Human microbiome, cancer, dysphoria/morphia, all existential challenges to the house as my own to live in. The house that was, of course, never really mine, never belonged to this generation that's dying younger of illness caused by stress and pollution and lack of access to healthcare. But the house won't forgive me for my parents' sins. We are all just renters in this body.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



HOROSCOPE

RADIATION. DON'T GET TOO CLOSE. ☸

BOOKS

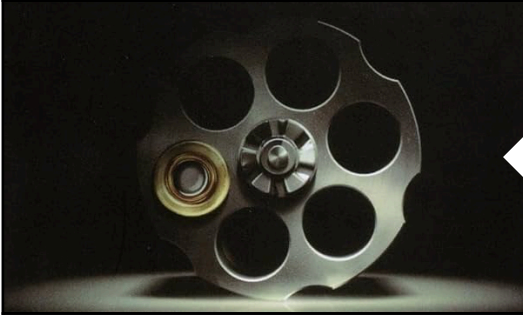
The GIRL From the OTHER SIDE: SIÚIL, A RÚN – Although I've only read two volumes of this work, Nagabe manages to construct a weird and interesting world with deep lore that hits those fairy tale uncanny elements so well. Gorgeously illustrated, this is an easy recommendation.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



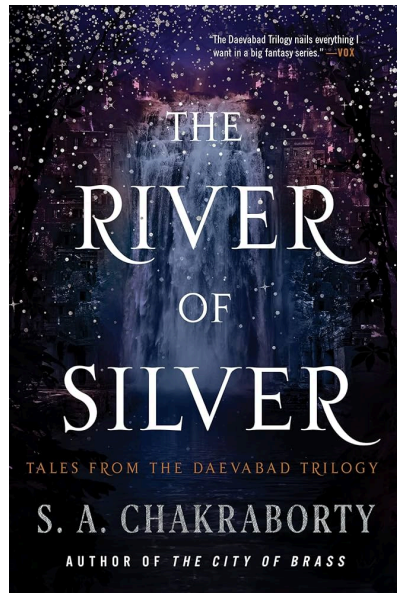
REBUS – I've been working my way through Ian Rankin's 24 novels dedicated to the Edinburgh cop. I've finished seven and it's odd being so invested in seeing an unlikable character win through in the end while also kind of rooting for him to crash into a wall at the same time.

– STU HORVATH



RIVER of SILVER – S.A. Chakraborty is one of the best fantasy writers in the business today and her Daevabad trilogy was the first series in decades to give me what the kids lovingly call a "book hangover" these days (they're right, it has all the markers of such a state). So when I found out that she was going to be officially publishing several short stories taking place between the major scenes of the trilogy and often featuring side characters, I was buzzed. Fortunately, this collection has the same charms as the trilogy and its only downside is that halfway through the collection the premise of featuring more side characters is set aside. If you want a nice mix of epic political drama, beautifully diverse and well-researched mythology and history as well as some romance, check this one out. However, I'd recommend reading it after the trilogy, as it expands upon a lot of major scenes and is spoilertastic (for those who care).

– PHOENIX SIMMS



MOVIES

THEY LIVE – Takeaways from my six-year-old son after I, a bad parent, allowed him to watch *They Live* (rated R for violence and so, so much cursing). 1. The famous fist fight is too long and “a little violent for me, Dad.” 2. The sunglasses should’ve showed everything in color rather than in black and white (being six, my son is a cinematic Philistine). 3. No matter who the apparent villain is in a movie or TV show, now he believes that ultimately “the Government is the real villain.”

– STU HORVATH



LADYBUG & CAT NOIR: The MOVIE – This is super wholesome. Also, for those who enjoyed the TV series yet craved resolution for some of the plot lines, skip the series and watch the movie. I watched in the original French and highly enjoyed it. It’s a simple tale inspired by the romance and coming-of-age antics of mahou shoujo classics like *Sailor Moon* and the action-packed sequences of shonen classics like *Dragon Ball Z* with a Disney musical twist. Caveat for those who are irked by musicals, this one is *super* musical. But the catharsis is well-earned.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

HEAT (The REST of IT) – God damn what a powerhouse. I can’t remember what I wrote earlier but I triple down on it. I never understood why Kilmer was such a beloved actor, probably because I mostly saw him as the assholes he played, but that last scene with his wife the also incredible Ashley Judd. That last turn at the end, he was telling us all along, can’t have any attachments you aren’t willing to drop in 30 seconds. Not that it worked out in the end. Hope the library has the sequel.

– LEVI RUBECK



TELEVISION



SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF – Science SARU made both a Rebuilt, feminist retelling of Scott Pilgrim and one of the most explicitly gay anime to date. The show centers on Ramona's perspective as she adjusts to Toronto, dyes her hair and seeks closure, not revenge, with her not-so-evil exes. *Takes Off* understands how shitty the men of Scott Pilgrim the comic and film were, and makes that fact unavoidable to all the men who thought identifying with Scott wasn't totally missing the point. Like Shinji, if legions of nerdy men on the internet keep identifying with your fail son, you cannot advance.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST: BROTHERHOOD –

At various times in my life, a messenger has arrived to tell me to watch *Fullmetal Alchemist*. I ignored these Cassandras until this month when I pushed past *that* episode and watched the rest of it. If you also waited a decade and a half to watch it, the show follows two brothers trying to get their bodies back after failing to resurrect their mom. It launched a thousand YouTube fancam tributes and it's easy to see why: the two main characters feel realistically 14 and 15, and their struggles ranging from delivering a baby to dealing with death are explored with delicateness and compassion. I'm still working on the whole thing, but I'm surprised by how good the dialogue is, how sad it is and how many times I think "I would have loved this in 2009". Sorry to everyone who told me then; but I'm enjoying it now.

– EMILY PRICE



GAMES



JUSTIN'S GAME CORNER

The LAST of US – Well, I finally saw what all of the fuss was about, roughly a decade late, of course. The first part, at least. Now for the second part . . .

BAYONETTA 3 – So much style, so much substance. Wonderful.

METROID DREAD – *Metroid Dread* is frustrating and over-designed with a poorly conceived control scheme. Maybe I need to git gud, but I dun wanna.

– JUSTIN REEVE

DORDOGNE – Despite the questionable, blackface-like art on one of the albums in the grandmother's bathroom in one scene (which is apparently related to *Un Je ne Sais Quoi*'s other game) and a worrying set up for a young Black thief character, this game has been lovely so far. I'm hoping the thief character doesn't turn out to be even more disappointing representation. But there are some wonderful raw moments of inter-generational commentary in this one.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE – Admittedly, it took a lot of word of mouth to convince me to pick up *Valhalla* and then a month or three to get past the opening scene of family destruction, which I found strangely off-putting. Once I got into the game, though, boy did it take over my brain. I played countless hours, yet never finished the DLC, and generally count it as my favorite in the series. I've heard zero word of mouth praise for *Mirage*. So maybe it's time to really knuckle down on *Ragnarok*?

– STU HORVATH

HOROSCOPE

THE CONSTELLATIONS WRAP YOU IN AN ASTRAL COCOON, DENSE, AT TIMES SMOTHERING AND ARCANE. DO NOT FEAR, FOR THIS IS ONLY THE INTERSTICES OF THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEXT - A SHIMMERING THRESHOLD WHICH WILL HELP YOU MAKE THE NECESSARY TRANSFORMATIONS BEFORE YOU CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY. 🍷