MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

Simon Dark: What Simon Does
(DC Comics, 2008)
Written by Steve Niles and Drawn by Scott Hampton

A word to the wise: If your satanic cult of choice is going to conduct a sacrifice in public it might be an idea to check for anti-heroes with identity issues. At least that's the lesson to be gleaned form the opening pages of *Simon Dark*, the new on-going series from *30 Days of Night* creator Steve Niles and artist Scott Hampton. The title's trade paperback, *What Simon Does*, collects the first six issues and does a reasonable, if somewhat muddled, job at setting up the protagonists and the desolate urban landscape they are forced to call home.

The first thing that jumps out at the reader of *Simon Dark* has nothing to do with the make-up of the story, however, but the choice of imprint. Convention dictating that stories with a darker bent go under their Vertigo umbrella, to see a DC badge on the front cover is an important statement of intent. Unlike Niles' aforementioned gorefest (published by the independent IDW) this book comes with a stamp of reliability, implying the contents will amuse, entertain, occasionally shock and, if things don't work out, some special friends might just make a cameo to keep your interest.

This brings us to a second point of interest, the familiar setting for Simon's story. Not only do we get a world pre-packaged with a reserve cast, we also have another mainstay of the DC universe to play with: Gotham City.

Proof that there is room in town for more than one masked crusader, Simon's neighbourhood is physically and metaphorically miles from the high-rises and low-lifes Bruce Wayne would be used to. If Batman's turf could be described as Manhattan then Simon's is definitely Fort Apache – full of low buildings, blue collar Joes and shoegazing commuters.

From the first pages we are introduced to a murderous, nameless secret society whose rites are interrupted by Simon. When a grateful survivor asks the befuddled hero what he wants in return he tellingly asks for some spare change for food. Bruce Wayne he is not.

The action then cuts to the first of a series of peripheral characters through which we learn more of Simon and his place in the community. Medical examiner Beth Granger is a tired singleton who thinks she has seen it all until coming across some of Simon's handiwork. Working alongside her is detective Tom Kirk, himself damaged goods (albeit in a very different sense) and resigned to Granger's insistence on her dating policy regarding work colleagues – i.e. she doesn't. Also along for the ride is Rachel Dodds, a new girl in town with a yen for Poe and second hand clothes stores.

This brings us to Simon himself, or rather his construction as hero and object of pity. Unlike the morally upright bastions of the DC universe, Simon Dark is a character in a state of moral flux. Aged 17, he is a pastiche of badly-sutured body parts and borrowed memories, with a set of shifting facial features under a poorly stitched mask. Despite his vagrancy he is afforded something approaching affection by the locals, which he, in turn, treats with a nervous gratitude. Simon's existence is a part of urban folklore. One of the refrains throughout the book is a skipping song sung by girl playing in the streets – a repetitive chant

designed to quicken the heart but keep the feet in check. Like a bogeyman Simon is scary enough to make the hardest men turn on their heels and run – but only if they deserve it.

Like any good adolescent, Simon's demons come both from within and without. Constantly struggling to establish his identity he is a mix of the scientific and the magical. His powers appear limited to enhanced strength and agility but it is his state of being between life and death that neatly sums up his predicament. Eventually it becomes obvious that his savagery is not a product of bile but ignorance and a debilitating lack of empathy. Simon's story thus is not about saving the world but dealing with his freakishness without the aid of a benevolent parental influence: a Frankenstein's monster for the emo generation, if you will.

So how does the story 'hang' together? About as well as Simon's stitching. As a writer Niles has a proven record of coming up with good concepts but his follow-through remains weak. By throwing his major players together in the very first scene he creates a seal on the story that makes the other characters have to work that much harder to gain a foothold in. His plotting also relies on a series of mini-twists that reach for subtlety but come off as insubstantial. As for the arch-villain, Vincent, he comes across as little more than comedic relief. The depiction of the police as fundamentally ignorant of Simon's existence rings hollow and the only outliers to the conspiracy arc, Beth and Rachel, seem little more than emotional crutches providing maternal and romantic support respectively. Most annoyingly, Simon comes through his first real test relatively unscathed. Ending on a note of enlightenment, he has little difficulty achieving his goals and making new friends. There's barely a tense moment in the 140+ pages.

As for Hampton's artwork, his reliance on Photoshop to layer images creates some startling effects, even if some pages come across as over-worked. His panel work is exemplary and the uniform guttering makes for a finely compressed read. His weakness, however, lies in character detail, where a painterly style does not lend itself well to illustrating a large cast in confined spaces. Caught in any dark alley Kirk, Vincent or any of the cultists could easily be mistaken for each other while Rachel and Beth could pass for sisters, a disservice to both characters.

Cold, lonely and hungry, *Simon Dark* makes for an intriguing character, but this first shot at an ongoing series displays too much impatient plotting and an array of barely distinguishable characters united by a costumed freak wearing Freddie Krueger's spare jumper. What does Simon do? Well he's not altogether sure. In all likelihood, neither are his creators.

Niall Kitson

Silent Hill: Origins
(Developer: Konami)
Platform: PSP (review copy), Playstation 2

A small town lies swaddled in mist, the only sound the steady clip clop of your footsteps as you walk down the street. A slow hiss begins to emanate from your pocket radio and you hear the shuffled steps of one of the towns twisted inhabitants as it slowly makes its way towards you. Your heart leaps, adrenaline kicks in and you start wildly swinging the iron bar in your hands, hoping to connect with the monsters head. No, it's not Limerick on a Friday night, it's Silent Hill.

Silent Hill has been one of horror gaming's mainstays since the 1990's. Originally released on PlayStation, it was a direct competitor of Capcom's *Resident Evil*, taking on the giant of the Survival Horror Genre with its all consuming mist and haunting sound track. Focusing more on psychological horror and eerie atmospherics rather than *Resident's Evil* concern with taking on traditional horror conventions (zombies, Lovecraftian monsters known as the hunters and an evil corporation), *Silent Hill* did it's best to upset the player, using off kilter camera angles, strange sounds and hideous monsters dredged up from your character's subconscious.

The original *Silent Hill* game centred on a protagonist named Harry Mason who was trying to find his daughter Cheryl after a car accident on the outskirts of the town. Harry quickly found himself embroiled in a tale of demons, drugs and insane local townspeople. At the time, *Silent Hill* was a significant step forward in horror gaming. Unlike *Resident Evil*, which relied on limited ammunition and zombies jumping out of wardrobes to scare you, *Silent Hill* made use of more obviously filmic conventions. The town was covered in a mist that reduced your field of vision (a necessity for the game in that the Playstation did not have the processing power to fully render the towns buildings) and added to the sense of isolation within the game. The gamer was given a pocket radio that hissed with static when the monsters that swarmed the town were nearby and even a torch used to light your way added a fear factor, with the light guiding monsters towards you. Full of scares, *Silent Hill* was a massive success for Konami, resulting in four sequels and one prequel.

That prequel game is *Silent Hill: Origins*, launched a few months before the next generation version *Silent Hill: Homecoming* is due out in the shops. In *Origin*'s you take on the role of trucker Travis Grady as he narrowly misses running over a young girl standing on the middle of the road. Running after her to see if she's ok, Travis finds a house on fire and the screams of the girl coming from within. Entering the house, Travis rescues the girl but collapses as he leaves the flame engulfed home. He wakes up in Silent Hill and goes in search of the mysterious girl, at which point the player takes over, guiding Travis around Silent Hill in his quest to find the girl.

Origins follows many of the conventions developed in the previous games, with the player having a radio that hisses with static when a monster is nearby, a torch that draws enemy's to you and a focus on melee weapons. The game develops many of the existing ideas within the Silent Hill Universe. Melee weapons now break after a certain number of uses, the relative strength of the weapon dependent on what it is made of, For instance a wooden fence post is only good for one or two strikes against a monster whereas a crowbar lasts much longer and kills enemies more quickly. In
previous games when your character ran he or she would gasp for breath, but this wouldn't affect your gameplay. Now, as Travis runs he slows down, eventually stopping to gasp for breath, leaving you

exposed to attacks. You can replenish his stamina with energy drinks, but as in all survival horror games, such resources are limited.

The game also returns the player to the concept of the real world and the other world, with the latter being a twisted and decayed version of the former. In previous games, an air raid siren would sound and you find yourself transported to the other world, watching rust and rot settle in and strange sculptures appear, made up of bodies and barb wire. In *Origins*, rather than have to wait with trepidation for the siren to sound, Travis can purposely jump between the real world and the other world. This happens when he touches mirrors scattered throughout the game. The transition from one world into the other is used as a plot device in which Travis can move past obstacles in one world which are not present in the other, or solve puzzles to the same effect. Whilst this expands game play it does remove some of the suspense and unease present in earlier incarnations of the game. Previously, when the siren sounded you knew something bad was about to happen and there was nothing you could do about it. In *Origins* you can just touch a mirror and reappear in the relative safety of the real world. The player has more control over the game, and as a result the sense of genuine trepidation present before is lessened considerably.

One of the more interesting factors within *Silent Hill* games has been its recognition of the fact that in the real world, most people are not particularly weapons savvy. Consequently, they will not be expert shots when they pick up guns and go chasing after monsters. The series followed this by having the game character miss his or her shots and a reliance on melee weapons. *Origins* is no different, although in this incarnation, melee weapons break after a certain number of uses, adding an extra level of stress when your fighting a demonic nurse and the drip stand your hitting her with shatters. Weapons control is simple to use, although selecting a weapon during a fight can be awkward resulting in the player just punching their attacker.

Of particular note is the music used throughout the game. *Silent Hill* games have always had an eerie and effective soundtrack and *Origins* is no different in the regard either. The soundtrack is based on the original music for *Silent Hill* by Akira Yamaoka who added such a level of creepiness to the series that the soundtrack was released on a CD and much of it was used in Christophe Gan's 2006 film adaptation. Visually the game looks excellent on the PSP, with the environments and character models fitting in excellently with the games pervious versions. As with most *Silent Hill* games, the monsters are nasty masses of twisted flesh and meat.

Origin follows many of the conventions established by the original series, but fails to deliver on the scares. The fifteens rating allocated to the game can be seen in the toned down violence and limited scares, with the abundance of weapons meaning you rarely go into a fight without being fully prepared. In addition, and more seriously, the games writers appear to have assumed that the players are fully aware of what a *Silent Hill* game involves. Travis expresses no surprise when attacked by one of the town's warped denizens for the first time. Also, the reasoning behind why he tries to track down the girl he nearly runs over (who is later revealed as Alessa, the girl sacrificed to a demon in the original game) is never really explained. A further level of confusion can be added by the lack of explanation regarding why Travis's radio starts to make noise when an enemy approaches. Travis just seems to accept all these things, leading to a high level of disconnection from the game. You just don't care if Travis survives or solves the mystery of the town. Later in the game [plot spoiler] it's discovered that Travis's mother spent much of her time in the town's sanatorium, with Travis never acknowledging that he has been there before. This tendency to 'jump' the plot has been a problem in previous *Silent Hill* games, with the main story never quite making sense, even after multiple play throughs. During play, this is not much of an

issue, as you become too involved in trying to ensure Travis survives whatever is happening on screen. However, the ending of the games can be less than satisfying, with issues raised throughout the game never quite being resolved and large leaps in logic being made which can be quite hard to follow. For example, Travis's mother was once a patient in the towns Sanatorium with many of the monsters reflect this (such as twisted figures who vaguely resemble people in strait jackets and an animated cage that casts the shadow of a screaming woman). However, the only way to know this is to read online guides as the information provided in the game is vague at best. The film version suffered from many of the same problems, particularly an over convoluted plot and an ending that just didn't quite make sense.

Silent Hill: Origins does not add much to the mythology of the Silent Hill Universe, playing more like a reminder to gamers that the franchise still exists and is holding on for dear life to its existence. Whilst the game does have some interesting innovations, and the occasional scare, this is not sufficient to hold the players interest, with poor storytelling throughout leaving gaps in logic that are hard to follow at times. The emotionless nature of Travis also serves to distance the player from the gameplay, making it hard to sympathise with his circumstances or encourage you to play on and solve the latest mystery at the heart of Silent Hill.

Eoin Murphy

Silent Hill: Origins
Graphics: 8
Gameplay: 6
Sound: 8
Replay Value: 3
Overall Score: 6

The Mystery Play
(Vertigo, 2008)
Written by Grant Morrison and Drawn by John J. Muth

Grant Morrison's *The Mystery Play* opens with one of the more interesting starts to a graphic novel I've read in quite a while, beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve, the arrival of Lucifer to tempt them, and the somewhat untimely death of God himself.

Morrison's graphic novel takes its inspiration from the early Medieval Mystery Plays, re-enactments of passages from the Bible rewritten into verse and performed by local amateurs. Mystery Plays were soon taken over by the Guilds, with each guild taking control of one story or scene within the play as a whole and guarding its verse with extreme suspicion of anyone wanting to view it. Mystery Plays were, in fact, the precursor to the wandering troupes of actors that are the forebears of modern theatre.

The story opens with a re-enactment of a Mystery Play by Townely town council, a small mining community in Yorkshire which has seen tough times as a result of Margaret Thatcher's New Right policies and an horrific crime which occurred years earlier. During the play, the actor who plays God is murdered with the body shown in a beautiful, but slightly blasphemous manner: the almighty himself is pictured lying face down on the ground with his robes pulled up to show his stripped boxer shorts.

Following the death of 'God', the police arrive, with the investigation taken over by the bearded Detective Sergeant Carpenter, who quickly becomes obsessed with the case and haunted by Townley itself, continuously and almost obsessively talking, about how every act that occurs around a murder scene – from a flock of birds flying overhead, to finding a spent Catherine Wheel firework – has some significance to the case. Throughout the course of his investigation Carpenter is followed by Annie Woolf, a report for the local paper desperate to make it into the National Press and who feels that this story is the one to take her there. Of course, what she finds out is all the more startling than she could have imagined.

As Carpenter moves throughout the town interviewing its inhabitants, he is occasionally overtaken by hallucinations. One particularly well scripted scene involves him interviewing the actor who played Lucifer, with the art work slowly transforming him into a devilish visage as they discuss the nature of truth.

Running in parallel to the investigation is the mystery of Carpenter himself. Christ allegories run through the writing, and Carpenter (not just a coincidental name, of course) even undergoes his own apparent 40 days in the desert of being tempted by Satan. At one point, after visiting a child's bedroom in an abandoned house, Carpenter cuts himself on broken glass, a panel revealing the stigmata like bleeding which results. The allegory is even carried through to the inevitable conclusion in which the townsfolk crucify Carpenter before he miraculously manages to escape, an event captured in the image of a jacket nailed to a cross and blowing in the wind.

The art work throughout is excellent, with Muth providing realistic and occasionally disturbing images, particularly the autopsy of 'God' and one unpleasant scene involving a brothel madam eating what first looks like a giant spider, one leg at a time. Some of the scenes depicted are stunning, encouraging the

reader to just sit and look at a panel without any dialogue for minutes at a time to take in all the detail. Muth has excelled himself throughout the novel.

Morrison's writing is, as always, highly effective and full of symbolism, encouraging repeated readings so that one can embrace the full meaning of the text. *The Mystery Play* is a gothic graphic novel at its best, forcing the reader to face uncomfortable truths throughout, both through its writing and through its art. For those interested in graphic novels filled with twists and turns and the dawning realisation of unpleasant truths, this is well worth reading.

Rico Ramirez,
Buenos Aires Correspondent

New Media Retrospectives #1: Clive Barker's Undying
(Developer: DreamWorks Interactive)
Platform: PC-CD ROM

As in all preceding eras, the technology of the twenty-first century has been intrinsic to both the spreading and shaping of the Gothic. The Gothic has disseminated its conventions between new media and traditional literature, evolving in the process. This critical concern is nowhere more apparent than in the release of Clive Barker's *Undying* in 2001, written by the popular horror author of the same name. Clearly, the game's title makes a serious statement about its authentic heavyweight horror credentials, claiming to be both a legitimate extension of Barker's existing literary and filmic fiction, and an alternative text that is equally worthy of critical respect. Without even delving into the game's contents, then, *Clive Barker's Undying* is steeped in Gothic identity. However, does the game itself stand up to the author's texts represented by other mediums, and is it capable of engaging with the theoretical aspects of the Gothic in a similarly effective way?

This is a tall order. However, Clive Barker rises to the role of author admirably, investing a large portion of his own effort into the game. Not only did he write the game's story, but he also provided his voice for one of the characters. It clearly shows. In the introductory cutscene it is explained that the main character, Patrick Galloway, an Irish paranormal investigator, has returned from the Great War after receiving a letter from his old friend, Jeremiah Covenant. This letter informs him of an outbreak of supernatural activity on a small island off the coast of Ireland, at Covenant's manor home. This sequence upholds the game's equality with its brethren texts, having the cinematic quality of film, and the well-written dialogue of a Gothic novel. In fact, Clive Barker's other material, particularly his films and comic books, with their emphasis on creating complimentary combinations of images and writing, make particularly suitable bedfellows to the videogame medium. *Clive Barker's Undying*, unlike many other horror games, through its focus on equalizing storytelling to visuals, re-enforces this symbiosis. Compared to his more recent efforts of videogame design with *Jericho*, released in 2007, Clive Barker's efforts in creating complex characters and situations in *Undying*, pays off. The problem with *Jericho* was its substitution of traditional horror through narrative and environmental atmosphere with an overuse of visually thrilling, but ultimately shallow combat. This is a charge which is often laid at the feet of videogames, with plot and characterisation eschewed for explosions and big guns. The videogame *Black* is a perfect example of this with the game's developers deliberately ignoring any depth to the game,instead focusing on set pieces and graphics. *Clive Barker's Undying*, however, focuses on authentic storytelling through visuals and writing, which is to expected from a writer of Barker's calibre.

The technology that represents this period environment renders it suitably atmospheric. The game utilizes the Unreal graphics engine, which, despite being seven years old, still looks impressive. Although newer graphics engines have made it appear obsolete, *Clive Barker's Undying* doesn't merely rely on the Unreal engine to deliver quality visuals. Rather than focussing on graphics in isolation, it uses the technology as a stepping-stone for a higher cause: to arrange such power artistically and atmospherically in order to accurately represent the game's period history environment. These environment surroundings are clear and sharp, yet they appear realistically decayed, perfectly constructing the antiquated world through modern technological means. Stone slabs flicker menacingly against torchlight, cobwebs wispily sway from ceilings and the sound of the wind conveys a sense of foreboding that permeates the entire island. Indeed, the design of the landscape and its buildings present a Gothic environment which is varied, never

repetitive, yet consistent in its period design. Excluding the continuity-breaking tropical rainforest and 'hovering hell' segments, the island environment appears as a single believable world tied together by the game's early-twentieth-century period perspective, rather than appear as a series of disparate, disembodied levels. It contains many interconnected locales, many of which echo the historical and literary Gothic past that it replicates so well. There's the Victorian-influenced Covenant Manor, a crumbling Catholic Cathedral, and a series of mysterious standing stone circles positioned out on the island's headland. Not only does *Clive Barker's Undying* re-envision the Gothic sites of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century, but it also holds connections to early-twentieth-century Gothic; the period in which the game is set. The twisted, tentacle-based enemies which appear in Barker's game are clearly inspired by the imagination of an earlier horror author: H.P. Lovecraft. Also, the turn-of-the-century weaponry, which consists of revolvers, shotguns and dynamite, is borrowed from literature contemporary to the game's depicted period, such as Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm*, or Lovecraft's own tales. Here, *Clive Barker's Undying*, in including stock elements of subject matter from the Gothic novel, positions itself and the medium it represents as an equally viable alternative to written storytelling.

The character's journals in *Clive Barker's Undying* also allows the conventions of Gothic writing itself to be transplanted into the new technological medium through which the game is created. Throughout the game, the player encounters readable journals and diaries of each of the characters, such as Patrick Galloway and the Covenant family members, which give insights into their psychologies. These characters are largely two-dimensional when met and then fought face to face, their complex inner lives revoked when they transform into visually horrific creatures to do battle. However, the writing, in its intentionally rambling and stuttering style, does contribute to the sense of Lovecraftian uneasiness and paranoia.

This disparity between surface and psychological horror, however, is one of the primary drawbacks of *Clive Barker's Undying*. The game primarily uses its graphics and sound to create tension, often eschewing its more complex psychological and historical elements for quick and violent thrills. One memorable example is when exploring the ruined medieval abbey on the far side of the island, the player is attacked by mad monks. This unquestioning violence, while initially shocking, does not develop any of the history that the monks and their religious surroundings would otherwise reveal; subject matter which most Gothic novels would not miss the chance to explore. Thus, in delivering its brand of shock horror, the game is in constant danger of isolating itself from the rich heritage it recreates virtually, undermining the effort it puts into being an authentic alternative to the novels that it takes for its inspiration.

One of the most important critical concerns that the game deals with, with varying degrees of success, is the search for a true Irish national identity, free from religious conflict. *Clive Barker's Undying* consistently demonises the symbolism of religion upon a visual surface level, whether it be the aforementioned monks and the hidden secrets scattered around their ruined monastery, or the equally demonic, pseudo-Protestant Covenant family and its supernatural experimentation. Here, both sides of Ireland's historical conflict are re-imagined, imbued with Gothic negativity. They are both set of land-grabbers who use prescribed ritualism to suppress their true intent to colonise the island and abuse its secret powers. Where the Catholic inhabitants are intent on proving the supernatural happenings are a divine testing and ultimate affirmation of their own religion's legitimacy, the Covenant family attempt to study and harness these powers in furthering their attempts to transform the island into a scientifically enlightened, rational home for the British subject. Both are equally paranoid and in the end, come to be dominated by the demons that enflame their obsession. The game, played through the eyes of Patrick

Galloway, an individual who has served in the Great War, presents nationalism as a lost cause, a concept that is inseparable from the chaos it rallies its people against.

Much like the Lovecraft novels which it references, the game uses the literal presence of physical demons as manifestations, stand-ins even, for psychological ones; a tangible representation of the underlying universal despair that such a conflict as the Great War might cause. Playing as the combat-hardened veteran Galloway, the player has the unique supernatural talent of 'scrying', an ability to read into the scenery to reveal the underlying horror that the everyday world hides. While this is an innovative and effective gameplay feature that leads to some genuinely horrific moments, it captures such horror in its mere surface visuality, denying it a deeper, psychological meaning. In one of the game's key moments, the player approaches a family painting which depicts all five members of the Covenant family. Using the scry ability, these subjects are momentarily transformed into the demonic versions of themselves. Thus, what lies beneath, the inner identity of these people, is just as much a surface as that which existed before investigation. Much like the mad monks, these enemies have no true narrative origins, and Clive Barker's game fails to fully deliver on its promise of plot and characterisation, key ingredients which would otherwise make it an equal alternative to his literary horror.

Although *Clive Barker's Undying* doesn't fully use its virtual powers to achieve its aim of raising the Gothic videogame to a standard comparable with the novel or film variant, these technical elements are impressive in themselves, and are combined to make a game that is, if nothing else, fun to play. Its innovative gameplay features such as the scrying ability are put to great use in producing their horrific visual effects, ensuring that the resulting shocks will stick long in the mind after the game has been completed. Even though it fails to live up to the name it bears, *Clive Barker's Undying* valiantly does what a good horror videogame should do. It expertly creates and sustains tension before releasing it at effectively timed moments.

Stuart Lindsay

Clive Barker's Undying
Graphics: 7
Gameplay: 8
Sound: 9
Replay Value: 7