

ISSUE 64

EXPLOITS

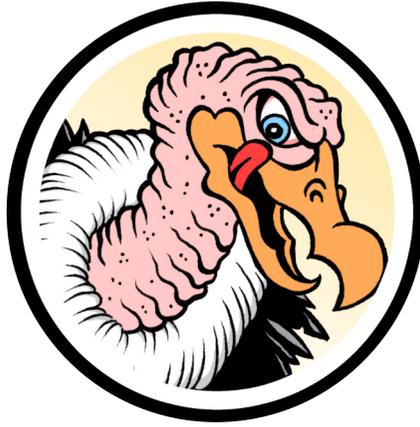
JULY 2023

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David Shmomura on
**DEADLIEST
CATCH**



**POLITICAL GAMES • INIKO • BIRNAM WOOD
• KINGDOM HEARTS 3D: DREAM DROP DISTANCE •
SUBSPECIES 5: BLOOD RISE**



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

PLAYABLE CAMPAIGNS

by Toby Jaffe

I cannot imagine anything as alien in 2023 as conceptualizing politics as *fun*. Such an idea was alien twenty years ago, too, just not as much and not in the same way. Yet from then until now I have been playing a series of electoral politics videogames made by a company now known as 270sims. I play its latest iteration, *President Infinity 2020*, regularly, despite the fact that it is not quite fleshed out and a bit buggy.

Players are required to select election year scenarios and candidates within them – weighing their platform positions and strengths and weaknesses in traits like integrity, leadership and experience. Then, they attempt to guide the candidate to the White House by barnstorming, speechmaking, advertising, spinning and debating their way through presidential primaries and then, potentially, a general election.

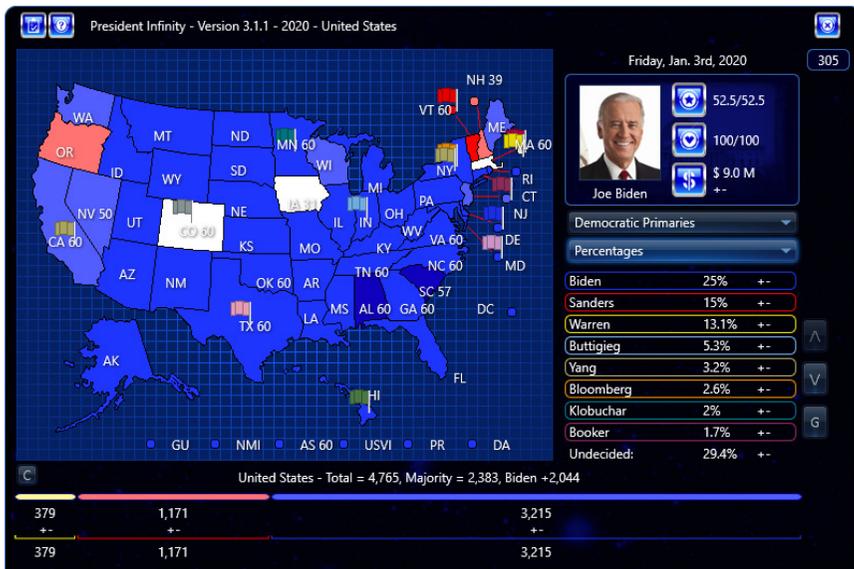
The game can be painfully reflective of real life even when one tries to change history. Take, for instance, a recent 2020 campaign playthrough I undertook as Bernie Sanders where I tried my darndest to right the mistakes of the '20 Sanders campaign. As Sanders, who is armed with an impressive integrity trait of 9 out of 10, I was much less resistant to criticize Biden than the real-life Vermont senator was (and is), much more proactive about meeting voters in states like South Carolina and much more conscious about countering negative media narratives. No luck – I attracted nothing but negative stories from the national press while they slobbered all over Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar and Mayor Pete; my attempts to paint Biden as a pharmaceutical industry shill unwilling to bring needed changes to our CORRUPT HEALTH-CAH SYSTEM were in vain. I did win Iowa and Nevada, but I lost New Hampshire to Biden in between and at that point, I was fucked. South Carolina and Super Tuesday played out pretty much exactly as they did in real life and I – er – Bernie was forced to drop out during the early COVID lockdown period in spring 2020.

If you want to play as a cheat code, select Donald Trump in scenarios from 2016 onwards. His stats, as you might imagine, are all over the place – his integrity is a disastrous 3, but his charisma is a respectable 7. What makes him a cheat code – and this may sound *faintly* familiar – is his ability to suffer zero political consequences from scandals, gaffes, abominations, atrocities, insurrections, etc., thanks to his basically unheard of 7 in the “spin” category and strong numbers in other categories like “stamina” and “command.”

For reasons both related to the game and to our everyday lives, there are ethical considerations in choosing to play as Trump, much as there might be when, for instance on a more extreme level, playing as, erm, say, Germany in *Hearts of Iron*. But Donnie has so poisoned our discourse that concepts like “ethical considerations” can be slippery and secondary, if they are thought about at all.

I’ve long wondered if election simulation games like *President Infinity* could ever be viable for a widespread audience. But now I’m starting to worry if such games will soon be viable *at all*. Games have rules, and when fundamental parameters collapse, it is difficult to carry on. An official 2024 *President Infinity* scenario will not be able to account for simulated election results determined by sectarian violence, militant state legislatures overturning official vote totals nor long-term disputes about the winner that go beyond what we’ve seen in the aftermath of 2020.

Such things will corrupt the game and render it unplayable. And if the game is unplayable, what of the political junkies? 🤖



MUSIC



INIKO – Brooklyn-born songwriter, producer and multi-instrumentalist Iniko is a boundless being. That’s how the soaring melodies and heartbeat rhythms of their music feels too. Their singles effortlessly become anthems for those with a futurist’s mindset. Most likely this is why Iniko refers to their passionate and diverse fan base as Lumineers. I first became aware of Iniko via an Instagram reel of them performing “The King’s Affirmation” in effortless acapella, shared by writer-activist Adrienne Maree Brown. I followed their account soon afterwards and quickly realized how inspiring their music had become to Afropunk and Indigenous folk as well as content creators from alternative subcultures. If you’re like me and engage with a lot of fantasy and science-fiction content, you’re just as likely to have heard the opening lyrics of Iniko’s single “Jericho” in an edit:

*I’m high, I’m from outer space
I got Milky Way for blood
evolution in my veins*

“Jericho” references the world’s most ancient built wall and how easily Iniko proclaims they can break down such barriers. In an era when we’re still reckoning with many divisions both ideologically and physically, especially when a literal wall was proposed to be built as a tool to contain and control American identities and North American borders are still heavily policed, such lyrical metaphors are powerful. Artists like Iniko are ones that easily become emblematic of the hopes and movements of both older progressives like me and the youthful generations of activists and creators who are weary of how authority is currently managed.

The artist started off by reimagining their favorite songs on TikTok and during a consistency challenge based off of a challenge set by their sister Ekela who’s (among many things) a vocal coach and music producer. During said challenge, Ekela suggested they rewrite Nikki Minaj’s “Do We Have a Problem?” which led to Iniko producing “The King’s Affirmation.” Initially this song, a fiercely

MUSIC

confident yet vulnerable rebuttal to cyberbullying and recentering oneself in their power, didn't go viral. But when Iniko did a spontaneous acapella version (I believe this was the same clip that introduced me to their work, in fact), it was an overnight hit and shared across different social media platforms. They woke up to over 50,000 notifications on their different social media profiles and had another reckoning with cyberbullying.

Some of this bullying was expected. Despite Iniko being very open about their non-binary identity, people relentlessly misgender them online both intentionally and due to sheer ignorance. Even perusing the comments section on their most recent YouTube video (I don't recommend it) is a fraught experience. This has led to the artist making their tagline "Genderless. It is exactly what you think it means." But some of the drama was also due to copyright. Many TikTok users remixed that first verse shared in the viral clip without credit and when many labels, including Columbia, reached out to Iniko about the song, they had to speedily produce the rest of the track with Ekela.

In one of the few interviews with Iniko on YouTube, Iniko explains to The Progress Report that they intend in all their work to free themselves and others of humility. They want to show up authentically and without a facade or a mask to mediate their music's message of empowerment. In their words, "I hope that when people hear it, they know that in order to be great you must first be yourself."

Greatness lies in all of us and is accessed, paradoxically, via vulnerability and not relying on an alter ego. Artists like Iniko show how tricky it is to remain authentic in a world that prizes people building up personal

brands, and how to navigate the often-essential networks of social media. Iniko's work shows it is possible to find some modicum of independent expression and creation. I've chosen a playlist that reflects both Iniko's journey and some artists that are from a similar forward-thinking mindset to them. I hope it inspires those who may discover them through this article to respect their inner strengths and be at peace with their more vulnerable side.

Also, as a final note to those who would like to see Iniko perform live, they have been invited to perform at Afropunk Brooklyn Fest 2023, on August 26th.

— PHOENIX SIMMS



MUSIC

PLAYLIST



“Kingdom,” by Iniko

“Pinocchio,” by Iniko

“Luna,” by Iniko

“Motion,” by Iniko

“Caught a Body,” by Iniko

“Hourglass,” by Iniko

“The King’s Affirmation,” by Iniko

“Jericho,” by Iniko

“Yosemite (Song For The Ahwahnechee),”
by Iniko

“Sunday Best,” by Princess Nokia, Onyx
Collective, OSHUN

“Thinkin Bout You,” by Frank Ocean

“Nont For Sale,” by Sudan Archives

“Point and Kill,” by Lil Simz featuring
Obongjayar

“Blood of the Fang,” by clipping.

“I Owe You Nothing,” by Seinabo Sey

“Jambo,” by Kamauu

“Deep Sea Diver,” by Angel Haze

“Dirty Computer,” by Janelle Monae featur-
ing Brian Wilson

“Hu Man,” by Greentea Peng

“OCTAVIA,” by Jamila Woods

“Starseed,” by Tanerelle, SIM

[LISTEN ON SPOTIFY](#)



BIRNAM WOOD – My mind is still floating somewhere in New Zealand after reading Eleanor Catton's latest novel, *Birnam Wood: A Novel*. Catton masterfully created an eco-thriller whose characters speak for various scenarios of the current environmental and socio-political dilemma of today. The ending itself was superbly constructed by its author and leaves a resolved yet ambiguous conclusion for its readers to reflect on.

The novel is set in contemporary New Zealand, wherein a gardening guerilla movement lives by cultivating crops utilizing unused pieces of land around the country – Birnam Woods being the collective name of this un-registered farming group. Initially, the organization's goal is to provide for those in need. But oftentimes, members of the group use methods that are not strictly legal, staining its humanitarian and environmental propaganda. And this is where the problem begins.

After Mira, a co-founder of the group, discovers a seemingly abandoned tract of land, she conceives a larger planting project. But when an American billionaire and pioneer of drone technology also discovers the land and negotiates to purchase and convert it into a doomsday bunker for himself, things get

complicated. This billionaire gets in touch with Mira and proposes to charitably fund the group's activity. With that large sum of money potentially on the table, members of the group start an in-depth analysis of their principles. The novel turns into a psychodrama where the character's ideology, mentality and background all come into play. Some members of the group feel that they are making a deal with the devil. What follows is an ecological thriller of social commentaries on modern politics, environmental issues and technology.

Reading the portraits of these characters and their relationships to each other often felt like reading monologues; there is not a lot of action until much later sections. It often requires a lot of patience to hold on to these monologues until the bomb finally drops. But when it explodes, the story becomes absolutely gripping.

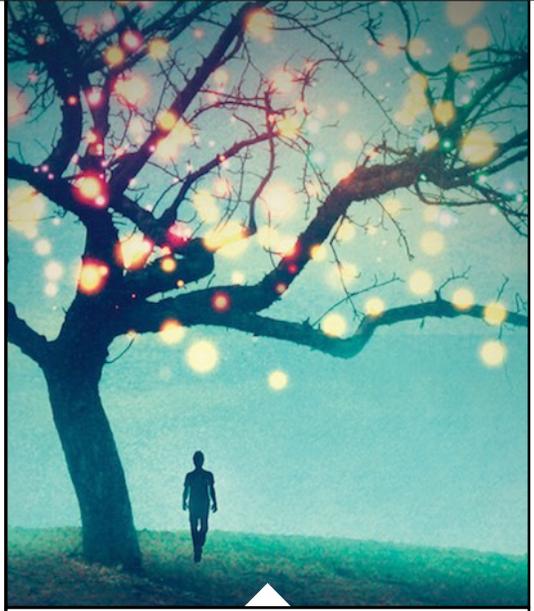
Overall, the novel engages its readers on how principles on socialistic and philanthropic aspects can succumb to capitalism. It will put your mind into work, and you will find yourself more cerebrally immersed, rather than emotionally invested.

– GILVIN PANCHITO

BOOKS

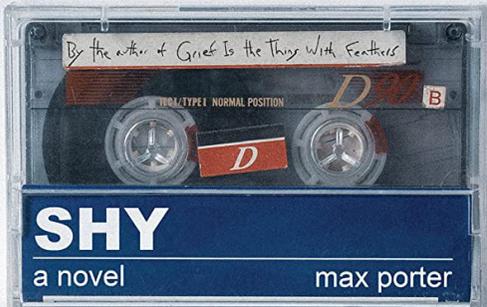
SHY – A slim novel uninterested in adherence to form, but not in a way that defies readability, Max Porter's *Shy* is a young man who fills his backpack with rocks to head down to the nearby pond with one last spliff and his favorite mixtape. It's England in the mid-'90s, but parents' inability to understand is timelessly universal. *Shy* is adrift in a tempest of teenage emotions, inter-destructive, intra-destructive, snide, cruel, wounded, exposed, all at a time when masculinity means busting balls and building emotional walls. He gets lost in high-octane techno, drugs, confusion and sex, but he's not a monster – if anything his experiences are painfully average, it's just that society has no scaffolding for a young man so completely unmoored. His mother tries to reach him but she's out of her depth, he's off to a group home where slivers of connection wiggle up but there's just so much viciousness and self-loathing to cut through. In the end, *Shy* emerges from the pond unscathed and soaking but it isn't a baptism, no greater force saves him, he just confronts a little death and gets the hug he needs. Still broken but mending, hopefully running a label with his mates by now.

– LEVI RUBECK



The GLITTERING WORLD – Robert Levy wrote what I think might be one of my top five dark faerie novels. This is thriller meets urban fantasy with a dash of horror here and there. The story is of Blue, a New York chef and lost soul who travels with his three closest friends to sign off on selling his grandmother's house in a fictional yet very convincing town called Starling Cove in Nova Scotia. But once he visits said house, he discovers he has buried memories that suggest his sense of estrangement is rooted in something deeper and more disturbing than he first believed. There are a few gaffs representation-wise (especially regarding race and gender politics) that could've been improved with diverse consulting, but nothing is too much of a deal-breaker for me (I can also tell intentions were in the right place because Levy's stance towards the police is firmly ACAB). Stu is going to have to deal with me asking for book recommendations more often, as it's thanks to him I borrowed this one from my library and devoured it.

– PHOENIX SIMMS





SUBSPECIES 5: BLOOD RISE – It often feels like you can't sprinkle a little holy water around without hitting a handful of vampire movies. Thanks to the popularity – and budget-friendliness – of their central creatures, vampire flicks have been a horror movie staple for as long as people have been making movies. And yet, despite that, the subgenre has produced surprisingly few resilient franchises in all that time.

Enter *Subspecies*, unlikely contender for one of the longest running vampire franchises ever made. The first film, released by Charles Band's Full Moon Studios, hit video store shelves back in 1991. Since then, there have been four official sequels, a spin-off, an action figure, comic books and more. Perhaps most impressive, all of the films share the same director – Full Moon regular Ted Nicolaou – and the same star, in the form of Anders Hove, who plays the villainous Radu Vladislav in movie after movie.

Subspecies 5 is the latest installment and the first one to get a theatrical bow, even if it's only playing in a scattering of theaters across the country. It's also possibly the best thing that Full Moon has done in a hot minute, which is . . . low praise indeed.

I grew up with Full Moon movies and, when they were at their best, I love them as much as I love pretty much any other films you could name. But even at their peak, Full Moon was making amazing trash. These days they make trash that is . . . considerably less amazing.

The *Subspecies* franchise was a notch above much of the studio's other output, even back in its heyday. So perhaps it's no surprise that *Blood Rise* more closely resembles an actual movie than anything they've done in a while. But "more closely," in this case, doesn't mean that it ever quite gets there, even if the decision to turn the film into an unnecessary origin story for Radu – and therefore a period piece – shows ambition, if nothing else.

– ORRIN GREY

MOVIES

The MOTHER – The "lone wolf and cub" genre of gritty dads taking care of impressionable daughters is well trod, but there's something to be said about the trope subversion of Jennifer Lopez's assassin mother figure here. She's compelling to watch, the action is slick and there's enough going on to stay interesting.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



DEEP RISING – The recent passing of Treat Williams brought this '90s-ass gem back to the surface, and what a delight. Yes that's Benny from *The Mummy*, Kano from *Mortal Kombat*, Wes Studi from all sorts of great stuff and, of course, Jean Grey from the early *X-Men* films. No need for backstory, we're on a boat and "if the money's there we don't care" and honkin' torpedoes are on deck in the first twenty minutes. We don't see the monsters for a while and they're mostly just extra creepy snakes/tentacles but the CG isn't that bad. The cover art gives away the last five minutes but who cares, we're shooting, we're swimming, we're quipping, everyone dies, one surprise survivor at end and then more bullshit?!?! Where's *Deep Rising 2*? Humanity's loss.

– LEVI RUBECK

DANIEL CRAIG'S JAMES BOND – Just picture the Joker from Tim Burton's *Batman* saying "I'm glad he's dead! I'm glad he's dead!"

– NOAH SPRINGER



PUSS in BOOTS: The LAST WISH – A delightful piece of animation that brings together so many lovely elements that if you have even a passing interest in the form, it's worth checking out.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

TELEVISION



DEADLIEST CATCH – Discovery Channel has never known what they have with *Deadliest Catch*. Since 2005, *Deadliest Catch* has been an unflinching look at the ongoing tragedy that is the Bering Sea crab fishery.

The work is dangerous, and occasionally deadly, often done by people in extremely vulnerable positions who are constantly at the mercy of captains, owners and buyers operating under one simple organizing principle: the crab must flow. As the show wheels on, the increasing and intense effects of global climate change are on full display, from dangerous and frequent storms to the impending loss of the fishery entirely. And while Discovery and Mike Rowe might believe this is a show about American rugged perseverance, it's perhaps our generation's *The Jungle*.

Crab fishing can never be made *safe*. Some industries can't. But over the course of the last 20 years, we've seen crew members speak openly about their lack of access to healthcare, the overall failure of the social safety net, the rampant issues with drug and alcohol abuse and how as an industry, most people would rather do something, anything, else. That is, if they could, because for many, the carceral state has pushed them to the edge of society. But

without them, the crab would not flow. And neither would the show, a fact Discovery is grappling with using clever edits and shooting techniques as more and more prominent members of the show have had public run-ins with law.

Increasingly, the show now must also shoot around the closure of the various fisheries. The show's first season was the last of the "derby" years where captains fought to catch as many crabs as possible during a limited time window. Due to the slow decline of population, all boats now operate under a "quota" system, a hard cap to how many pounds of crab they can fish. This wasn't enough. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game now closes the various species seasons all together when they feel the population cannot sustain it.

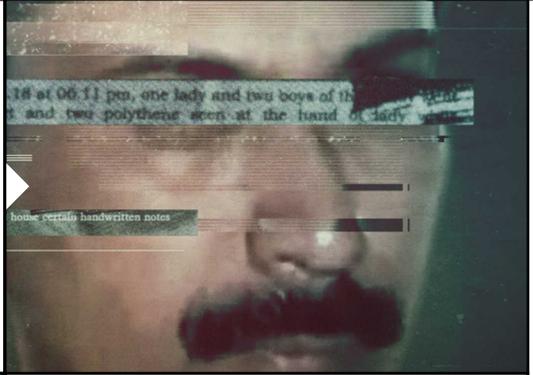
But the crab must flow. To feed the ratings and to feed distant consumers paying premium prices built on the backs of workers who will never see half of the value of their catch. And as so many read *The Jungle* and failed to see the compelling socialist message, so too do we watch *Deadliest Catch* and finish the evening at Red Lobster.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA

TELEVISION

HOUSE of SECRETS – A heavy trigger warning for suicide and mental illness, wherever you think this documentary is going, I promise it goes elsewhere. I was not familiar with this case before starting this limited series, but it's definitely one of the more interesting docuseries I've watched about death, faith and family obligation.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

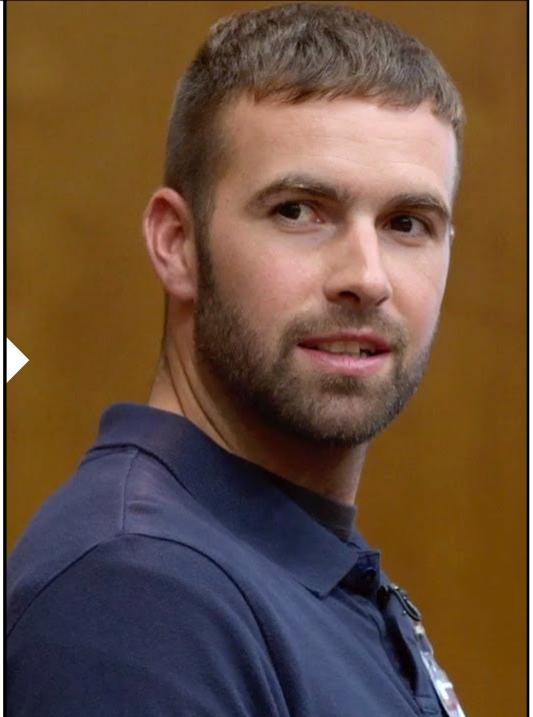


The MANDALORIAN (SEASON 3) – Now that there's not as much exposition regarding Mandalorian lore, the series is free to experiment with its narrative. It was great to get episodes from other perspectives on both sides of the moral spectrum. The steampunk, sand-ship/glider contraption was pretty slick (along with all the ship designs). Jack Black and Lizzo's guest appearances were fun, as well! A well-rounded season, overall.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

JURY DUTY – Not sure how they pulled this off, and don't think it can happen again. The most light-hearted prank reality show, *Jury Duty* has one guy volunteer to serve on a jury as part of a "documentary" about the process, but he's the only one who doesn't know it's all a sham. A straight sidekick in a sea of insanity, Ron's trying to keep his head down and his jurymates' spirits up as all the improv actors around him cook through a ridiculous case. James Marsden plays his own evil twin, Hollywood to the gills and riding perfectly between famous d-bag and charming sweetheart. Everyone else deserves their own shout out but really just watch the damn show and how they bend over backwards to let Ron shine in the truly bonkers backdrops they set up for him.

– LEVI RUBECK





KINGDOM HEARTS 3D: DREAM DROP DISTANCE – *Kingdom Hearts* is a beloved franchise, and for good reason. Its peculiar mix of Square Enix characters and Disney icons has created games that are full of charm and personality. The first *Kingdom Hearts* was an action RPG with a decent (but not spectacular) gameplay loop, which is to be expected for a debut in the series.

Kingdom Hearts 2 stepped the combat up with more in-depth combos and a new drive system. Then *Kingdom Hearts Re:coded* and *Birth By Sleep* introduced a command system, where special moves, magic and items can be quickly accessed. All these games introduced new mechanics felt fresh, but none were really like the 3DS release of *Dream Drop Distance*, which introduced a thematic system that both Sora and Riku can access: Flowmotion.

Dream Drop Distance starts with Sora in Traverse Town, watching someone wall kick and high jump off buildings – this someone turns out to be Neku from *The World Ends With You* (an amazing and underrated DS RPG), and Sora tries to befriend the anti-socialite to varying degrees of success. Neku proceeds to jump, spin and swing off a lamp post, jump again, grind off a rail, then do an insane multi front flip while a purple glow follows his path. Seeing this makes my neurons activate. When the tutorial “Flowmotion basics” comes up, I become extremely intrigued.

Momentum has shifted to a floaty, fast and stylish movement system. Sora and Riku can now parkour off walls, grind rails and spin around large enemies – and throw them. The player is not locked to just rolling infinitely, but instead can bounce between walls like a pinball. New attack options are also available and bring that *Kingdom Hearts 2* flash with them. Sora can dash and barrel roll with the keyblade into an enemy, then finish with a devastating slam. Watch as Riku does 360s on a lamp post and uses the kinetic energy to draw dream eaters in, then shred them while spinning using skull noise.

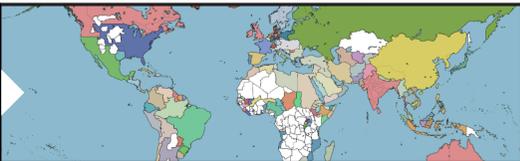
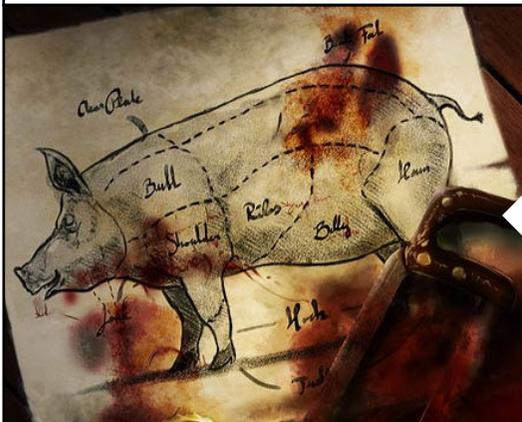
This is coherent with the narrative, too. *Kingdom Hearts’* story is infamous for being convoluted, but I promise this is simple (kind of). Sora and Riku have been put into the dreams of worlds that are sleeping. And when one has a lucid dream – a dream where one is aware that they are, in fact, dreaming – a typical thing for them to do is fly, as it’s now totally possible. Likewise, Sora and Riku are in dreams and now can jump, flip and spin with insane proficiency. This new mechanic not only improves gameplay, but blends with the idea of being inside a dream. This is why this is one of my favourite mechanics in the charming collaboration of characters that is *Kingdom Hearts*.

– SAMI RAHMAN

GAMES

VICTORIA 3 – I'm trying to form the United Socialist States of America, but I can't get the capitalists out of congress, despite trade unions being more popular.

– JUSTIN REEVE



AMNESIA: A MACHINE for PIGS – The finale to this game and its monologue left me in shock (the good kind). Instantly one of my top five atmospheric horror titles. While very linear, the environmental storytelling did some serious power-lifting. The main character's plight is also perhaps one of the most complex and raw explorations of intergenerational trauma and guilt that I've experienced in a game. And the deconstruction of steampunk through a Gothic body horror lens is brilliant.

AMNESIA: JUSTINE – Whoever said at the design table that the player should go back to the opening sequence every time they die and have to interact with practically every object each time? Rude, just super rude. This is probably the weakest of the *Amnesia* series that I've played so far.

AMNESIA: REBIRTH – Haven't finished this quite yet, but all you need to know is this is perhaps one of the most nuanced representations of motherhood I've seen in a game. The game expertly deals with loss, mourning and personal journeys towards hope. Tasi is the only protagonist of this series who has a fight response if you can keep her fear gauge in check (which is done by checking in on your possibly supernatural unborn child). What a bad ass. There's also some gorgeously spectral level design that's reminiscent of H.R. Giger that you should definitely turn up the game's brightness levels to witness.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

HOROSCOPE

WITH A MIGRAINE, EVEN THE
STARS HURT TO LOOK AT. 🍷