

MELATONIN

★★★★ | PC

When you snooze away in *Melatonin*, you'll find yourself in a dreamland where you can swallow projectile hamburgers and catch gold coins that fall from the sky. Although it has the aesthetics of a cosy rhythm game – hand-drawn, pastel-toned animation set in the subconscious lands of one sleepy guy – its challenging nature will surprise you. It will also charm you. If you think yourself a beat master, you will be humbled almost immediately. Something as simple as pressing buttons in time with a boppy tune becomes a wonderfully frustrating task in coordinating tempos, tones and animated patterns. You'll be nodding your head (rhythmically, not sleepily) to keep up. The gameplay provides genuinely rewarding levels, which ramp up quickly in exciting ways, and dreams are prefaced with a guided practice round that transitions smoothly into scored mode. They begin as fragments of contemporary life featuring emojis and mobile apps, before veering into deeply human anxieties and desires. It's a wholesome game you will get addicted to – if not to test your rhythm skills, then to keep dreaming. **JOSEFINA HUQ**



BLACK SNOW

★★★ | STAN

In Ashford, a graduating cohort's hopes and dreams are memorialised in a time capsule for 25 years, while a legacy of slavery is buried. The re-emergence of a letter from one of the students, Isabel (Taliyah Blackman-Corowa), sheds light on her unsolved murder and begins an investigation into both her life and the forgotten lives of her ancestors. There's a sense that *Black Snow* is vying to distinguish itself among other smalltown mysteries, through a genuine effort to incorporate factual stories from South Sea Islanders into its fictitious Queensland town. The specificity of community, set across two timelines from various perspectives, is a welcome addition to this kind of serial – yet everything beyond feels hollow. The plotting is over-embellished, stuffed with tropes, and would benefit greatly from a more stripped-down approach to the procedural. It's still an easy binge, but given the shake-up of the cold case – and its larger cultural ramifications – one wishes the series followed suit, instead of just going through the motions. **GEORGE KAPAKLIS**



MAYFAIR WITCHES

★★★ | AMC+

Light on magic but leaden with plot, there are more than a couple of bad omens haunting this latest Anne Rice adaptation. Its protagonist, Rowan Fielding, provides little for Alexandra Daddario (*The White Lotus*) to flesh out. A lonely orphan hailing from a mysterious bloodline, she ventures to New Orleans to find her family, and gradually gets in touch with her dormant mystical powers. So far, so generic – but to its credit, this iteration of the Southern Gothic sketches out a dynastic conflict that's almost tantalising enough to lure the viewer back after each cliffhanger. A wickedly seductive spirit has burrowed deep into the Mayfair family (to which Rowan discovers she is heir), while a secret peace-keeping society and conspiracy theorists further disrupt the balance. The ingredients for a delectable witch's broth are present, but there's no fire burning underneath. *Mayfair Witches'* anonymous style and muted chemistry suffocate any attempts to extract the florid eroticism of its mature fantasy. Despite its charms, you're unlikely to fall under its spell. **JAMIE TRAM**

From Stephen King to John Carpenter, television has been a reliable home for all great masters of horror. I've always felt the genre has fit the small screen best: nothing quite beats the spookiness of curling up in front of a glowing TV during the dead of night, gradually becoming all too aware that you're alone in the house.

The sinister sci-fi of the original *Twilight Zone* became host to iconic directors like Richard Donner (*The Omen*) and Don Siegel (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) and went on to spawn countless horror anthologies that lured in even more notorious figures. Following from *Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities* last October, Netflix has brought beloved manga artist Junji Ito to its platform for a new anime anthology series: *Junji Ito Maniac: Japanese Tales of the Macabre*. Fans of Ito's operatic and eccentric style will no doubt be excited to see the characters of Tomie (an infinitely-reproducing succubus) and Souichi (an anaemic wielder of black magic) return in a collection of 20 stories here adapted into anime for the first time.

While Ito's works are known for their elaborately gruesome spectacle, they resound far beyond pure shock value. They're human stories about trying – and failing – to make sense of the world around us, and the spiralling obsessions we pour ourselves into. You'll feel like you're losing your mind, and will be hungry for more. **JT**

THE NIGHT LOGAN WOKE UP

★★★★ | SBS, SBS ON DEMAND

The acclaimed Canadian auteur Xavier Dolan makes his first foray into television with this adaptation of a play by Dolan favourite Michel Marc Bouchard. Told across five episodes, the Quebec-set series begins with estranged members of the Larouche family reckoning with the death of their matriarch, Madeleine (played exceptionally by another Dolan regular, Anne Dorval). In two parallel timelines, various family members wrestle with their own individual demons and come to terms with the depth of their shared trauma. The narrative may be familiar territory for Dolan, but he brings a darkly surreal edge to the proceedings, oscillating between dreams and reality across the show's two-decade span. The series possesses many of the director's trademarks, including André Turpin's sumptuous cinematography and lovingly kitschy interiors. Dolan's signature flair for melodrama is also wonderfully supported by a heart-swelling score from Hans Zimmer and David Fleming. *The Night Logan Woke Up* is a haunting piece that finds resplendent beauty amid suffering. **ANDREW FRASER**



UNPACKING:
A GAYMING SETUP

Pride Month always sparks excited discussions of queer art. For 30 glorious days, the social media algorithm floods my feeds with *Heartstopper* GIFs, drag show clips and homoerotic illustrations. At least, more than usual. But too often, video games are left out of the conversation. There's a dim view of video games in broader culture, which elides the reality that gaming has become one of the most accessible artforms, home to thousands of independent LGBTQIA+ artists worldwide. And, to be honest, I'm a little tired of hearing about *Heartstopper*.

After its exhibition at this year's Sydney WorldPride festival, Pride at Play is now showing in Melbourne at St Kilda Town Hall until 24 June. (An online showcase is also available. Both are free.) The exhibition celebrates video games and tabletop roleplaying games from Oceania and the Asia-Pacific, made by queer folks for queer players. On top of highlighting local titles, curators Xavier Ho, Fae Daunt, Mads Mackenzie and Chloe Appleby provide the opportunity to play international independent games that have been meticulously translated into English.

The selection includes visual novels, Zen games and even a demon-infested RPG. Of interest to me is the "masculinity simulator" *Hard Lads*, which sees the player direct my favourite viral video "British lads hit each other with a chair". Embracing silliness, aching sincerity and everything in between, each game charts the dizzying digital frontier of queer expression. **JT**



THE CROWDED ROOM

★★★★ | APPLE TV+

In this twisty crime thriller, Tom Holland departs from the world of superheroes to enter something much darker. In 1970s New York, Danny Sullivan (Holland) is arrested for his involvement in a shooting, and a curious interrogator, Rya (Amanda Seyfried), is compelled to uncover the truth. Told through a collection of interviews and flashbacks, Sullivan's unreliable narration sustains a thrilling air of mystery. The show's first-person, non-linear storytelling is its biggest strength. Unfortunately, the series' major revelation is rather predictable, undercutting the development of its characters. Holland's boyish charm radiates in early flashbacks, but he struggles to remain captivating as the tortured shooting suspect. Seyfried's grounded performance anchors the show, while impressive supporting performances, especially from Sasha Lane, round out the cast. While *The Crowded Room* maintains a brooding tone and stylised vision of crime and violence, the characters and narrative aren't quite compelling enough to hook viewers for all 10 episodes. **MEG FUNSTON**



STRAYED LIGHTS

★★ | PLAYSTATION, XBOX, NINTENDO SWITCH, PC

There is nothing particularly challenging about *Strayed Lights*, which oversimplifies what could be an engaging experience. Born a glob of energy in an alien world, you must attack creatures to shed your crusty body and become a being of pure light. The game's hook is the defence-based mode of combat, which has the player switching between coloured energies to match the lighting of their opponents. It's about learning attack patterns and parrying, which can be accomplished easily due to the minimal variety between monsters, and health that regenerates whenever you successfully parry. Rather than testing the player's skills, the game invites you to take in the atmosphere of the landscape, defeating creatures and collecting light to Austin Wintory's (*ABZÜ*) pleasant soundtrack, without any explicit prompting. It is short, low-stakes and uncomplicated to the point of tedium, but there is something refreshing about wafting through a fantasy world without the stress of fighting for your life. **JOSEFINA HUQ**

KILLER FREQUENCY

★★★★☆ | PC, PLAYSTATION, XBOX, VR, SWITCH

Forrest, a small-town radio host, is ready for another quiet graveyard shift. When the local police reroute their dispatch line to his show, it promises to be anything but. There's a killer on the loose, and it's up to Forrest to save Gallows Creek while following standard broadcast practice: announcing music, playing ads and avoiding dead air and dead listeners alike. A horror comedy with a genuinely thrilling mystery, *Killer Frequency* is a perfectly executed adventure game. PC controls feel natural, easily juggling clues and dialogue prompts. Maps, notes and logic puzzles are all around the station, but finding them is only half the answer – helping callers over the airwaves is the real test. In conversations ranging from absurd to life-or-death, you'll talk people through first aid or hotwiring a car. Giving incorrect advice can lead to gruesome on-air murders, no less horrifying from the absence of visuals. Smart scripting and excellent voice acting bring the residents of Gallows Creek to life – all the more reason to try and keep them that way. **AGNES FORRESTER**



AMNESIA: THE BUNKER

★★★★ | PLAYSTATION, XBOX, PC

Amnesia: The Bunker is so nerve-wracking that dying feels like a welcome release. You stumble out of unconsciousness as a French soldier, alone(ish) and trapped in a WWI bunker. Escaping means exploring every claustrophobic corner for notes and dog-tags from your deceased comrades, and collecting items to keep you alive and out of the dark. Meanwhile, a monster is stalking you. The game relishes your inability to make smart decisions while in lizard-brain mode. Rationing resources, keeping the lights on and moving stealthily is difficult when the fog of the monster is in your periphery, and your heart is pounding at an upsettingly high rate. Your panic is amplified by having access to only one safe/save room (in rogue-lite fashion), making every successful return validating, every repeat venture high-stakes and harrowing. The sound and animation are designed with precision, padding out the suffocating dankness from the arsenal to the soldier quarters. It's clever terror that engages your brain almost as much as your guts. **JOSEFINA HUQ**



THE AFTERPARTY S2

★★★ | APPLE TV+ 12 JULY

The first season of *The Afterparty* took a well-worn crime premise – a murder at a school reunion – and added Detective Danner (Tiffany Haddish), an unconventional cop who asks suspects to give their statements as “mind movies”, with each episode adopting a different genre and POV. Season 2 takes the same gimmick to a family wedding, while bringing back first season favourites Danner, Aniq (Sam Richardson) and Zoë (Zoe Chao). The show chewed through most genres in its first season, so this one apes specific styles like Hitchcock, Wes Anderson and Jane Austen films. The series is uneven as a result. There's a brilliant gonzo romantic-PTSD-dance-drama starring John Cho, followed by an episode told mostly in TikToks. Its murder-mystery unfolds neatly over the season, but *The Afterparty* is often more interested in silly diversions like “Who was that naked guy in episode one?” than answering “Who killed the groom?” It's easy watching, if a bit too clever for its own good. If you liked the first season, you'll like the second, but it won't win over any new converts. **TANSY GARDAM**

Sometimes, I fear we take Daniel Radcliffe for granted. In an era where distinctive, eccentric character actors are often thrust into Hollywood and stripped of personality, the beloved face of the Wizarding World forged his own, contrary path. If I'd spent eight movies and 11 years playing Harry Potter as a young adult, I would simply take my riches and disappear off the face of the Earth. Radcliffe, on the other hand, has spent the last decade in a series of unconventional, often self-effacing roles across film, TV and the stage. And unlike Potter's progenitor, JK Rowling, Radcliffe has been a consistent, prominent supporter of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Just this year, Radcliffe grew a real moustache and donned a curly wig to embody the main character of *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story* (streaming on Paramount+), a film that sends up the biopic genre with the gleeful, irreverent energy of its subject. Radcliffe plays the role straight-faced, never betraying an awareness of the film's absurdity – and is all the funnier for it. On 11 July, Radcliffe will trade *Weird Al* for *Mad Max* in Stan's *Miracle Workers: End Times*, the post-apocalyptic fourth season of the increasingly bizarre anthology series from novelist Simon Rich. Performing alongside Steve Buscemi and emerging Australian talent Geraldine Viswanathan, Radcliffe will play a wasteland warrior who must learn to embrace suburban life. Beyond his embrace of risk, commitment to quirk and unpredictable choice of roles, what makes Radcliffe appealing is that he always looks like he's having fun. **JT**

DETECTIVE PIKACHU RETURNS

★★ | NINTENDO SWITCH

Pikachu may look cute in a tiny detective hat, but this drawcard only takes his latest game so far. The plot follows the titular Pikachu and human sidekick Tim as they investigate why Pokémon in Ryme City have been acting up. In the process, they uncover evil technologies and corrupt organisations that point to Tim's own personal mysteries. Sadly, the lacklustre mechanics, awkward cutscenes and the simplicity of its puzzles suck all the fun from it. There are glimpses of joy – such as sneakily figuring out how to break into locations (and collaborating with Pokémon to do so) – but the deduction process is always three steps behind what most players will have already figured out, including younger children. While its mysteries are light work, wading through consistently dull dialogue makes the game a slog. *Pokémon* games typically build distinct worlds and centre on friendships with both people and creatures. Here, Ryme City and its inhabitants have *some* charm but feel fundamentally hollow. *Detective Pikachu's* attempt at hardboiled ends up over-easy. **JOSEFINA HUQ**



GHOSTRUNNER 2

★★★★ | PLAYSTATION + XBOX + PC

Being a supersonic, cyber-enhanced ninja is tough work. In this frenetic follow-up to parkour slasher *Ghostrunner* (2020), you play as the augmented assassin Jack, who possesses the ability to air-dash, slow down time, and slice enemies with the flick of a katana. You'll also die in a single hit. The game's threadbare story flies by, taking you into the bowels of an AI cult and across an all-new desert wasteland as you hunt down killer machines gone rogue. For a cyberpunk fighter, Jack spends an awful lot of time buddying up with cops. Levels are trial-by-fire gauntlets, flinging enemies and projectiles at you from each corner of the expansive maps. Faithful to dystopian urban planning, the game is lousy with bottomless pits – expect to frequently plummet to your death. The meaty challenges can feel cheap, often contradicting the game's emphasis on mobility and speed, but there's a fresh joy to the additions of a stealth cloak, motorcycle and other upgrades. Master the game's mechanics (and your inner Zen), and you'll feel like a God from the machine. **JAMIE TRAM**



THE KILLER

★★★★ | NETFLIX

Hardly one for sentimentality, David Fincher injects his chilly follow-up to *Mank* (2020) with his characteristic air of severity, albeit one lightened by his cheekiest sensibility yet. The slick assassin procedural features 11 songs by The Smiths – such is Fincher's sense of humour. Michael Fassbender's unnamed hitman protagonist practices a paranoid asceticism that's near-robotic, but he has a soft spot for Morrissey's crooning voice while lining up his sniper rifle. The story begins on a job gone wrong, and the unconventional character study that ensues is razor-sharp, often loaded with tension, and frequently hilarious. For a director with a reputation for meticulousness, there's a self-deprecating quality to this portrait of a character who wipes every surface he touches, and disparages more well-adjusted, Type-B "normies" in voiceover. Through exquisite cinematography and expressive sound, Fincher presents a man whose own technical rigour is in service of cold-blooded murder. It's an entertainingly sly move. **OSCAR RAGG**



Have you noticed that it's very hard to kill Godzilla? Across nearly 70 years, the reigning King of the Monsters (and cultural ambassador of Tokyo's Shinjuku ward) has only been conquered four times. Even then, our favourite oversized reptile has never stayed down for long. A creature wrought from nuclear trauma, it endures as an emblem of humanity's self-driven destruction, and a testament to the entertainment value of big fellas beating up each other.

In *Monarch: Legacy of Monsters* (out 17 November), Godzilla stomps into new territory: an Apple TV+ series. Just don't expect to see too much of the guy. The show takes the form of a globe-trotting, decade-hopping thriller centred on Monarch, a shadowy government organisation that monitors all sorts of titanic beasties. It's a risky premise, asking audiences to care about 10 episodes of human drama when they know that Godzilla and King Kong are just out of frame. That said, some of the best monster stories have taken a less-is-more approach to their main attraction. Gareth Edwards' 2014 *Godzilla* reboot (which first introduced Monarch) barely strayed from the perspective of its human cast, patiently layering the colossal weight and terrible power of its hero before cutting it loose.

Honestly, forget the monsters. The biggest selling point is the dual casting of Kurt and Wyatt Russell as Lee Shaw, a man whose own past is mysteriously entwined with Monarch's evolution. Both father and son radiate enough charisma to compete with Godzilla's atomic breath. **JT**