

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Dead Space 2*

*Developer: Europcom Visceral Games, Publisher: Electronic Arts  
(reviewed on XBOX 360)*

As any deep-space traveller knows, going into cold sleep/hibernation/sus-an/insert cliché here/ after a prolonged fight against aliens never ends well. Ripley found herself 57 years in the future fighting the same aliens she thought she'd blown out an airlock in the first film; in *Event Horizon* (Dir. Paul W.S. Anderson, 1997) Laurence Fishburne's character ended up trapped on a space ship with Sam Neill (The Horror!) that was being sucked into a black hole, and in *Dead Space 2*, Isaac Clark (the hero of the first game) awakens to discover that he has no memory of the last three years, he's on a space station called "The Sprawl" which is hollowed out of the Saturn moon, Titan, and said station is being quickly overrun with necromorphs.

Not the best way to wake up after a long sleep, but what are you going to do? In Isaac's case, grab a Plasma cutter and go slice up some reanimated mutant corpses.

The gamer takes control of Isaac as he tries to escape the Sprawl, only to become embroiled in a plot by the Unitologists (who seem vaguely similar to a certain new "religion" that has lots of celebrity members including one quite short one who likes impossible missions. Although as far as I'm aware they're not involved in a plot to become immortal by building an alien monolith and reanimating corpses, but you never know) to begin a new phase of human evolution by building a new Marker (a sacred artifact which had been the cause of all the trouble in the first game).

Running with the original game's previous mechanics, the gamer is embroiled in a survival horror in which resource management is combined with the need to slice off the limbs of enemies in order to kill them. Weapons are made up of various engineering tools, although new types are added to the fray, including a nifty Javelin and a mine layer that also comes in very handy.

Graphically DS 2 exceeds the first game, with new, even more gruesome, enemies. Character models are also improved with the added bonus of the player actually getting to see Isaac's face as he speaks to other survivors on Titan.

Also improved is the running of the game. In DS Isaac was shuttled from one repair job to the next as an excuse for fighting the Necromorphs. In DS 2 the plot flows much more naturally and feels more like a story being told than a bullet point presentation.

The horror elements in *Dead Space 2* are both obvious and subtle. The more obviously horrific, of course, involve the reanimated and mutated corpses of the dead. The attacks by necromorphs come from out of nowhere and with a large variety of bad guys, allowing for sudden changes in mood. For example, the Pack are a mass of small, humanoid enemies who swarm you. The multiple enemies require quick bursts of rapid fire to be killed down. Other enemies, such as "The Brute" requires sustained and heavy gun fire to take down. In this way, the player is kept constantly off guard and the player's selection of weapons can become a matter of life and death.

However, the real horror comes as the player realises the true nature of the necromorphs. It is easy to dismiss the larger monsters as just being your standard video game cannon fodder. However, some still retain human characteristics, with Slashers having a human face and The Pack obviously being children.

Indeed, at one point in the game (and please note, spoilers follow), Isaac finds himself in a school. Nothing attacks and it is eerily quiet, until he reaches the nursery. Watched through a window, a woman calls out to something out of sight and a necromorph crawls into her lap and explodes. It takes a little while but the realisation eventually sets in that the necromorphs have been through the nursery and reanimated the corpses of infants. It's particularly unsettling and, from a personal point of view, not the best moment to have your pregnant wife watching you play.

This is a shift from the more familiar fear of infection that permeates the Resident Evil games and the psychological warfare that Silent Hill plays on you. If anything, the Dead Space series is going all out for body horror, with the necromorphs' victims twisted into grotesque parodies of themselves and sent out to convert more to the Marker's malevolent cause. If Resident Evil is the Contagion (Dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2011) of the game world, then Dead Space is quickly filling the role of District 9 (Dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2009) or even Human Centipede (Dir. Tom Six, 2010) (without all the faeces).

The game also has additional gameplay elements - at one point it takes a slight break, in which, instead of running around trying not to get eaten, you have to steer a needle into your own cornea (in the game, not in real life – I can see the Daily Mail's headline already...) Gods help you if you push it too far...

Also of note is the multiplayer format for the game. You play either as part of a security detail (in groups of four), trying to stop the necromorphs or you play as the necromorphs. The security detail plays much like Isaac in the main game, but playing as a necromorph is where the fun is. You can play as one of four types of necromorph allowing you to slice, shot and vomit acid on those pesky humans as much as you want.

Dead Space 2 is an excellent sequel to the original game, adding to the background of the universe and new gameplay elements that mean it never feels stale to play. Added to this is the genuine horror of some of the plot; doing away with reliance on the cheap thrill of having something leap out from hiding to attack you and, instead, giving you the unsettling notion, that whilst it's still a videogame, the monster you just killed is the reanimated corpse of a child.

If you are a fan of the series, then this is definitely one to get. It carries on with the excellent gameplay of Dead Space and builds the mythos of the universe. Added to this is the ramping up of the terror and the unsettling feeling that permeates many of the best horror films -that the creature you just sliced into pieces could, just possibly, be you at some point.

### ***Eoin Murphy***

Dead Space 2

Graphics: 9

Gameplay: 9

Sound: 9

Replay Value: 9

Overall Score: 9

### ***F.E.A.R 3***

Developer: Day 1 Studios, Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment  
(reviewed on XBOX 360)

Okay, this one needs a recap...

In *F.E.A.R* you played as 'Point Man', part of the First Encounter Assault Recon team (you have to wonder how long it took the developers to come up with that one), sent in to stop Paxton Fettel, a soldier who, having being involved in secret government experiments (working with Armachem, your standard unscrupulous OCP style multinational Company) which psychically enhanced him to control an army of clones, has gone rogue and started to murder company executives and eat them. As you do.

Point Man successfully stops Paxton but discovers along the way (after being chased throughout the game by a scary little girl in a red dress) that he is not only Paxton's brother but is also the son of Alma, the little girl who in reality is a full grown woman who has been experimented on in order to create the perfect soldiers. These soldiers include Point Man and Paxton, who, it turns out, in best soap opera style, are her children. The game ends with Point Man killing Paxton, an explosion, and Alma continuing her quest for revenge.

In *F.E.A.R 2* (reviewed in Issue 6 of the Journal) you play as Michael Beckett, a Delta forces operative. Long story short, there's lots of shooting, things jumping out of the shadows, scary little girls who aren't really little girls and Beckett who Alma forces into having sex with her thereby getting her pregnant in time for the third game.

*F.E.A.R 3* (I'm exhausted now) takes the gamer back to Point Man, now languishing in a privately run prison, suffering visions of his dead brother Paxton. Point Man is rescued by his dead brother's ghost and escapes and upon discovering that not only is Alma pregnant but that the birth of her child will result in the creation of a new and devastating evil, sets off to kill her, leading to all kinds of shenanigans involving cultists, mercenaries, teleporting bad guys and some sort of a monster lizard thing that tries to eat you every so often.

*F.E.A.R 2* did not get a great review in this Journal. It relied heavily on pop up scares, was unrelentingly dark (not in atmosphere, you just couldn't see anything) and for this reviewer it was just a tad boring. *F.E.A.R 3* on the other hand, is a definite step up.

It is, admittedly, very light on the horror elements. Besides the odd glimpse of Alma and the occasional demon dog attack it's a standard First Person Shooter (FPS). However, it is an excellent FPS. The Artificial Intelligence of the various enemies is well executed. They flank you, recognise your tactics and try different methods to take you down, amounting to a tough and rewarding game that is becoming rarer in today's market, where you can pay over €50 for a game and have it competed in a day (I'm looking at you, *Call of Duty*...).

*F.E.A.R 3* will take you a lot longer than a day to complete and for a real challenge, putting it on the highest difficulty level will keep you occupied for a couple of weeks.

Graphically, the game is excellent, with good character models, varied locations (thankfully moving away from the offices you seemed to spend most of the previous two games in) and a multitude of enemy types just itching to gun you down.

Added to this is the extensive multi- and co-operative player modes. The main campaign can be played either as a single player or co-operative game, with gamers selecting either Point Man or Paxton as their character of choice. Which one you choose will drastically alter gameplay, with Point Man fulfilling the standard FPS role of running around shooting things. Paxton, on the other hand, is a disembodied spirit who specialises in sneaking and possessing the bodies of enemies (stay too long in a corpse however and it explodes in a bloody mess).

The life of the game is extended through its extensive multiplayer, which have a number of different modes including the standard Death match variation. *F.E.A.R 3* also has its own version of the *Gears of Wars Horde* mood, where you and any additional players are holed up in a building defending it from constant attack. The joyously named “Fucking Run” is another multiplayer mode, where not only are you under attack from enemies but also have to outrun a giant wall of psychic death as it rolls across the level and if it touches you, you die.

Whilst a good shooter, *F.E.A.R 3* is massively disappointing as a horror game. It is just not scary in any way and despite the developers’ best efforts those that are there appear more tagged on than anything else. This is even more disappointing when you consider that both Steve Niles, the artist for Graphic Novels such as *Thirty Days of Night* and the horror maestro John Carpenter were involved in developing the look and story of the game. Nowhere is this apparent. There are only two types of supernatural enemies in the entire game (demon dogs and the aforementioned monster lizard), which appear only occasionally and plot-wise there is nothing particularly groundbreaking or frightening going on here. Although, given Carpenter’s current form, perhaps this isn’t a surprise (*Ghosts of Mars* (2001)? *The Ward* (2010)? Really?).

*F.E.A.R 3* is an excellent first person game, unfortunately, it’s about as frightening as *Lego Star Wars*...

### ***Eoin Murphy***

*F.E.A.R 3*

Graphics: 8

Gameplay: 9

Sound: 9

Replay Value: 8

Overall Score: 8

***Roísín Dubh***

Publisher: Atomic Diner

Writer: Maura McHugh

Art: Stephen Daly

The first of our reviews of new Irish-created horror comics is *Roísín Dubh*. Set in 1899, the protagonist is Roísín Sheridan, a young woman with big dreams seeking to escape the bonds created by society and become something more than her station denotes; in this case, an actress.

The story opens on the road to Garvagh (in Derry) when an argument between Roísín and her parents over her future is rudely interrupted by the attack of a Neamh-Mharibh (in scientific speak an undead vampire type thing).

Rather than ruin the comic for you, I'll won't give away the plot details. Suffice to say, as with most publications to date from Atomic Diner, this is a good, solid comic. The writing is tight, with the characters introduced quickly and effectively, and without recourse to stereotypes. Indeed, a quick Google search reveals that Roísín's mother is a fan of esoteric philosophy (she's reading *Isis Unveiled*) and that her father is more worried about his daughter than their social standing (a nice reversal of the more common tendency in period-based popular fiction). In the limited space available it also manages to hint at a larger conspiracy, with a group of mysterious men releasing the Neamh-Maribh (Irish walking dead) from its prison.

The art also stands out. Excellent use of black and white results in dynamic storytelling, with the Neamh-Maribh suitably unpleasant and the atmospheric art setting the tone for the story.

It should also be noted that the cover art by Stephen Byrne is excellent and is something you would be happy to frame and put on the wall.

Whilst this is a review of only the first issue of *Roísín Dubh* (the only one available at the time of writing), the creative team behind the comic have done an excellent job of hooking the reader. Although it could be said that it is essentially a turn-of the century *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Roísín Dubh* does enough to distinguish itself from the hordes of young woman versus vampire tales that sprang up following the critical and cult success of everyone's favourite cheerleader (certainly not that indestructible one from *Heroes...*). The use of Celtic mythology within a comic's context is refreshing, with ancient druids, old Irish Gods and a talking brooch all helping make this a uniquely Hibernian page turner.

Indeed, *Roísín Dubh* strongly reminds me of some of the best stories in *2000 AD* (the art is reminiscent of *Nikolai Dante* and early *Sinister Dexter*, and the classic story of Celts that is *Slaine*) and it would not be out of place in the *Galaxy's Greatest Comic*. If you're a fan of horror comics – especially those with a home-grown twist- this is definitely be one to check out.

**Eoin Murphy**

### ***Zombies Hi***

Publisher: Uproar Comics

Writer: Danny McLaughlin

Pencils: Kevin Gio Logue

Ink: John Campbell

Further Stories by: Holly Stinson, Ursula Duddy, David Campbell, Darren McCay

Issues reviewed: 1 and 2

We're back in Derry again, this time in the city that has given rise to all manner of creation, from dodgy accents, Presidential candidates with murky pasts (both Provisional and Eurovisional) and more place names than Constantinople (or is it Istanbul?). The latest innovation from the Walled City is a new series of comics produced by the comics collective Uproar. *Zombies Hi* (its name playing up on the rather unique dialect of English spoken in the far north west of Ireland) is a monthly publication that tells the story of a zombie plague in their home city.

Told in a series of comic strips and short stories, *Zombies Hi* follows multiple characters (apart from one short strip in Issue One which involves Druids and Halloween) as they try to survive a epidemic of the undead, with the majority of survivors holed up behind the walls of the city, which is, after all, no stranger to sieges.

The art in *Zombie Hi* is not quite up to the quality of that in publications produced by the larger publishers, and nor perhaps should it be expected to be. Small press publications face a number of inevitable technical limitations and don't quite have the high-end computer technology that is used these days to generate mass produced comics. And let's face it, there's only one Alex Ross. Despite these limitations, however, the artwork is relatively good, clearly telling the story and making good use of varied panels.

The writing in the strips is also passable, with some interesting takes on the zombie plague trope, and isn't too reliant on the standard Northern Ireland stereotypes (although one of the main characters is, predictably, a Catholic PSNI officer with father issues). It should be noted, however, that dialogue in some places is clichéd and awkward. The Druid story in Issue One is definitely the weakest in both issues One and Two, and the colour art used here jars with the black and white in the comic.

Its depiction of Northern Ireland is an interesting one, and leads to some nice touches, such as a scene in which a group of politicians, who trying to figure out where to house the survivors, attempt to segregate them into different parts of the city based on their religion. Even a Zombie apocalypse still hasn't healed the old wounds, apparently.

Where *Zombies Hi* does fall down is in the short story sections of the publication. All the stories featured in the first two issues would have benefited greatly from a redraft and the hand of a skilled editor. In a number of places words are repeated in the same sentence, the plots are confused and the writing prone to jumping tenses.

All of these problems could be eliminated with proofreading and redrafting but it just does not seem to have been done and, ultimately, it detracts from the publication.

It is always good to see Irish comics being produced, and in the case of *Zombies Hi*, its intriguing to see the creators taking the standard zombie apocalypse trope and applying it to a local context. Whilst it's still early days in terms of the overall plot it will be interesting to see where it all goes.

However, *Zombies Hi* is certainly the weaker of the two Irish publications reviewed here, with the greater experience of the Atomic Diner team ultimately shining through in *Roísín Dubh*. *Zombies Hi* may evolve into a similarly solid comic but it will need a steady and experienced editor to deal with the prose and script problems that crop up here in order to do so.

**Eoin Murphy**