

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Cursed Mountain*

Developer: Sproing Interactive, Publisher: Deep Silver

Platform: Nintendo Wii

*Cursed Mountain* opens as the gamer's onscreen avatar is climbing a mountain in a blizzard. It's slow, torturous and at times you wonder if you're going to make it. You're vision is obscured by snow and another climber shouts encouragement. And then you get attacked by the evil ghost of a Buddhist monk. Which is surprising, as you don't normally think Buddhists of any sort as being evil, but what are you going to do? The opening is an excellent, atmospheric beginning to what is still one of the few horror games available on the Wii console.

For a long time the Wii has had the charge laid against it that is purely for the casual gamer. Games like *Rabbids Go Home* (which is enormous fun), *Mario Kart* and the innumerable kids games haven't helped endear the console to hardcore gamers or horror enthusiasts. *Cursed Mountain*, however, may be a sign of things to come.

The story proper begins with Eric Simmons searching for his brother Frank (who you controlled on his journey up the mountain) who has become lost somewhere on the Holy Mountain of Chomolonzo in Tibet, Eric arrives in a deserted mountain town, seeking out the man who financed the expedition. This is basically an introduction to the control and combat system, with the gamer slowly exploring the town streets and buildings.

All too soon you face your first ghost, a shadow that appears in front of you leading you on through the town until it suddenly attacks. Wielding an ice axe equipped with a handy mystical amulet you're able to defend yourself, banishing the spirit from the real world. Soon after you learn mystical prayers that can be used to banish the ghosts without resorting to hacking at them with an axe. These prayers, which I'll discuss later, are simple (sort of) gestures made using the remote and the nunchuck.

Graphically, *Cursed Mountain* is a good advance on similar Wii games such as *Overlord* and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Empire*. The backdrops are well designed, with few, if any, glitches. Character models move naturally, responding quickly to commands and it is a good sign for the future of the console that relatively realistic graphics can be used on the Wii. Whilst not exactly Playstation 3 level, they're functional and work well. The in game sound is also quite good, with the scream of a ghost attack echoing not just from the television but from the small built in speaker in the remote.

Unfortunately, there are several problems with *Cursed Mountain*. The story is developed by cut scenes which take place both within levels and in bridging the transition to the next stage. However, rather than use CGI, *Cursed Mountain* instead uses still images, drawing the attention of the gamer away from the action. This creates a significant barrier in keeping the gamer's attention. The breaks slow down and almost stop the action and this is further exacerbated by the dry storytelling. To be honest I had no real interest in rescuing Eric's brother and after reading several of his diary entries scattered throughout the

game I found myself feeling rather glad that he was still lost up on the mountain and not on ground level annoying me.

In terms of the control system, Sproing Interactive does everything it can to avoid utilising the traditional gamepad controller. Movement is controlled with the nunchuck and targeting via the remote. Unfortunately it tries to do too much, especially when you are under attack from multiple ghosts. The combination of axe and prayer attacks soon becomes awkward, with any attempt at a coherent strategy lost in mad flailing around. The camera doesn't help either, occasionally getting stuck in walls or focusing on the back of Eric's head when it would be better served fixing on the ghost currently trying to rip your face off. This results in unnecessary damage being taken as a ghost you either forgot about or hadn't seen lays into you from behind.

The prayers used to banish ghosts, whilst a good idea, is an attempt to make further use of the motion controls unique to the Wii. However, these prayers become more and more complicated as you gain more of them and whilst onscreen instructions are a constant source of help, you will still find yourself gesturing madly in the air and just hoping for the best.

Adding this to the previous camera problems and you'll soon find yourself becoming frustrated with the game.

Later in the game you begin to face boss battles and these are surprisingly difficult, especially after the relatively easy time you have getting to these sections. You'll find yourself trying to solve puzzles whilst fighting giant bat winged demons at the same time as trying to avoid the spirits of dead monks. Suffice to say you will die, and often.

As I played the game, I found myself reminded of games developed in the eighties and nineties for the Sega and Nintendo Consoles, where the difficulty level was excessively high in order to make the game last longer. Puzzles appear that serve no real purpose other than to extend the gameplay, end of level bosses are inordinately difficult to beat and it is filled with diary entries, mountain climb logs and ancient scrolls to keep you occupied.

*Cursed Mountain* is a good attempt at a horror game for the Wii, using the motion controls relatively effectively. The graphics throughout are of good quality for a console like the Wii, and although not of the same quality as a Playstation 3, it shows what can be done with the Wii in the hands of a skilled developer. If only some more time had been spend on refining the combat system, and developing an engaging plot this could have been the first truly excellent horror game on the console.

This is a game to try, but not to buy.

***Eoin Murphy***

*Cursed Mountain*

Graphics: 7

Sound: 7

Gameplay: 6

Replay Value: 3

Overall Score: 6

***Batman: Arkham Asylum***

Developer: Rocksteady Studios, Publisher: Eidos Interactive

Platform: Xbox 360

The Dark Knight has returned, and finally to a game worthy of his name. Batman has been linked to a number of sub-par videogames in the past, many of them rushed through development to coincide with the release of the films. However, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* truly feels like an independent story, a compliment rather than a mere accompaniment to the lore laid down by the graphic novels and movies.

The premise of the game is simple, but effective. The Joker has broken loose from his imprisonment in Arkham Asylum, releasing a rogues' gallery of Batman's previous super-villain foes, who must all in turn be confronted and defeated before the Clown Prince of Crime turns the prison island into his very own funfair kingdom. While it might seem little more than a convenient excuse for a fan-pleasing who's who, each villain leaves their mark upon the storytelling and gameplay: Batman's encounters with Bane and Killer Croc lead to straightforward combat, whereas the taunts and teases of the Joker or the Riddler are more puzzle-based affairs. Combat is smooth and the auto-targeting system ensures you always hit the intended thug amongst the crowd.

Batman's attacks, mapped to three separate buttons on the controller, are categorised as three main types: offensive, counter and stun. These can be used to stylistically deflect enemy attacks or disarm them of dangerous weapons such as knives or stun rods. Also, Batman can, in a suitably bat-like fashion, tackle enemies in a variety of stealthy ways. Whether it's descending from the roof using the grapnel gun, throwing batarangs round corners or sneaking up behind enemies and disabling them in a single takedown, as the player you really feel compelled to explore and utilize the dark surroundings of Arkham Asylum to your advantage. These extra combat options really bring the environment to life, making it seem like a believable prison island that reacts intelligently to how you play, rather than simply forcing you down a linear path from point A to B. With hidden collectibles scattered throughout the asylum, including interview tapes, some of which are genuinely disturbing to listen to, trophies and biographies which reveal the finer details of The Dark Knight's most infamous adversaries, the compulsion to explore every nook and cranny is given weight and reward.

Some of the game play sections are particularly effective in evoking the gothic origins of the Batman character. Batman's movements are particularly esoteric. In one particularly memorable sequence, Batman suffers the fear-effects of Scarecrow's mind-altering drug, where the game's environment is warped to reflect the pitfalls of the Caped Crusader's subconscious. Although this eventually leads to some fairly rudimentary *Prince of Persia* style platform-hopping, other ways in which this interiority of mind is rendered, such as leaving the prison's morgue by the door only to find yourself back inside it, or revisiting the alley scene where Batman's parents were killed (with the costumed Batman suddenly appearing as a young Bruce Wayne), are subtly unsettling. As is the case in all mediums through which the Gothic is manifested, interior anxiety is rendered through surface appearance, a series of returns and re-visitations; in this case through the spectacle of fear in sight and sound. Indeed, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* plays on the relationship between Batman and his surroundings. Just as the asylum displays his sense of duty, acting as post-modern museum, stage and re-staging site for his own vigilante justice, so to does it manifest his own doubts about his separation from those he put behind bars. Developing the themes of the graphic novels, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* explores the ever-shortening gap of difference in

the modern Gothic between crusader and criminal, justice and injustice, Jekyll and Hyde. Much like in the graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, the Joker emphasises the similarities between Batman and himself; how, much like Jekyll and Hyde, one requires the other for existence, and one feeds off the other. In *Returns*, the Joker remains in a coma until Batman comes out of retirement, inactive and unneeded without an opposite. In *Arkham Asylum*, the division between the two, between chaos and order, good and evil, becomes blurred through the power of the penal and psychiatric institution: psychology and technology. This theme of the game is based partly on the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, where the actions of the institution's directors become themselves criminal, provoked by trauma and made possible by technology. For example, the Asylum's founder, Amadeus Arkham, purposefully kills by electric chair the serial killer, "Mad Dog" Hawkins, as an act of revenge for murdering and raping his wife and daughter. Other doctors working in the asylum, including Harleen Quinzel and Jonathan Crane are eventually admitted as patients.

In the game, after the Joker takes over the asylum, he uses its surveillance system to observe and analyse Batman's movements. Appearing intermittently on the television screens dotted throughout, he taunts Batman and takes the position of authority as the psychologist, subverting the culturally high value placed in its usefulness to heal the fractured patient subject. While this replacement shows the total interchangability between interrogator and interrogated, it further demonstrates that the panoptical power of the prison lies not in stable morality, but merely in the shifting use and abuse of its technology. His words through the speakers are well chosen: "Why, it's all the same, isn't it, Bats? You and I, this and that? You're just as mad as the rest of us! Why don't you let me take a look inside YOUR mind?" Here, the Joker perfectly encapsulates the Modern Gothic concerns of the world that surrounds the madman or serial killer: where the now-complete breakdown of the social class system, its dependence upon new media to classify the criminal, and the universality of technical expertise and education afford an escapee like the Joker more power than would be possible in any other era. As in Alan Moore's graphic novel, *The Killing Joke*, the Joker is able to manipulate our trust in new media and its network of meanings which construct society's relationship with the criminal. In *The Killing Joke*, the Joker attempts to convince the police that he is sane, tortured by Batman's own convictions to the contrary, a product of the Caped Crusader's own mad belief. In *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker subverts the techniques of psychology to prove how hollow they are, highlighting the middle class anxiety that therapy doesn't work. "What do you see?" a psychotherapist asks Joker when showing him a Rorschach card. "A dead elephant," he replies, sarcastically.

Architecturally, the environment of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* adds to the cerebral elements of the game considerably. The Asylum itself is a mixture of Victorian Gothic and twentieth century Eastern European Expressionism. The latter emphasises the psychological history of Freud and Jung, and the artistic acceptance by America of the films of Fritz Lang, Robert Wiene and F.W Murnau. The game's twisted camera angles and long, stark shadows are reminiscent of this movement that forms a major part of the origins of Modern Gothic, and the game recreates them lovingly in order to reflect Batman's own dubious morality and sanity throughout the story.

Rendered in Epic's latest Unreal 3 Engine, *Arkham Asylum* is beautiful, atmospheric and always smooth to the eye, even when the action gets busy as Batman fights up to ten henchmen simultaneously. It's a coherent island that, even once the main story has been completed, remains open to exploration. With the game's extra challenges, unlockable trophies, biographies and back stories to draw you in and seek out, this is a game that ensures you won't be escaping from the asylum any time soon.

***Stuart Lindsay***

*Batman: Arkham Asylum*

Graphics: 8

Sound: 8

Gameplay: 8

Replay Value: 8

Average: 8

***Blood and Water***

(DC Comics Vertigo)

Writer: Judd Winick, Artist: Tomm Coker

It seems everywhere you turn these days the average horror fan is assaulted by the monstrosity that is paranormal romance. You can't walk into a bookshop without seeing it with its own dedicated section, edging out traditional horror and replacing blood sucking monsters with sexy and misunderstood immortal teens.

Unfortunately, all hope is lost for those of us who prefer our undead to be soaked in the blood of the sexy and misunderstood teens. *Blood and Water* is the latest piece of writing to revel in the trials and tribulations of young vampiric love, albeit with a slightly gorier approach, in what is a collected reprint of Judd Winick's 2008/09 Vertigo comic series.

The story follows Adam Heller, once the former cool kid of his high school who, despite having Hepatitis B, was guaranteed to be a bright young star. Now, at the age of 23 Adam is dying, having contracted Hepatitis A from a bad burger. He is retaining water in his torso, spends an hour of every morning vomiting and has just gotten word he has a tumor on his liver and won't survive the year.

All in all, it's been a bad couple of years.

In steps Adam's best friend Joshua and Nicole, who explain to him that they are vampires and that they would like to turn him into one in order to save his life.

Now, when I first picked up this book, I thought it could be an interesting read, having at its core a terrible dilemma, in which a young man facing an early, painful death is given the chance to embrace an eternity of killing others so that he can survive. It's a moral and ethical conundrum which forces the reader to consider whether they themselves would kill in order to survive. Adam is initially disbelieving, confused and tempted by the offer, debating with himself and his vampiric friends about whether or not it is right to do this. That is, of course, until his vampire friends explain that they don't need to eat humans, indeed, they can survive quite well on the blood of animals.

Reading between the lines, it seems likely that Winick introduces this spin on the vampire tale in order to do away with the inevitable plot strands linked to all the angst that comes with being a vampire (amply covered in Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* Series). Winick's vampires drink animal blood, go out in the daylight (wearing suntan lotion of course) and get to have all the fun of undeath without having to worry about hurting any humans.

Of course, if they want to drink human blood they can. But it comes with terrible side effects - Human blood is massively addictive to vampires, and whilst it gives them enhanced strength (even for a vampire) it eventually leads to insanity and being hunted down and killed by other nosfreatu for giving the cuddly vampires a bad name.

Winick's take on the vampire mythos ultimately therefore takes a meandering path down the road of damnation to paranormal romance. By taking away the need for human blood from his characters Winick has removed a plot point that has been the bane of all vampires since long before Buffy took her first steps, the angst ridden moment when they try to resist the red thirst until a final bloody baptism. Then some more angst about having eaten your girlfriend/best friend/math teacher/high school bully.

Yes, this theme has been done to (un)death, especially when written in the clichéd manner that infects most, if not all paranormal romance. However, by removing it Winick has also lost something that could have made *Blood and Water* stand out amongst other similar pieces of writing as the crux of this collection is around the effect the change has on Adam's life. Adding a bit of bloodletting amongst the hedonism could have added a darker edge to the story and made it a more captivating read.

Rather than have to choose between his or someone else's life, the protagonist of *Blood and Water* discovers that becoming a vampire means being one of beautiful people, enjoying hedonistic nights, and no one had to get hurt in the process. This lack of payback for being undead is in truth rather annoying, making the story a pretty superficial read.

Later in the narrative, presumably to add a bit of tension and conflict to the plot (please note this is where the spoilers kick in) Winick has added an ancient tribe of vampires that not only fed on humans but also on other vampires. These creatures bred with humans (in between eating them apparently) with their children only turning vampiric once they drink blood. The Tribe, as it was known, was hunted to extinction by the other vampires who didn't want their kind to eat humans (kind of like a vampiric RSPCA) although rumour persists that some went into hiding.

It, of course, turns out that Adam is, by a remarkable coincidence, a descendent of these evil vampires and now they've returned in order to get him to reawaken the rest of their race. So begins a vampire versus Super vampire battle. Fair, enough you think, this should liven the story up a bit. It doesn't and seems far too much like the end of *Blade* and several episodes of *Buffy*.

The sheer number of coincidences attached to this story soon becomes too much to sustain in such a short collection. For example: boy gets hepatitis, eats a bad burger, gets worse hepatitis, gets turned into a pointy toothed member of the cast of *90210*, fancies his dead vampire friend's girlfriend, turns out to be the last descendent of an ancient evil clan of cannibalistic vampires, defeats supervamps, discovers dead friends girlfriend fancies him back...

6 issues. Too many coincidences.

The artwork within the comic series is good, with the story easy to follow and suffering from none of the confusion that the more stylistic *30 Days of Night* endured. Like the writing, it serves its purpose in delivering the story but adds nothing new or different to the vampire mythos. Of note are the covers of each issue which have been included in the collection. Drawn by the legendary Brian Bolland (*2000AD*, *Superman*, etc), they are the one thing about this series that stands out.

*Blood and Water* tries, desperately, to create a group dynamic similar to that which was used in Grant Morrison's classic *Preacher* series. Unfortunately it fails miserably, lacking the believable friendship and

witty dialogue that existed between Jessie and his friends. The story is further hampered by awkward dialogue that creates an immediate barrier between the reader and the characters.

Having read the comic book you'll find yourself dismissing it as nothing more than another superficial vampire story that adds little to the genre. It has no atmosphere attached to it and when it's revealed that Adam lied about how he contracted Hepatitis, and actually got it from shooting up Heroin with dirty needles, you'll find yourself wishing you had some yourself in order to liven up this drab piece of writing.

*Blood and Water* leans far more heavily towards Paranormal Romance than towards horror. This needn't necessarily have been a bad thing if the writer had tried something new with an increasingly oversaturated genre (as Charlaine Harris did with the *Sookie Stackhouse* series) Unfortunately with such poor writing and plotting, vampires that aren't really vampires (even the ones in the *Twilight* series eat the occasional human...) and uninteresting stories, *Blood and Water* was one comic series I just couldn't get my teeth into.\*

\*The Journal Editors would like to take this opportunity to apologise for the bad pun with which this review concluded.

***Eoin Murphy***