

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### ***Batman: Arkham Reborn***

Writer: David Hine , Artist: Jeremy Haun  
(Publisher: DC Comics, 2010)

Gotham City is a fitting home for its guardian – Batman lurks in the recesses of its distinctive architecture, camouflaging himself among the gargoyles and grotesques. Gotham’s cityscape is one of the most developed of all fictional locations: for the series *No Man’s Land* (1999) a detailed map of the city was produced, its rivers, bridges and streets named after DC Comics’ most beloved artists and writers. Undoubtedly, one of the most famous buildings in Gotham is Arkham Asylum – or, to give it its full name, ‘The Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane’ – a location introduced to the comics in 1974 to serve as a holding pen for Batman’s rogues gallery.

*Arkham Reborn* is the latest story arc to develop the asylum’s mythos. It begins with the director, Jeremiah Arkham, picking his way through the ruins of the asylum (which was destroyed by the crime lord Black Mask during the events of a previous storyline). Stopping before one particular cell, Jeremiah recalls its former occupant, Humphrey Dumpler (AKA ‘Humpty Dumpty’), a man compelled to take things apart and put them back together – inevitably with disastrous consequences. ‘Poor Humphry,’ he muses. ‘Obsessed, like me, with repairing what was broken.’

This beginning recalls both Dan Slott and Ryan Sook’s *Arkham Asylum: Living Hell* (2003), the work in which Humpty Dumpty was introduced, and the seminal Arkham text, Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989), wherein one doctor tells Batman: ‘sometimes you have to break down to rebuild, psychiatry’s like that’. *A Serious House* introduced the concept of Arkham and its inhabitants as a mirror of the protagonist’s psyche – here Jeremiah replaces Batman as the subject reflected, and the story follows his attempt to rebuild his own life and professional reputation along with the asylum, only for both projects to falter and fail.

Jeremiah Arkham (nephew of the asylum’s founder Amadeus Arkham, who built the facility in memory of his murdered wife and was eventually doomed to become a patient within it) is here fleshed out, having appeared in previous works only as a weak mollycoddler of patients, suffering from the delusion that his efforts can ‘cure’ violent sociopaths such as the Joker. Our perceptions of Jeremiah as foolish and ineffective will be proved false by the story’s shocking denouement, and even reflected back upon us: ‘foolish, gullible reader, I confess... I have lied to you.’

Other established characters given an outing include Victor Zsasz, the serial killer whose body is covered in tally-marks, one for each victim. Zsasz promises Jeremiah he is keeping ‘a special place’ for him, on the inside of his eyelid, ‘so every time I blink I’ll be reminded of what an irritating little man you were’. Another prominent villain to feature is Killer Croc, who is, well... a giant reptile with a taste for human flesh. Head of security Aaron Cash is missing an arm from one of Croc’s break-outs. They taunt each other through bullet-proof glass, Cash gleefully telling his ward that for thanksgiving dinner he ate crocodile: ‘it tasted like chicken with a hint of fish’.

New to *Arkham Reborn* are the characters Alys Sinner, and the trio Jeremiah refers to as ‘the Beauties’. Alys, who becomes Jeremiah’s second in command, is the only survivor of the ‘Lux Beata’ cult, of which her parents were the self-appointed prophets (but who did poison that Kool Aid?). The distinctive red

ribbons which twine around sections of her hair are revealed early on in the story to be printed with the names of the seven deadly sins – and each time she unravels one she acts accordingly. ‘The Beauties’ are three special patients who Jeremiah keeps sequestered. ‘No-Face’ is the victim of a horrifying childhood accident which left him with no discernible facial features – he can only show his emotions by painting them on. ‘Narcissus’ is a nameless enigma of a man obsessed with his own reflection. Like Narcissus’ pining lover Echo, he can only speak by faintly repeating what has just been said to him. Last is ‘the Hamburger Lady’, a woman whose appearance is so grotesque it is said that all who look upon her go mad.

Needless to say, the recurring motifs here are faces and masks. Masks (of both the literal and Freudian kinds) can be found everywhere in the story – Jeremiah’s rebuilt Arkham is a mix of gothic and classical architecture, and the new doorway is a huge yawning mask of Greek tragedy which seems to swallow up those who enter, signifying that the interior is a place in which all characters are transformed into their primal archetypes.

While *Arkham Reborn* is largely a mystery story, enriched with much psychoanalytic meditation, it does not stint on the horror content. Beneath the cleanliness and order of the rebuilt asylum lies a hidden second building – a nightmare landscape created to torture the wayward inmates. One such unfortunate is Benjamin Wiley, AKA ‘the Raggedy Man’, a child-killer who wears a cloak fashioned out of the blankets of his victims and decorated with their toys. Wiley finds himself in a recreated version of his own childhood basement prison, and the only escape is death – by means of seppuku administered with a can-opener. In many ways Hine is the ideal writer for an Arkham story: a previous major work was the black and white horror miniseries *Strange Embrace* (1993) which dealt with psychosexual trauma, body horror, madness, death, and congenital syphilis. Although his current work is a slim volume, it delivers value in terms of having an engaging and well-plotted storyline with a satisfying twist – and plenty of nasty little details.

DC’s recent output has suffered from spotty artwork, with titles often being shunted between artists of varying ability. *Arkham Reborn* benefits from being the product of a single, highly accomplished artist: Haun’s work is clean, consistent and modern without being too stylized, the panels both interesting to look at and clear to read. He shifts easily between distance views of multiple figures, action frames and detailed close-ups of faces. Particularly worthy of admiration is his depiction of female characters: Alys Sinner is not one of the pouting, improbably-chested, tiny-waisted *femmes* still ubiquitous in superhero comics. She has a slender, androgynous frame and a prominent nose – a quirky, individual kind of beauty.

*Arkham Reborn* is suitable for both avid readers of Batman comics and newcomers. Those familiar with the workings of continuity will know that it takes place during Bruce Wayne’s lost year, and the ‘Batman’ featured is actually his *protégé* Dick Grayson (the first Robin), but the story has been carefully constructed in such a way as to render this information unnecessary.

**Kate Roddy**

### ***Dead Space: Extraction***

Developer: Europcom Visceral Games, Publisher: Electronic Arts

Platform: Wii (reviewed on)

Space, as it has been pointed out on more than one occasion in various films, books and games, is a dangerous place. Nowhere, however is more dangerous than Aegis VII, the setting for the Wii prequel to 2008's hit horror game *Dead Space*.

*Dead Space Extraction (DSE)* takes place a few days before the events of *Dead Space*. You begin the game as Sam Caldwell, an Engineer working on the extraction (you see what they did there?) of the Marker, a mysterious alien device found on the surface of the planet (at some point a mysterious artefact won't turn out to be a harbinger of doom or the control device for the birth of a new solar system. It will be an alien portaloo.)

Following the open chapter, the player moves to another character perspective, that of Nathan McNeill, a Detective for the colony's police force. You then play as McNeill, as the colony slowly becomes over run with necromorphs, with only a rivet gun and your wits to protect you, as you team up with three other survivors and try to fight your way off the world and to the dubious safety of the *Ishimura* (the mining ship which was the location for the first game) above.

*DSE* carries on with the dismemberment fun that ran throughout the original game. The only way to stop the vile monsters that overrun the colony is shoot off their limbs using whatever weapons you can find, which usually amounts to various engineering tools. This adds a degree (although not massively) of strategy, with it being essential for the player to shoot off enemy limbs as shots to the body will be absorbed (they are dead after all...).

The Nintendo Wii has a number of on rail shooters ("on rails" games are played from a first person perspective, with the game dictating where the gamer goes, hence "on rails") from *House of the Dead* (meh) to *Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles* (good). However, none of them have quite the same level of interactivity that is available through *DSE*.

In most games of this type, the game is relatively static. The gamer is assaulted by a multitude of enemies, defeats them, then the camera shifts to a new location where they attacked all over again. *DSE* follows a similar methodology but where it is different is that it has puzzle solving, route selection and ongoing conversations between the gamer's character and the Non Playable Characters (NPCs). For example, following a burst of frenzied attacks from Necromorphs, the player is trapped in a network of tunnels beneath the colony. The three NPC characters and the player character begin to argue about which route to take with the decision finally left to the gamer.

Importantly, all the dialogue is well written and voice acted, and this level of storytelling adding to the game's appeal; turning it from something where you play maniacally for four hours and then never touch again into a compelling interactive narrative that draws you in and encourages you to genuinely care for the characters concerned. In terms of graphics *DSE* is excellent. It makes maximum use of the power available to the Wii and the character and enemy models; whilst not up to PS3 or XBOX 360 level, Wii still standouts as amongst the best on the console.

The game makes great use of the Wii control, so rather than the norm for this kind of game, which involves pointing the Wiimote at the screen and pulling the trigger, *DSE* uses the Nunchuck as well, which can be used during some sections of the game to turn the player's head, use different weapons and attack enemies with a melee weapon.

The sound and music for the game again is of high quality, with juddering creaks, screams and all manner of creepy music adding depth to the game. This is further helped by the small speakers built into the Wiimote, so during the moments when the player starts to descend into madness, voices can be heard whispering from the controller (at least I hope they're coming from the controller, otherwise I need to be kept away from the cutlery).

*DSE* is a perfect example of just what the Wii is capable of. A hardcore game, using excellent storytelling, pace, sound, music and graphics to create a great horror experience. Published in September 2009, the game, strangely, did not do brilliantly in sales, so for those of you have a Wii and have gotten tired of Mario and his mushroom antics, or for who Lego Harry Potter just isn't wizard, try *Dead Space Extraction* and let the dismemberment begin!

***Eoin Murphy***

*Dead Space Extraction*

Graphics: 9

Gameplay: 9

Sound: 9

Replay Value: 7

Overall Score: 8.5

***The Strange Adventures of HP Lovecraft***

Writer: Mac Carter

Pencils and Inks: Tony Salmons

Producer, Cover Art and Colours: Adam Byrne

Flats: Keaton Kohl

(Publisher: Image Comics, June 2010)

The HP Lovecraft: explorer of the unknown, writer of dark mysteries, and slightly mad racist. And now, apparently, the only thing that stands between humanity and the rise of evil ancient gods (even though they're not Gods, they're actually all-powerful alien entities, but you all knew that, didn't you?).

*The Strange Adventures of HP Lovecraft* (SAHL) tells the tale of a young HPL living in Providence, Rhode Island. He's a struggling writer, selling his weird tales to publishers (who, then, as now, prefer vampires to fish men), living with two elderly aunts and occasionally visiting his mother in the insane asylum. So, really, he's not that much different from the rest of us...

Coupled with the love of his life rejecting him for an aristocrat (and you would think that this fictionalised version of HPL's life was complicated enough for anyone), the chance sighting of a certain ancient book tucked away in a library exhibition (10 points if you can guess which book it is) awakens ancient intelligences that stare with malevolent avarice through the dimensional barriers that separate their realm from Earth.

And so begins the collapse of HPL's life. Rejected by his sweetheart, librarian Sylvia St. Claire and mugged by dock workers, HPL begins to dream horrible events only for them to begin to come true when HPL's muggers turn up eviscerated...

The inclusion of HPL's night terrors follows closely the man's real life; HP having suffered from nightmares for much of his life. Indeed, he used these terrifying dreams as source material for some of his work ("The Night Gaunts").

The mysterious murders are linked to him; and, with ancient evils, a jealous boyfriend, an overly helpful psychiatrist (aren't they all) and the police all after him, HPL must solve the mystery of the book and not only save his soul but the world itself.

When I first picked up this collected volume I was a little dubious. HPL as a lead character initially struck me as a bit odd, but the conceit is surprisingly well executed by Carter. HPL is a flawed but interesting character, with just enough back-story about his family life fed to the reader to increase interest and not come across as an info dump. The supporting characters, such as HPL's aunts and his sanatorium-based mother (who knows far more than she lets on, naturally), all help flesh out the story and add to character believability and motivations.

The story itself will be familiar to the more gothically-inclined reader, encapsulating as it does many of the classic elements of (unsurprisingly) Lovecraftian horror but at no point does this come across as stale or hackneyed. The artwork helps carry the story along, with Salmons and Byrne effectively conveying 1920s Rhode Island and its inhabitants, complementing the story rather than superseding it (think *30 Days of Night*). When the creatures that lurk beyond the dimensional gate make an appearance they are well

enough illustrated to almost repel the reader (just imagine far more mouths, eyes and limbs than are necessary and you're on the right path).

*The Strange Adventures of HP Lovecraft* draws inspiration from many of the true events of HPL's life. Prior to her death in 1921 his mother, Sarah Phillips Lovecraft was indeed committed to Butler Hospital (a psychiatric hospital to this day), the same sanatorium in which HPL's father died (as a result of syphilis induced insanity. Ah, for simpler times...).

The story does however gloss over the true nature of the trans-dimensional interlopers; with the squiggly-tentacled ones being discussed here as dark gods, rather than as aliens (which is, of course, their true nature). HPL himself was a renowned atheist, with his creations hiding behind the mantle of godhood to fool the simple masses of Earth. Whilst this is not explored in *SAHL*, it is an ongoing story, so this may be delved into in further issues, and, in truth, it is not overly important to the story anyway.

The story builds slowly, introducing HPL and the people and places that form his life, with the gradual build up highlighting the collapse of his safe existence into a series of desperate chases, tragic misunderstandings and teeth turning to maggots (one of the more unpleasant parts of the story...).

*The Strange Adventures of HP Lovecraft* is a fairly good, solid comic and whilst it won't have you huddled under the bed clothes as you read it, it is something I would recommend. This first volume helps establish the character of HPL (although without all the racism...) and finishes with the promise of further tentacled-horror to come. Oh, and by the way...Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!

***Eoin Murphy***

### *Metro 2033*

Developer: 4A Games, Publisher: THQ  
Platform: XBOX 360 (reviewed on), PC

Moscow is not somewhere I would normally think of going on holiday. I can't quite explain why, other than that decades of Cold War propaganda must have warped my opinion of this great city. In the post apocalyptic world of *Metro 2033*, however, Moscow is definitely off the list. The city, and the rest of the world, has been devastated by nuclear war and the few survivors cling on to survival in the Moscow Metro system (with parts of the system reinforced during the Cold War to act as shelters in case of Nuclear War).

Set twenty years after the nuclear Armageddon, the various metro stations of the underground have formed their own little puddles of civilisation, alternating between vague democracies and neo-Nazi playgrounds.

Playing as Artyom, you have spent your entire life in the same metro station, raised by your uncle in the relative safety of Exhibition Station. With the arrival of a Ranger called Hunter, however, you discover that a new threat has emerged in the Underground, alongside the various bandits and mutants, which roam the tunnels. The Dark Ones are a new stage in evolution and have already wiped out other station communities. Tasked with travelling with Hunter to warn the Polis Station and its army of Rangers about this new threat, Artyom must travel through hostile tunnels and stations to save the only home he has ever known.

*Metro 2033* is based on the novel of the same name by author Dmitry Glukhovsky and follows the original story closely. Glukhovsky's novel was well received both in Russia and in Europe (with 4A Games based in Ukraine) and much of it is conveyed in the game. The stations are hubs of life in the darkness of the tunnels and the various enemies in the game are no pushovers. Mutants of various shapes and sizes, from giant rat things to giant cat things, roam the tunnels and the surface and can be an absolute nightmare to bring down, making quick attacks and dashing away before you can react.

The game makes use of ammunition as currency and it is always in short supply. Throughout the game you're faced with hoarding good quality bullets to upgrade your weapons or giving into temptation and using it to clear a tunnel of mutant enemies quickly and efficiently.

The game has a number of standout dynamics. Unlike similar post apocalyptic games, *Metro 2033* goes all out for realism. As with most nuclear apocalypses, radiation is a major problem. However, in *Metro 2033* it has a major effect on gameplay, with one of the first items you acquire being a gas mask to help protect you from radiation. The masks need regular filter changes, with a small meter and some other visual cues to let you know when you need to change it (your breathing becomes laboured and vision greys out). Too much exposure and its game over.

There is also a good variety of weapons but it is with this that some of the niggles that often afflict this type of game become apparent. You can only carry three firearms at any one time, with one from each type of weapon. So you can carry a handgun, a larger gun such as a submachine gun, and your specialist weapon, such as a gas powered rifle or a multi-barrelled shotgun. This in itself is fine and is a mechanic that is used in a number of highly successful games. However, here it doesn't really make much difference. At one point I found myself dithering over which type of submachine gun to pick up. Both

looked about the same, had similar names and yet I had no way to tell which was better, which is a serious issue in a game where resource management is all important.

Graphically, *Metro 2033* is good. It's not *Halo* or *Enslaved* but it does the job to ensure you spend most of your playing time staring into the darkness and hoping nothing leaps out and tries to rip off your face. Character models are good and it aids the storytelling well, with in-game graphics used throughout.

It should be noted though that this is not an easy game. Unlike others in the genre that rely on slowly drawing you in, with easy enemies attacking you as it works up to the real nasty stuff (think *Resident Evil* moving from zombies to lickers and finally bringing you face to face with Nemesis), *Metro 2033* drops you right in it, with even human enemies needing multiple shots to bring them down. Mutants and tougher enemies soak up ammunition, making it a real problem when you want to upgrade weapons or ammunition and I found myself spending most of my time searching dark corners and wondering through stations scrabbling for ammo.

Whilst this adds to the realism of the world, it really breaks up the gameplay and leaves the player (certainly this one anyway) frustrated and irritable.

To sum up then, *Metro 2033* is (and I'm aware this is less than eloquent as a critical judgement, but it's accurate) ok. It's not the best game I've ever played, nor is it the worst and it does have a good sense of atmosphere throughout. However, the high difficulty level, tough resource management and sheer speed of enemies makes the game less accessible than other, similar shooters.

If you're after a post apocalyptic, scare-heavy and challenging shooter then *Metro 2033* may be the game for you, but if you prefer the likes of *Halo*, this station shouldn't be your final destination...

### ***Eoin Murphy***

*Metro 2033*

Graphics: 7

Gameplay: 7

Sound: 8

Replay Value: 6

Overall Score: 7