

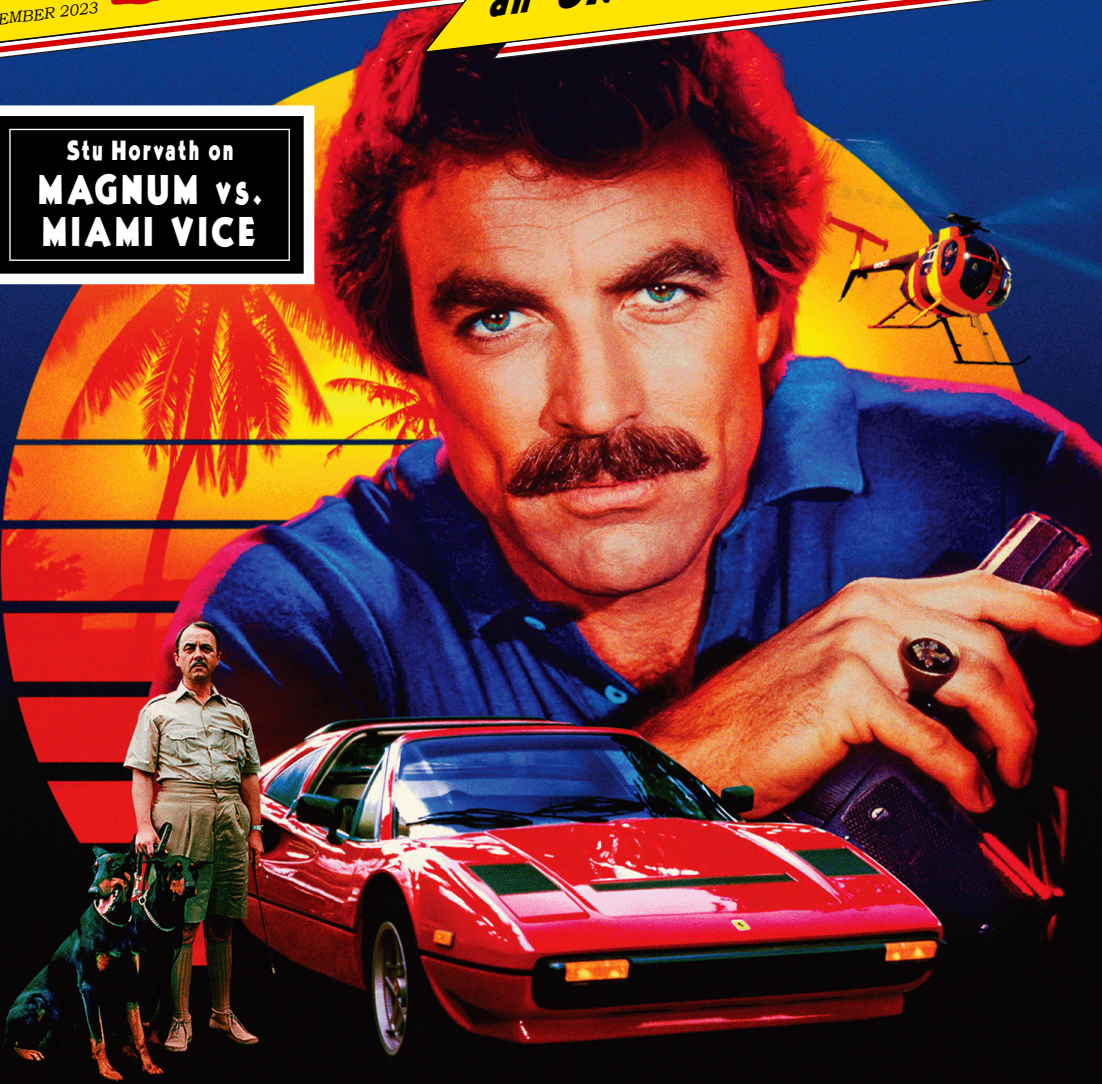
ISSUE 68

EXPLOITS

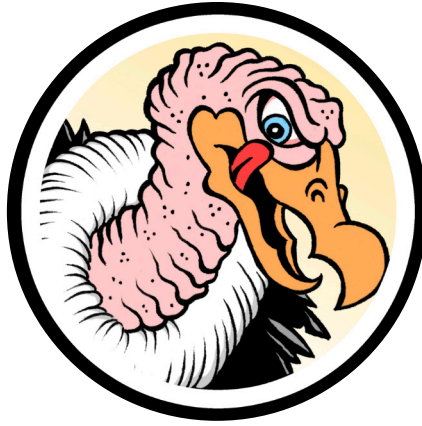
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NOVEMBER 2023

Stu Horvath on
**MAGNUM vs.
MIAMI VICE**



**RAW • GAME • SEA of STARS
• ACCIDENTAL GOSPELS • ABBA**



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

ACCIDENTAL GOSPELS

by Elijah Beahm

Something not often mentioned about Christian belief is the importance of being *your own* pastor. In a sense, it's a matter of finding what you believe in balance with what God teaches you. To divine meaning from your life and experiences to guide your actions. Unfortunately, the usual knee-jerk response, especially among more conservative circles, is to just defer to others and stay in a safe bubble, even though that runs counter to a lot of what Christ encourages.

This is frustratingly common in most religious media. The formula is to just sanitize modern hits to avoid potentially upsetting their conservative audiences, even if the groups themselves aren't conservative. So, for every Tree 63's "Can I See Your Face" or Anberlin's "Godspeed" that earnestly speaks to the human experience, most Christian songs are so empty that Spirit Halloween has set up shop in them. They're as close to gospel as a takeout menu – a menu I once was sadly familiar with thanks to my then "best friend," a far more narrow-minded young man.

I couldn't listen to that album by P!NK, he'd press, "It's Explicit." Why try AC/DC when there's . . . *Skillet*. With such a limited selection, you learn to listen beyond the cursory level — chewing on what's being said. Were the messages saying what they intended, or just thinly veiled raging hormones disguised as being passionate about "Jesus?"

Yet, while watching the end of Michael Bay's *Transformers*, I finally heard echoes of the gospel as I knew it. Those words, sung by the late Chester Bennington, in "What I've Done." A song about reconciling with past sins, desiring to be reborn anew and to erase the pain you've caused. The more of Linkin Park I listened to, the greater that appreciation grew. "In The End," finding understanding in failure, how material acts can be made fruitless. "Numb," literally taking place in a church as a generational clash driving so many young believers — like myself — from the broken institutions supposed to preach to us.

I finally found the beautiful existential expression I'd been starving for. Demi Lovato's struggles for stability, self-image, confidence and forgiveness; going so far as to sing a prayer out to their late parent, "Father." Or Halestorm's ballads of liberation, consent and perhaps their strongest piece yet, "Terrible Things." Uncompromisingly bleak, pained, yet there's that shred of hope. The inherent contradiction of the human condition. Acknowledging how far we've fallen, but that we don't have to give in.

Where I was told I'd find emptiness and sin, I found a chapel of hard-hitting poeticism of rebirth and standing against evil without fitting a "perfect" mold someone else decided from their own interpretations. A testament of existential fears, wants and hopes uncompromised for those afraid of being challenged. What supposedly would weaken my beliefs instead fuels it, nourishing the soul in a way few things can. While they may be accidental gospels, they carry the word far better than the broken institutions that dare to condemn them. Nothing short of a small miracle. 🙏



MUSIC



ABBA – There’s a certain type of music that survives generation to generation not necessarily because it is *good* but absolutely because our parents thought it was good. For a long time, for me, that was the music of David Bowie. My mom was mystified that I liked Bowie as much as I do. I told her then that the reason I like him is because she likes him and played his music pretty often. But that’s not true. My mom played “Space Oddity” a lot, a song I think she thinks is called “Major Tom.” But over the last few years I’ve found myself being able to sing along to another group despite having never sought out their music. It’s the music of ABBA.

I know the words of *so many* of their songs. Hearing one of their songs in passing feels like unlocking deep, hidden knowledge. I haven’t even really found the depths of this knowledge yet. Rock bottom perhaps lies on some deep cut. I don’t really know their albums or even the names to the songs but I definitely know the words to their songs. It’s almost like being activated as a hypnotized sleeper agent except the only mission I’m being activated to carry out is the proliferation of winners of the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest.

ABBA is absolutely the music of my childhood home and of my mother. In a very literal

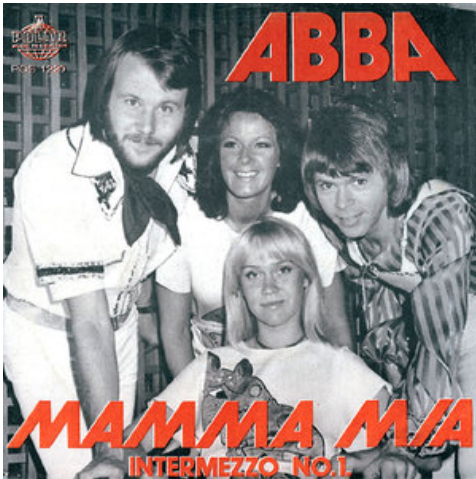
sense, it’s the “music of my people.” As the child of two immigrants from very different cultures who learned a type of American identity largely through TV and other millennials, I’ve always had the pleasure of a home experience constantly being invented and reinvented. In this case, that means I’m telling you ABBA is the music of cleaning house on the weekend, doing yardwork and preparing the Thanksgiving meal.

A few years ago, I likely wouldn’t have even really acknowledged that I *liked* ABBA. And if I’d found them on my own, I’m not sure I’d have stuck with them in the way that I have. Which is to say, I will be infecting future members of my family with this mind virus.

It’s funny, I have a habit of listening to whatever I am writing about when I write these but something has been missing. Every time I listen to ABBA it isn’t quite the same as listening at my parent’s house. I have a much nicer speaker set up than the early 2000s CD player at their house. I’m sure the Spotify versions are the same as the worn copy of *ABBA Gold*. But certainly, what is missing is the fifth member of ABBA. My mom, singing her own versions of the song enthusiastically.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA

MUSIC



"Mamma Mia," by ABBA

"Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)," by ABBA

"Angeleyes," by ABBA

"Money, Money, Money," by ABBA

"Chiquitita," by ABBA

"Thank You For The Music," by ABBA

LISTEN ON SPOTIFY

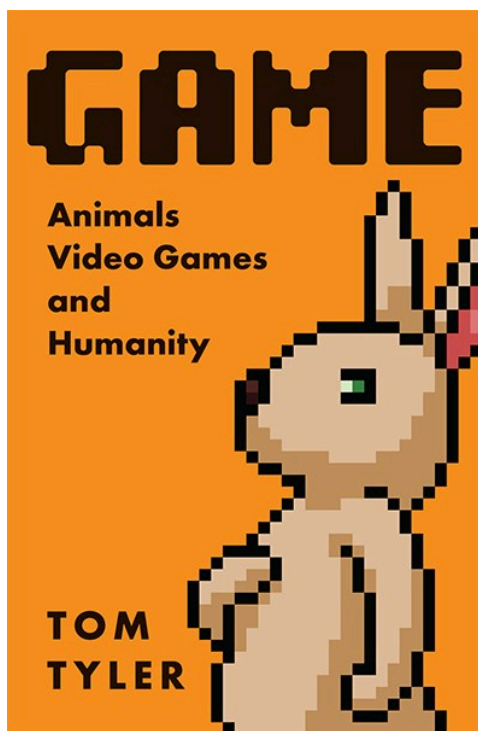
BOOKS

GAME – If you have already noticed that the title of Tom Tyler’s *Game* is a double entendre, you are probably going to like this book. Making it clear from the outset that his goal is not to provide “a comprehensive history or overview of animals in games,” Tyler instead offers an eclectic series of essays on various animals one might encounter in videogames, ranging in tone from playful to profound, often suggesting surprising philosophical connections dished up with a hefty side of wordplay. For example, chapter five, “An Inkling,” is a mere handful of pages illuminating the etymology of the word “inking,” describing the first installment in the *Splatoon* franchise but mostly leaving the reader on their own to draw interpretive connections. At the other end of the spectrum, chapter 11, “Misanthropy without Humanity,” uses Ndemic Creations’ *Plague Inc.* as a jumping-off point for a profound – and possibly controversial – meditation on who, or what, can be credited with the characteristics of misanthropy. Because each chapter could essentially stand on its own, the sheer range of references across the book is dizzying, from *Tamagotchi* to Jeff Minter’s Llama-soft games, from the obscure (the PlayStation 2 game *Dog’s Life*) to the curious (*Ridiculous Fishing*) to the revered (*Skyrim*, *Earthbound* and *Minecraft*).

Most essays follow a general pattern in which Tyler introduces a game or a group of games, uses some aspect of the games to draw a connection to a better-known work of literature or philosophy, and then leverages that connection into an interpretation that asks the reader to understand both the game and the written text in a new way. Literary references range from Shakespeare to Don Quixote to C. S. Lewis; more contemporary

philosophical works include Val Plumwood’s “Being Prey” and Harry G. Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit*. It is not always clear if Tyler is interested in games for their own sake or as foils for philosophical discussion, and his wide-ranging references may bring the reader to question whether or not Tyler is himself playing a kind of game as he writes. Still, even if you have the occasional beef with his methodology, Tyler’s meaty questions are sure to help you ruminate without going ape, or feeling sheepish.

– NATE SCHMIDT



BOOKS

The YAKUZA'S BIAS – A yakuza second-in-command learns the meaning of masculinity and leadership through attending idol events with his boss' daughter. Endearing, this was an easy recommend to folks who like to see brash dudes recontextualize their own machismo.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



SWORD of the LICTOR – The entry in the Book of the New Sun that finally goes all in on the mayhem. Inscrutable decisions! Multiple volumes of monsters! Questions asked and previous questions unanswered! Rampant death! Casting down old rulers! Masks stacked on masks stacked on masks! One more to go for me, but who can deny the wild pace. It's fantasy, it's sci-fi, it's the combination fantasy-sci-fi, but with heaping scoops of Catholicism. I can claim to understand maybe 50% of this book understanding isn't really the point.

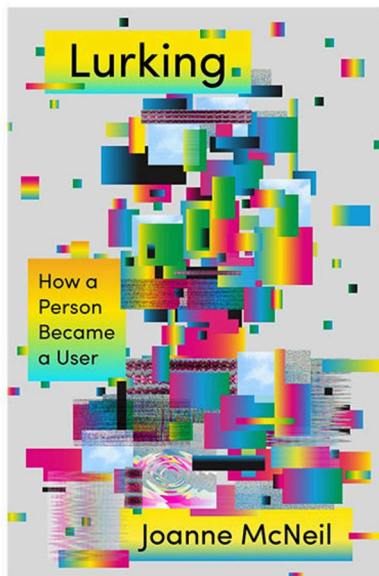
– LEVI RUBECK



LURKING: HOW a PERSON BECAME a USER

– Joanne McNeil is very adept at providing an overview of the history of the social internet thus far. She covers everything from BBS to Livejournal, to Tumblr and Twitter eras and beyond. Her focus is on how people became constructed differently online and how social media has abstracted and changed our behavior patterns. Although lurking is the title of the book, I found it was often more of a tangential subject in each chapter. The act of lurking before posting or engaging has certainly shifted over time however and I feel this book is a perfect companion read to *You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



MOVIES



RAW – *Raw*, Julia Ducournau's directorial debut, takes place as the protagonist Justine enters veterinary school. She has barely a moment to breathe before she's swept up in the hazing rituals that all incoming students have to endure, culminating in a blood-spattered class picture and her breaking her lifelong vegetarianism by eating a raw rabbit kidney. The film draws little distinction between dormitories and classrooms, the boundaries blurred from the moment the older students throw her mattress from a window as part of their ritual. Justine has nowhere to retreat to – her sister Alexia, an older student at the same program, is unsympathetic bordering on mocking.

Modern carnivorousism is a private suffering. The animal is killed elsewhere, prepared elsewhere – the "meat" we buy in stores resembles the animal it came from as much as a table resembles a tree. *Raw's* veterinary setting makes this illusion impossible to maintain. Animals are not sympathetic creatures or characters in their own right but medical forms, to be presented dispassionately in a classroom setting and learned from, and it is access to this clinical separa-

tion that begins to break down Justine's understanding of reality.

Why would animal meat, to any honest extent, be different from human meat? Instead of taking the angle of sympathetic vegetarianism – Justine is ambivalent to the animals she encounters, bored with her family dog and dismissive of her sister's – it ends up at nihilistic cannibalism, where the boundary between animal and human is so thin it's barely worth drawing.

In that environment, the development of the sister's cannibalism seems remarkably logical. By attempting to create ties between young people, unmoored and displaced from their family – and perhaps, generously, trying to inculcate a scholarly disposition in these future medical students by immunizing them to acts that do not take place in polite society, that could be construed as violence – the hazing instead unleashes Justine's cravings for human flesh, as it did to her sister and mother before her. A natural development from that first violent, intrusive bonding ritual, the class picture, where everyone alike was covered in blood.

– MADDI CHILTON

MOVIES



AMANDA'S MOVIE CORNER

In the MOOD for LOVE – I'm not sure anyone who is into movies needs an argument for watching the Wong Kar Wai's masterwork of intimacy and the road not traveled.

AFTER LIFE – Beautifully meditative, this film is a fantastic portrait of both filmmaking and memory.

The CHRONICLE – A lot of movies would be better if they were brave enough to be gay, but this vehicle for launching a lot careers for better (Michael B. Jordan) and worse (Max Landis) would really be better if it was queerer.

DAY of the BEAST – A priest needs to be invited to the birth of the Antichrist on Christmas Day and commits all kinds of sins to get the invite and save the world. I love it.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

NOAH'S MOVIE CORNER

CLIFFORD – I mean, it's an absolutely ridiculous premise, but it's always fun to watch Charles Grodin be driven insane

LAST NIGHT in SOHO – Solid little ghost story with immaculate style, but a little weak on the structure and the sexual politics feel a bit iffy.

The MIST – You might say this is the precursor to *The Walking Dead*, and you wouldn't be wrong, but I think the stronger link is to *Midnight Mass*.

SORCERER – Awesome movie. Terrible, terrible name!

– NOAH SPRINGER



TELEVISION



MAGNUM vs. MIAMI VICE – A few years back, I watched the entire eight-season run of the original *Magnum, P.I.* (1980 to 1987). I did this to see how a show I watched fondly but sporadically as a kid held up as an adult. The answer is: pretty well. When sitting down to watch something, my wife Daisy and I both will often mutter, “Man, I wish we had more *Magnum* to watch.”

In an attempt to find more *Magnum*, we started watching *Miami Vice*. We only got a few episodes into the first season before drifting off to other things. We still miss *Magnum*. But why? *Miami Vice* is, like *Magnum*, a tent-pole TV series of the ‘80s. It immediately wows with the Michael Mann-directed pilot, awash with neon, powered by the amazing use of Phil Collins’ “In the Air Tonight” in what is one of the best TV montages of all time. In fact, the success of *Vice*’s gritty tone was a direct influence on later seasons of *Magnum*, where cases became morally ambiguous (and in two occasions,

featured excellent montages using songs recorded by Phil Collins-era Genesis).

The problem, I think, is that *Vice* leads with its seriousness, so when it veers into the silly character stuff that was standard for ‘80s TV, the contrast is jarring. *Magnum*, though billed as a detective show, is actually a show about a group of friends and their shared history. There are serious episodes, sure, but many more silly ones, and it’s the light-hearted ones that set the tone. I don’t love *Magnum* because of the gritty mysteries (Thomas is really a mediocre P.I.) or the gratuitous views of beach babes (there is less of this than you might expect, but also a couple of instances of actual nudity that I still have a hard time believing aired without notice). Rather, I love the show because of Thomas and his friends, a group of people who weirdly, after eight seasons, feel like *my* friends. Crocket and Tubbs are cool, sure, but they’re never chill like that.

– STU HORVATH

TELEVISION



AMANDA'S TV CORNER

KEI X YAKU – A Japanese BL crime drama, this has all the makings of a dishy drama with the added benefit of two leads who actually deliver chemistry.

TASK MASTER (SEASON 12) – *Task Master* is a British institution and watching this series, it's easy to see why. This particular series has an incredibly solid cast of folks who challenge the shows premise of lateral thinkers.

The MOTIVE – A short series about an Israeli crime, this story keeps asking you “what the motive is” with a wry grin and a knowing look but by the end even you don't care. Absolutely bottom of the barrel true crime.

CLAIM to FAME (SEASON 2) – The premise for *Claim to Fame* sounds far worse than it is – relatives of celebrities compete to maintain their anonymity; slip up and let someone know you're related to Hollywood royalty and you go home. In practice, the show is gleeful sincerity and wacky hi-jinks with fairly normal people who are ultimately fairly endearing.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS (SEASON 2) – It's a real mixed bag this time around, but when it's good it's really fun. Anson Mount is really charismatic yet down-to-earth at Captain Pike, perfectly cast in my opinion. Same for Ethan Peck as a more vulnerable and nuanced Spock. I feel like they've dragged out La'an Noonien-Singh's arc, however, and wish they'd start giving more crew members some time in the spotlight.

– PHOENIX SIMMS





SEA of STARS – The worst thing I could say about *Sea of Stars* is that it too often feels insincere. To be clear, I don't think Sabotage Studio could have made such a gorgeous game drenched in homage if they did not genuinely love JRPGs (or *Chrono Trigger* at least), but playing their latest pastiche left me feeling like the developers were less interested in their characters and world than I was.

It's kind of a meme at this point among JRPG fans that indie devs love to make homages to the greats of the genre in the '90s while simultaneously deriding one of its hallmarks – turn-based combat – as outdated and boring. They'll often tout updates to combat that make it “more engaging” while failing to interest anyone with the rest of the game: Art, character designs, worldbuilding. Meanwhile, fans continue to (re)discover more of those old games today and don't seem to mind the combat at all.

Sea of Stars is much the same, which is a shame given how much attention and care was devoted to art, animation and music specifically. It's all betrayed by the games' written elements, though: Narrative, worldbuilding, characterization and dialogue all fall flat by not only over-relying on tropes, but trying to be witty and self-aware about it. It's much the same playbook Sabotage used in *The Messenger* (2018), a *Ninja Gaiden* pas-

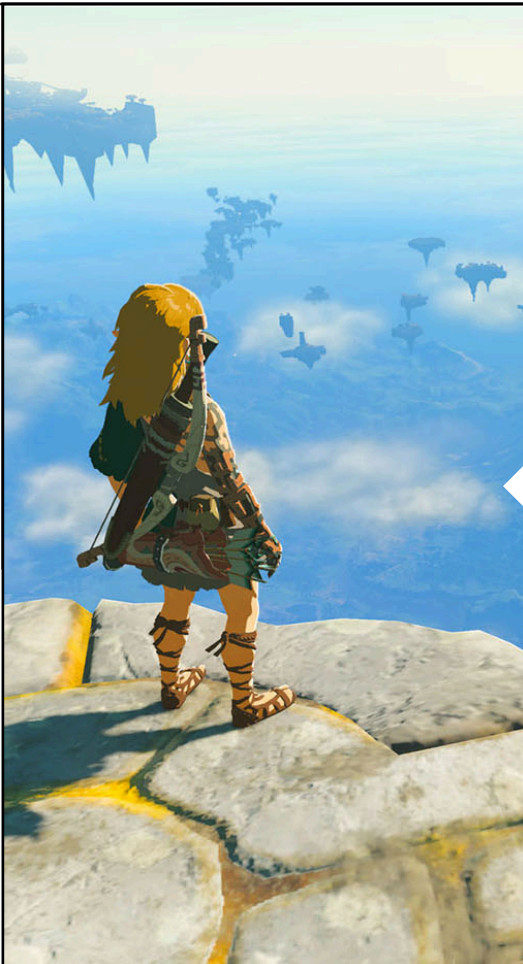
tiche and ode to arcade action-platformers. Its sarcasm and fourth-wall breaking humor works alongside fast paced action and the game's short length while remaining true to its roots. Carrying the same tone and scope over to a JRPG has done everything else a great disservice.

With such strong visuals and music, I thought I could see myself enjoying a tropey but heartfelt adventure in this world I do not remember the name of. But then I met a cool, mysterious pirate lady named Klee'shaë. Get it? That sarcasm does not lend itself to the length and character-led narrative of a JRPG. I don't think I'm ever gonna see fan art of her alongside all the other mysterious pirate ladies! This also manifests as a disinterest in doing anything with its main cast, as if it's already given up on originality so why even bother distinguishing between characters at all? Its deuteragonists lack any personality, let alone distinct identities.

Sea of Stars tries so hard to be cool with its ironic detachment, but I would describe canonical JRPGs – *Trails*, *Xeno*, *FF*, all big commercial productions, yes, but passion projects nonetheless – as nothing if not sincere. I really wanted to like *Sea of Stars*, but it's hard to when it doesn't even like itself.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

GAMES



The LEGEND of ZELDA: TEARS of the KINGDOM – Don't get me wrong, I love wide open spaces, but in *Tears of the Kingdom*, the spaces might be just a little bit too wide and just a little bit too open, at least for me. I'd love to see something besides broken signage once in a while.

– JUSTIN REEVE

Everyone else gorged themselves on an entire Country Buffet of megadungeon wandering, and they were fools. Meanwhile I am smart, taking my time, enjoying sensibly stacked plates, working through Hyrule up down and center like a marathon and enjoying it all the same. It was overwhelming at first to feel like I see so much that I want to go to and dip around in, but there's no real joy in capitulating to a thirty page list of chores. Now I just do what I do, wander where I am drawn, work through the story when driven, and may trot through the rest in time. There's still plenty left.

– LEVI RUBECK

BTS ISLAND: In the SEOM – I'm about 12 years late to this game and have absolutely no clue what I'm doing. In any case, at least I'm not playing as a cop, this being basically cops and robbers, after all.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



PAYDAY 3 – *Payday 2* is one of my favorite games, in large part because it is a deeply stupid game. And, as with Amanda above, at least I'm not playing a cop. That's true of the sequel too, but it's far less stupid, which, paradoxically, makes it . . . more stupid? Weird.

– STU HORVATH

HOROSCOPE

A RANDOM COLLECTION OF LETTERSSGAUWHWLDDGUANWH! 🍷