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HAROLD RAMIS
ERNIE HUDSON
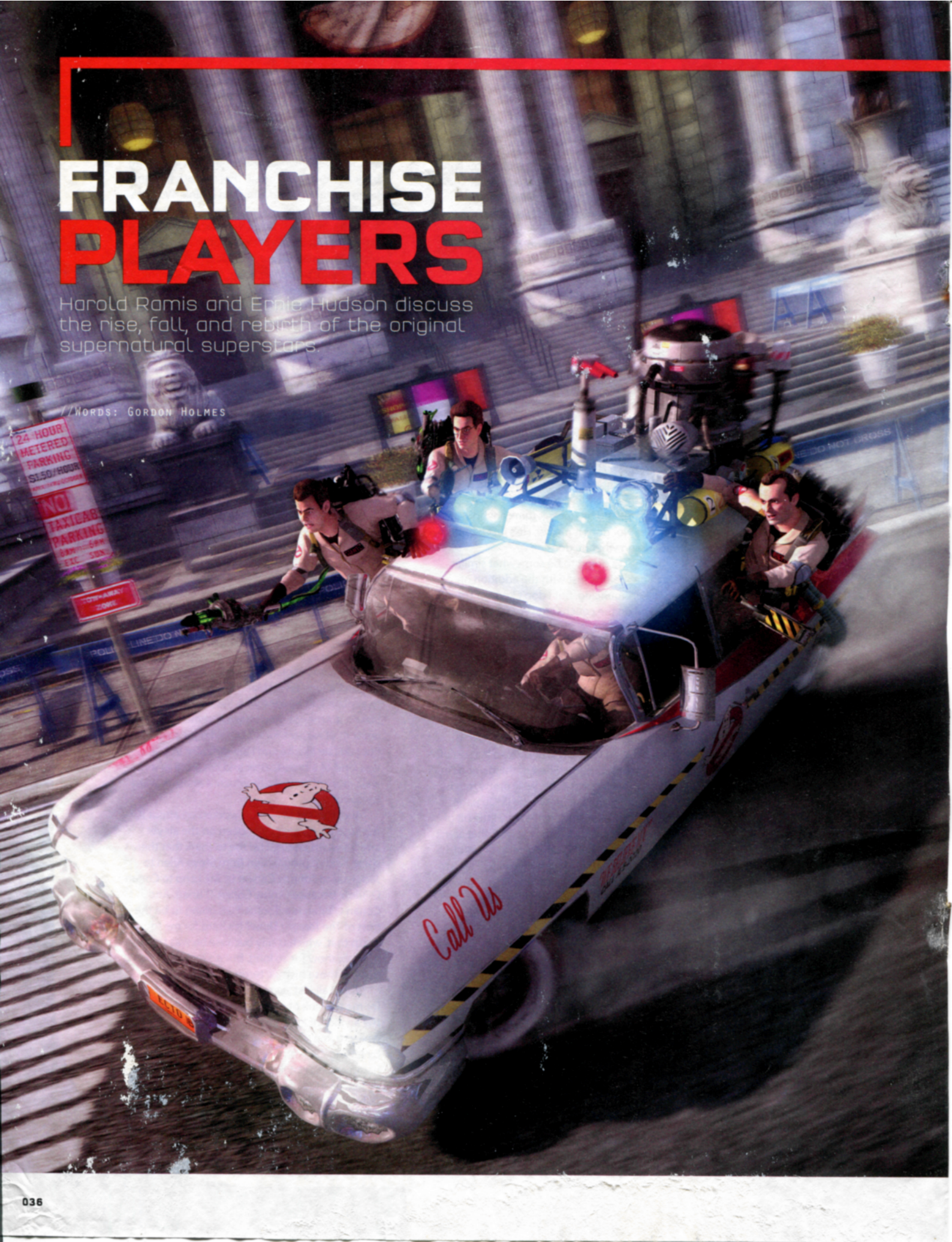JULIET LANDAU
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FRANCHISE PLAYERS

Harold Ramis and Ernie Hudson discuss the rise, fall, and rebirth of the original supernatural superstars.

//WORDS: GORDON HOLMES

As Hollywood continues to mine pop culture's past for fresh revenue streams, franchises that have long been forgotten are being given a fresh coat of paint and trotted back out into the spotlight. In fact, a quick look at this summer's movie slate reveals familiar names like "Terminator," "Transformers," and "G.I. Joe" all hoping to turn your childhood memories into big bucks.

But one popular '80s franchise is taking a novel approach. Everyone's favorite paranormal investigators and eliminators are looking to put a PKE meter in *your* hand with the upcoming *Ghostbusters: The Video Game*. Featuring a script from original scribes Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis, voiceover work from almost all of the original cast, and a storyline that ties into the past and expands on the movie's mythology, Atari is hoping to bring a once mighty brand back from the other side while changing the way Hollywood views the video game industry.

"The franchise rights alone will make us rich beyond our wildest dreams."
It's hard to believe that Aykroyd, Ramis, and Bill Murray knew they were creating a cultural phenomenon when they pulled on some janitor coveralls and hopped into a pimped out Cadillac ambulance. But to hear *Ghostbusters* screenwriter and star Ramis (Egon Spengler) tell it, they knew that was exactly what they were doing.

"It might be the height of arrogance to say so, but we'd already been associated with some really big things that landed hard in the culture. Starting with *Animal House* and *Saturday Night Live*, everything else we'd done prior to that was successful. So we had no reason to suppose this wouldn't be big. And everyone thought that we were creating a new iconography. That the concept was such a strong hook that it was going to land really hard."

And land hard it did. *Ghostbusters* opened in theaters on June 8, 1984, and stayed on top of the box office for seven consecutive weeks on its

> **" I remember Dan Aykroyd saying when he did Blues Brothers he resisted a lot of merchandising because he didn't want to have his face on every lunch box in America. But then he said, 'Now I do want to have my face on every lunch box in America.'"** —HAROLD RAMIS

way to becoming the highest grossing comedy of the '80s. But perhaps more important than the financial draw was the effect it was having on audiences.

Best known as the everyman "fourth" Ghostbuster, Winston Zeddemore, actor Ernie Hudson remembers, "When the movie came out it really touched that part of the social psyche. It was great. I think the surprise for me was it really got to small kids, they love it. And it also got older people, even senior citizens."

"People love *Ghostbusters* in a really big way," Ramis continues. "Parents loved it for their kids. We got mail from teachers who said they loved that kids were playing Ghostbusters at recess because it was a non-violent game that didn't divide the kids into good guys and bad guys. It's really had some power."

With the success of *Ghostbusters* buoying them, a sequel seemed like a can't-miss prospect…

"It's a sign all right, 'Going Out of Business.'"
Despite a record-breaking opening weekend, 1989's *Ghostbusters 2* was considered to be a let down. "*Ghostbusters 2* was slightly disappointing to the audience," Ramis admits. "It's hard to recapture the thrill of seeing something for the first time. There were things that I was never happy with, even conceptually, but that wasn't my call."

Premiering the week before the cinematic steamroller *Batman* probably didn't help matters either. Venkman, Stantz and company couldn't compete with the box-office juggernaut that was Jack Nicholson's Joker and Prince's "Batdance." With a final domestic gross that was less than half of the original, it looked like the poorly received sequel had done something the Environmental Protection Agency never could— shut the Ghostbusters down.

"They wouldn't touch us with a ten-meter cattle prod."
Between 1991, when *The Real Ghostbusters* cartoon ended its run, to the announcement of the video game in 2007, *Ghostbusters* was considered to be a dead brand. Chris Stewart, the owner of the popular *Ghostbusters* website

protoncharging.com, had a tough time finding content to fill his pages. "It was really a sad, lonely time for the hard-cores (known as "Ghostheads"). It seemed like for the better part of a decade, someone passionate about the brand would take a shot at putting something out—the 88MPH comic series, the NECA action figures, stray T-shirts and hoodies—and it would do kind of OK, but not OK enough to warrant making more stuff."

The original Ghostbusters even took their own crack at relaunching the franchise with the *Ghostbusters in Hell* concept. "Dan tried to revive it in the '90s and actually wrote a script for Columbia," Ramis remembers. "My concept there was that Hell is a simultaneous reality and it's slightly out of phase with our reality. It's like a strobe, when our reality is on, Hell kind of blinks off. The Ghostbusters had to technically skip one beat and then they're in Hell. Dan's original script had Hell as a fantasy place. But my thought was Hell is right here on Earth and looks just like the world we live in."

Rumors at the time had actors such as Pauly Shore and David Spade suiting up as the next generation of Ghostbusters, but Ramis recalls, "My dream team was Chris Farley, Chris Rock and Ben Stiller, which I thought would have been funny." Unfortunately (or "fortunately" depending on how you feel about Pauly Shore), *Ghostbusters in Hell* languished in development hell for years before quietly disappearing.

"Remember something in the Bible about the last days when the dead would rise from the grave?"

And then nothing, until Sony approached developer Terminal Reality about creating the game in 2007. According to Stewart, "The story goes that the video game got the go ahead because Sony commissioned a brand marketing study, and, not counting religious symbols, the most recognizable logo in the entire world was Coke. The second most was Ghostbusters."

Whether that was the case or not, the prayers of Ghostheads around the world were finally answered when Atari announced they would be releasing *Ghostbusters: The Video Game*. But what really attracted attention was when Aykroyd told a videogame magazine that he considered the game to be *Ghostbusters 3*. While some games have been considered to be canon, no game has ever been considered to be an official sequel.

So, how can *Ghostbusters: The Video Game* succeed as a sequel where other long-standing series have failed?

"We're the best, we're the beautiful, we're the only, Ghostbusters."

This summer alone, movie fans are going to have

> ## "Egon looks better than I look. That's for sure. Nowadays the voice still fits, but the suit certainly doesn't."
> —HAROLD RAMIS

to learn to love an Arnold-less *Terminator* and a Shatner-less *Star Trek*. But Ghostbuster fans won't have to deal with that disappointment.

When the cast list for the game was released, nobody was surprised to see that the usual suspects would be back to lend their voices. Aykroyd, Ramis, and Hudson have always been interested in reviving the franchise. And while it was a pleasant surprise that Annie Potts and William Atherton would be back to reprise their rolls as Janine Melnitz and Walter Peck, respectively, one name on the list left everyone, even the other actors, with their jaws on the floor … Bill Murray.

Dr. Peter Venkman was coming back.

"I'm not sure what all the backstory is, but I was always under the impression that Bill was the reluctant one to come back," Hudson says. "So, when I heard that, I was shocked."

Ramis adds, "Oh, me too. Absolutely. He's so, not just publicity shy, but he's been so incredibly selective about what he's done over the last several years."

"I'm very happy though," Hudson continues, "I
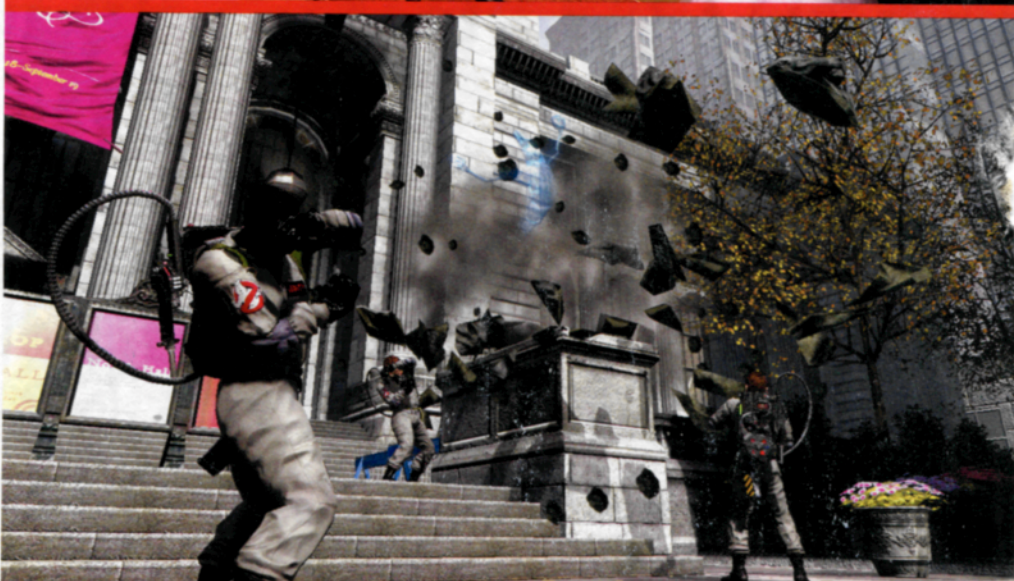
can't imagine anything being legitimate without Bill Murray. He just is Peter Venkman."

"Suck in the guts, guys. We're the Ghostbusters."

Let's face facts—it's nice to see Harrison Ford back in the iconic fedora. But, it's disturbing to see a man in his sixties swinging from a whip. He could hurt himself.

This is another aspect of the revival that *Ghostbusters* fans won't have to worry about. The development team at Terminal Reality has done an amazing job creating versions of the actors that look just like they did back in 1991.

And what did Hudson and Ramis think when they saw their movie counterparts come to life in glorious high-definition graphics? "Winston went through a few changes there, but I like what they came up with," Hudson says. "It reminds me of another part of me that used to be. I think they captured all the characters well."

"Egon looks better than I look. That's for sure," Ramis laughs. "Nowadays the voice still fits, but the suit certainly doesn't."

"Type something, will you? We're paying for this stuff."

But what about the storyline? While Trekkers are currently wetting their Starfleet uniforms, worried about what J.J. Abrams is going to do with their beloved franchise, Ghostheads are in familiar suspense.

With Aykroyd and Ramis helming the script, the game is guaranteed to stay true to the original spirit (no pun intended) of the films. The storyline, which features the Ghostbusters' "dickless" nemesis Walter Peck being put in charge of the team, ties into a museum exhibit of works from Ivo Shandor (the certified genius/ authentic wacko behind Gozer worship), and even explores the backstory of the librarian ghost from the original film.

"We've got the tools, we've got the talent."

This June marks the 25th anniversary of the release of the original *Ghostbusters*, and the video game is set to be the centerpiece of a *Ghostbusters* revival or perhaps a Venkmanaissance that will see a Blu-ray release of the movies, Minimates from Diamond Select, and a first-ever line of action figures based on the actors' likenesses from Mattel.

"There never were *Ghostbusters* action figures that looked like us because they were based on the cartoon," Ramis says. "I remember Dan Aykroyd saying when we were working on the first *Ghostbusters* script that when he did *Blues Brothers* he resisted a lot of merchandising because he didn't want to have his face on every lunch box in America. But then he said, 'Now I do want to have my face on every lunch box in America.'"

This marketing blitz was going to be the closest Ghostheads were ever going to get to an actual big-screen *Ghostbusters 3*. That is until…

"The light is green … trap is clean."

With the excitement the video game was generating, Columbia Pictures decided to green light an actual *Ghostbusters III*. "The studio asked me and Danny if we thought they (Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnitsky from the U.S. version of *The Office*) could write this and we said, 'Yes,'" Ramis says. "So they're working on a script and we'll see what happens. It'll be new Ghostbusters and we'll be around as sage mentors."

But Hudson admits he has concerns about a *Ghostbusters* script in new hands. "I think *Ghostbusters* is Aykroyd and Ramis. I have a hard time imagining it without those two involved in the creative process."

Now that there's a *Ghostbusters* movie in the works that can fall into any or all of the three traps listed above, it'll be interesting to see if this changes the way Hollywood looks at sequels of franchises that have long been dormant. And before you say it's unlikely for Hollywood to ever consider a video game to be a worthy sequel to a popular franchise, keep in mind that 2008's highest grossing opening week for a sequel wasn't *The Dark Knight* or *Indiana Jones IV*, it was *Grand Theft Auto 4's* $500 million haul.

And while Eisenberg and Stupnitsky's work on *The Office* has been critically acclaimed, Jim Halpert and Dwight Schrute have never had to square off against a 100-foot marshmallow man. So, what advice would the sage mentor scribe have for writers trying to create a sequel to a franchise that has 25 years of history and a devoted fan base?

"Well," Ramis ponders, "It better be good."