

ISSUE 67

EXPLOITS

an **UNWINNABLE** publication

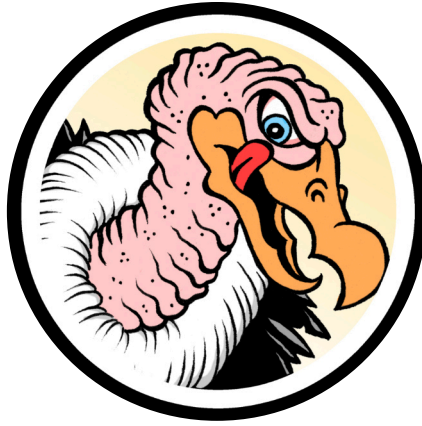
OCTOBER 2023



POP CULTURE BUBBLEGUM SLURRY • OLD RECORDS

• BEWARE THE GLOP! • FIONNA and CAKE •

DARK NIGHT OF THE SCARECROW • LISA: The PAINFUL



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

POP CULTURE BUBBLEGUM SLURRY

by Michael Lee

“The more strongly the culture industry entrenches itself, the more it can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers – producing, controlling, disciplining them; even withdrawing amusement altogether: here, no limits are set to cultural progress.”

– Theodor Adorno

Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947)

We here at Content Inc. are always looking forward (unless we're mining the past for nostalgia). The next great thing is just over the horizon. We know you have already forgotten the last show you just watched, but don't worry, because what we have planned for you next will be even better than that. Just subscribe to Content Inc.'s new streaming service **CRAM**: Where we cram pop culture slurry down your throat until you die! Don't worry, it tastes great with its new bubblegum flavor! The powerful mix of endorphins in every piece of content slurry lull you into a complete state of inactivity. You'll be powerless to resist! Did you like the old cherry flavor better? Take a hike! It's gone forever! We destroyed the recipe. I'm sure you heard about our upcoming blue raspberry flavor . . . sounded pretty good, right? **WRONG!** It's gone too. Tax write off. The new bubblegum flavor costs \$19.95 a month . . .

Back in 1947, Adorno could see the writing on the wall. In his eyes, popular culture was no longer art. It had become *industry*. A factory, mass producing goods for consumption, The Culture Industry churns out products filled with signifiers. Written in filmic & videogamic shorthand, we have been trained to recog-

nize and consume these products with minimal effort. We can identify the plot beats, we can see a character trope, and yet, this doesn't invalidate a piece of media for being rote, it somehow strengthens it.

The Culture Industry produces content like this to flatter us with a faux enlightened sense of mastery over it. We see this in the death of criticism. We have been buttered up to think that we "get" these films we watch and games we play. Further, our identities become linked to these cultural signifiers and brands. We become part of the machine. So, when someone writes a piece of criticism it is an affront not only to the piece of media, but by extension, it is also an affront to the person whose identity is intertwined with the MCU or Bethesda games. Look how weird people are acting about criticism of *Starfield*. We've been trained to not be reflexive or introspective. We've been trained to consume. We are not in control. The Culture Industry is "a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need" feeding us slop and telling us we love it.

As technology has advanced, and media has become inescapable, The Culture Industry has been made even more powerful. While we think about how much STUFF there is for us to enjoy, this is not consumer empowerment, in fact the power we think we have is actually, "the power of those whose economic position is the strongest." Think Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav **raking in nearly \$500 million** over the last five years, or Activision chief Bobby Kotick **taking home a cool \$155 mil in 2021**. The Culture Industry serves them. It lines their pockets with gold.

The Culture Industry has done away with the facade that any of this slurry has one iota of culture in it. They know it, and I think we know it, but it's hard to find ways to resist it. So . . . read an indie mag like this one. Or go play an indie game. *Signalis* rules. Go play that. Bobby Kotick ain't getting a cent from that. 🍷



MUSIC



A STACK of 78s – A couple weeks ago, someone left a pile of very chunky vinyl records in my building's basement. Naturally, I took them upstairs and tried to play them on my record player. They're an odd size, with most of them about three-quarters of what I would regard as a standard size for an EP or LP. One was closer to how a 45 usually looks and they were distinctly old-fashioned in texture and label. I thought I would give that speed a try. No dice. My guess is that they're 78s.

That will remain a guess because there's no speed indicated on the labels for these records. In a way, though, that also supports my idea that these are 78s, because that used to be the standard speed. 45 and 33 1/3 emerged and became more standard in the 1950s and 60s. It looks to me as though I have some holdovers in my possession, though, because most of these are R&B and Jazz efforts or standards from the 50s, with one late-model disc that was probably cut in the late 60s. Some collector seems to have been dedicated to big, chunky, two-sided EPs even after smaller singles and LPs started to hit the commercial music scene.

Having no way to play these discs, I took them as a guide and searched for as many

tunes as I could find on streaming services. Talk about a change in format and standards. I wonder what the compensation structure from Spotify looks like for the owners of the rights to these albums. They should have all been in the public domain a while ago, but I'm guessing the regular readers of Exploits know how that goes.

I have a found playlist to show for my efforts, although it's incomplete. If I keep digging around, maybe I'll find that some of these records have been digitized and uploaded elsewhere online, findable on YouTube or maybe the Internet Archive. Another funny thing about the presence of some of these tunes on Spotify is the quantification of their current levels of fame or obscurity to users of that platform. The Etta James tunes might have recently been played a few million times, but Louis Brooks & His Hi-Toppers have monthly plays in the double digits.

Brooks and his band are represented in this list with an archetypal rhythm and blues song, standard chord progression, instrumentation, walking bass line and all. Even though there's nothing exceptional about the song, I appreciate how the tone of the instruments comes through. The piano in particular has a little bit

of extra harmonics that suggest a less polished instrument as the player rattles around and doubles the sounds of the bass. Shame that I don't have a way to see how that tone would come through off of the vinyl, through a needle and cartridge, and with a little amplification.

Unison, harmony and tone are all major features of these records. There are the harmonies of doo-wop, very literally exemplified by how members of The Turbans sing "doo-wop" in the background of their lead's falsetto on "When You Dance." There's the way Eddie Harris' band passes around the melody from the single line of his saxophone to the pianist playing the same melody in chords in "Theme in Search of a Movie." And there's the way that, after circling Joe Liggins' voice and piano for the preceding minutes of the track, the horns of The Honeydrippers sharply hit their marks in unison at the end of "I've Got a Right to Cry." These records often have a great ensemble feeling, with instrumental players and vocalists riffing off one another under the supervision of a bandleader. Even the voice of the bandleader has a moment in the stop-start introduction of "I've Gotta Guy," when Johnny Otis cuts everyone off mid-phrase to ask that the volume levels for the guitar be raised after hearing the opening riff.

It's possible that I may have discovered some of these tunes with a playlist generated by an algorithm or a fan of the music of that era. But even if I had dialed that up, either by searching for an artist that I would recognize more easily (say, Count Basie, Harris or James), it wouldn't have the particularities of this stack. Speaking of the stack, I'm going to bring it back down to the basement. Maybe someone else around here will be able to play them.

— DON EVERHART

PLAYLIST

- "Theme in Search of a Movie," by Eddie Harris
- "Listen Here," by Eddie Harris
- "Good Rockin' Daddy," by Etta James
- "Crazy Feeling," by Etta James
- "When You Dance," by The Turbans
- "Let Me Show You (around My Heart)," by The Turbans
- "Burley Cutie," by Johnny Ace, The Beale Streeters
- "Never Let Me Go," by Johnny Ace, Johnny Board & His Orchestra
- "It's Love Baby (24 Hours A Day)," Louis Brooks & His Hi-Toppers, Earl Gaines
- "I've Got A Right To Cry," by Joe Liggins, Honeydrippers
- "Jeep's Blues," by Johnny Hodges & His Orchestra
- "I Gotta Guy," by Esther Phillips
- "Thursday Night Blues," by Johnny Otis
- "Cross My Heart," by Johnny Ace, The Beale Streeters
- "Angel," by Johnny Ace, The Beale Streeters
- "Bewildered," by Richard Berry
- "Farther Up The Road," by Bobby "Blue" Band
- "Sometime Tomorrow," by Bobby "Blue" Band
- "Beware," by Jesse Belvin
- "Dry Your Tears," by Jese Belvin
- "Bye Bye Baby Blues," by Roy Milton
- "Old Man River," by Roy Milton
- "The Pick Up," by Etta James
- "Market Place," by Etta James
- "Jimmy's Blues," by Count Basie
- "Taps Miller," by Count Basie

LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MONSTERS UNLEASHED: BEWARE the GLOP! – I grew up reading Jack Kirby monster comics. For those unfamiliar with the phenomenon, these were comics popular in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, featuring big, weird monsters – often from outer space – that wore purple shorts because of the interference of the Comics Code Authority and threatened to conquer Earth. They were usually put together by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and there were so many of them that they became their own thriving subgenre.

It didn’t take long for the popularity of these monster comics to be subsumed by the capes-and-tights crowd that was coming on the scene, and these days, they mostly exist only as nostalgia and throwback, though even folks who aren’t familiar with these four-color weirdos probably know them at least a bit – Groot of the Guardians of the Galaxy had his origins among them, for example.

Plenty of other people remember them fondly, just as I do, and many of those individuals grew up to be comic book writers and artists in their own right. In 2017, Marvel

launched a “Monsters Unleashed” crossover event that brought many of these old monsters back to the fore and, as part of the promotion for the event, released three prose books aimed at middle-grade readers, aping the style of the classic R.L. Stine Goosebumps books – they even got Stine to give them a blurb for the cover.

Despite my enthusiasm for the subject matter, the first I had heard of these books was this year, when I found one in a comic shop. Written by Steve Behling, *Beware the Glop!* is a delightfully designed book that’s perfect for early fall reading, complete with bright orange printer’s stain on the page edges to complete the Goosebumps-esque aesthetic.

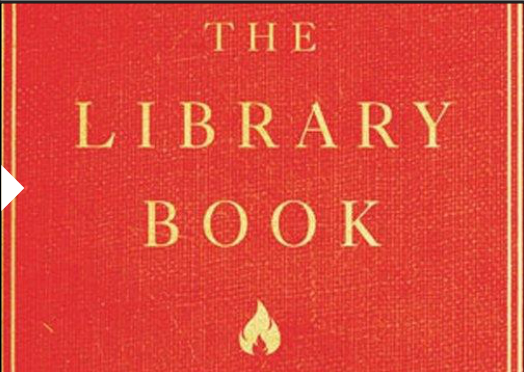
It’s also surprisingly good, which I honestly wouldn’t have expected. Featuring the return of a favorite from the old days of the Jack Kirby comics, perhaps the best thing that I can say about *Beware the Glop!* is that at one point the Glop says “easy peasy, lemon squeezy,” and it is actually ominous, somehow. That’s an accomplishment!

– ORRIN GREY

BOOKS

The LIBRARY BOOK – You know those gifts that are like “for the book lover in your life” and they’re a cheap plastic reading light? Susan Orlean’s *The Library Book* is actually for the book lover in your life. A story about books, libraries and restoration this manages to be a love letter to the book in a way that is sure to appeal.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



THE LIBRARY BOOK



CERTAIN MAGICAL ACTS

CERTAIN MAGICAL ACTS – Alice Notley, author of what looks like about 50 books, won the Ruth Lilly poetry prize with this one, which came out after her selected collection *Grave of Light*. Feels like at that point some prizes can be saved for the rest of us, but I digress into pettiness. *Certain Magical Acts* is a bit of a chonker, clocking almost 150 pages. These are not pithy pages either, just big jammy dollops of verse on almost every one. I was not certain I’d finish it, and as of this writing I haven’t, but I’m past the hump because Notley really knows how to peel out an angry, luscious groove. I would have probably given her the prize too.

– LEVI RUBECK

**MISS MAJOR SPEAKS: CONVERSATIONS
with a BLACK TRANS REVOLUTIONARY** –

The best thing I can really say about this book from Miss Major and Toshio Meronek is that it made everyone SICK of me for the three days I was reading it because I couldn’t stop reading bits of it to them. Miss Major is truly a living legend and a deeply funny one.

I think it’s great to actually have trans work that isn’t interesting in cowing for a presumed cis reader/observer and actually just says the things that need to be said!

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE



MOVIES



DARK NIGHT of the SCARECROW – I find that there’s a specific vibe that emanates from vintage TV movies, especially the ones in the horror genre. They have all the charm of an episode of a low-budget anthology horror show, something like *Monsters* or *Tales from the Darkside*, but with grander ambitions. They are full length features, after all.

At their best, you get something like the original *Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark* from 1973, later remade as a flawed 2010 film directed by Troy Nixey – often thought to be directed by Guillermo del Toro, though he has only a producing and writing credit; an easy mistake to make, as it would fit well in Del Toro’s filmography. A moody gothic, *Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark* uses its budgetary limitations to craft a subtler exercise in shock, even with little pointy-headed monsters running around and tormenting everyone.

Dark Night of the Scarecrow is, in my humble opinion, a masterpiece of subtle made-for-TV horror, utilizing atmosphere and implication to sidestep the cheesier route often stumbled along by the killer scarecrow subgenre.

The result? A genuinely creepy little horror film where you actually see very little at all.

Larry Drake plays Bubba, a mentally challenged man who is the victim of a vindictive mob because they are convinced he harmed a little girl, his only friend. When Bubba hides in a scarecrow, he’s executed by firing squad, only to be proven innocent too late. Before long, the posse who gunned him down starts meeting untimely ends, and the shadow of a certain scarecrow looms over everything.

The opening scenes are difficult to watch, but once Bubba starts getting revenge, it’s wonderfully eerie. One of my favorite moments involves the villain lurking around the annual Halloween party, the small church done up with paper pumpkins, skeletons and more. The energy is amazing, and the Halloween cheer leaks out into the rest of the film as well. By the time the scarecrow is chasing the bad guy through a cornfield on a giant threshing machine, you’d be hard-pressed to not feel in the Halloween spirit.

– TREVOR HENDERSON

MOVIES



The MILPITAS MONSTER – Finally answers the question that has plagued our greatest minds for centuries: What if the mothman was a 50-foot kaiju that ate trash?

– ORRIN GREY

The FACULTY – Hoo boy, the '90s, amirite?

– LEVI RUBECK



STRANGE WAY of LIFE – Now obviously Pedro Pascal and Ethan Hawke are hot and cool as cowboy exes, and the Saint Laurent clothes look incredible! But beyond that there's a short full of inspired choices around color, with an incredible Alberto Iglesias score and some sharp direction around proximity and tension that would make any theatre director (myself included) deeply jealous!

– OLUWATAO ADEWOLE

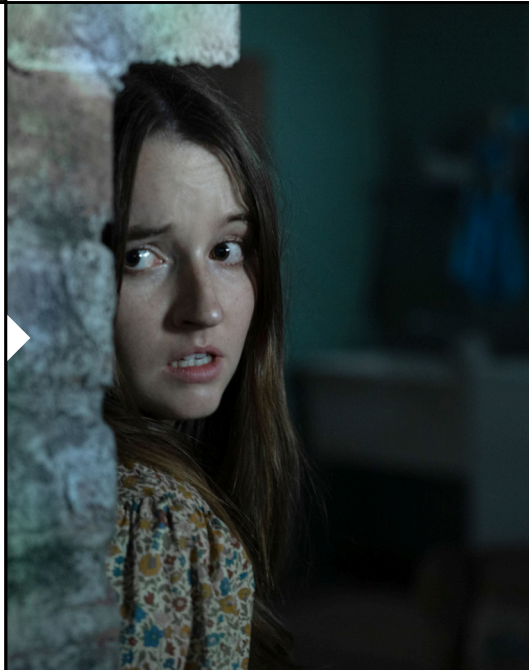


NO ONE WILL SAVE YOU – The worst part of No One Will Save You is that its “twist” is all done in the first 15 minutes. The best part is that no one does save the main character.

The dialogueless movie doesn't come off as well as it does in Mike Flanagan's wonderful *Hush* but it does force you to watch. The movie. You can't text during things. You can't look away. You'd miss Kaitlyn Dever's wonderfully pained performance as a woman driven too far, put through too much, and ultimately, who is not saved. She saves herself. Other stuff happens too. But only by confronting our inner demons are we able to live our best, weirdest lives.

Free on Hulu, watch this one.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA



TELEVISION



FIONNA and CAKE – *Adventure Time* is ending again, and not for the first time. Five years since *Adventure Time*'s climactic confrontation with its very own end, *Fionna and Cake* has revived the franchise's place at the forefront of animation with some of the best animation and most thoughtful world building to come out of the industry this year.

Fionna and Cake takes a more mimetic approach to revisiting *Adventure Time* than the epilogue miniseries *Distant Lands* did in 2021. It is a 10-episode arc more akin to *Stakes* or *Elements* that thoughtfully examines a moment in Ooo that catalyzes character growth. It must be admired how thoroughly uninterested the series is in being something more than its predecessor. To say it is a show for *Adventure Time* fans would be a matter of course – nothing would make any sense at all, really, if you weren't following close along the series' last few seasons. The premise alone, a whole spin-off show about the gender-bent characters of the series' antagonists' fan fiction, sets the tone.

But I also feel that *Fionna and Cake* was made for *Adventure Time* fans because it is so unrelentingly relatable. It introduces an unfamiliar take on the variant of Ooo that looks like a U.S. metro. It lacks magic, and its eponymous protagonist and her (not talking) cat feel that something has been lost (and it's not *not* alienation). As *Adventure Time* grew with its creators and audience, it feels like this series meets us five years later too. I grew up with the show in the 2010s. It ended while I was in university. On the other side of that all now, as I become more accustomed to the costs of health care and filing taxes I can't not think *she just like me fr* when I see Fionna's messy studio apartment. At its end, *Fionna and Cake* feels like a brief, didactic walk alongside friends. It applies the themes of *Adventure Time* into the context of living in our own pre-apocalyptic, un-magical world. We can accept that it was an experience. That it may have been everything. And that it is time for the bus to depart.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

TELEVISION

HOTEL DEL LUNA – While I find the principal romantic pairing to be a mismatch, IU is an unstoppable force throughout this series, which functions as a meditation on death, grief and fate.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

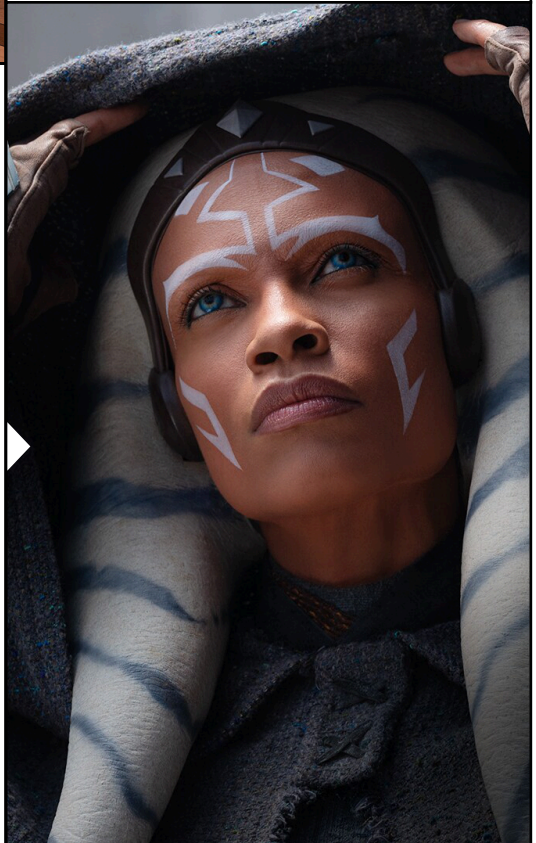


BOJACK HORSEMAN (S5) – One of the many things I'm late to the party with, but this was worth the wait. The depictions of anxiety and mental health are spot on in this series, but I also appreciate how heartfelt and respectful most of Todd's asexual arc is . . . could've done without the sex robot shtick though.

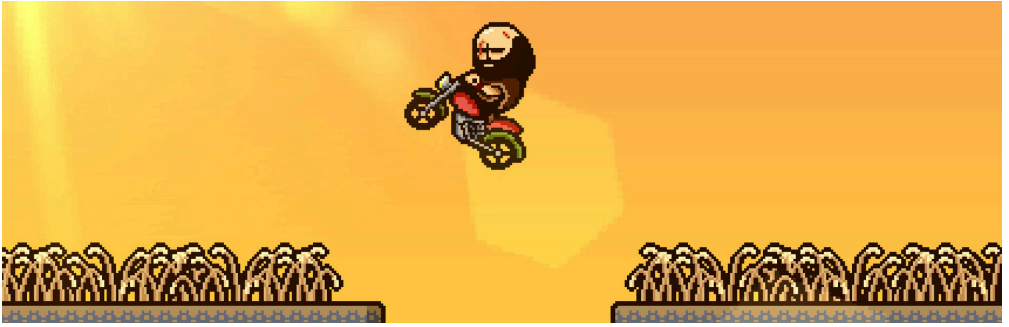
– PHOENIX SIMMS

AHSOKA – The Volume is a stage. The Disney cowboys use it as such, working from left to right but mostly keeping in the center with spectacularly painted backdrops that can't help but feel curtained nonetheless. This is not a problem really, but it puts Disney's CG work into a theater context, but almost entirely without the gravitas of working actors grinding through their lines, playing to an audience of one camera rather than the last seat in the last row. *Ahsoka* feels like the first show to lean into this, with Ray Stevenson (RIP) stomping the space boards with Shakespearean weight, and Lars Mikkelsen (finally) popping out in the last act with his competent villain routine. But as all things Disney *Ahsoka* mostly leans, gesturing towards a now fan-canon that loomed large in the theater of a thousand nerdy minds, with all the world's CG barely able to compare.

– LEVI RUBECK



GAMES



LISA: The PAINFUL – Throughout *LISA: The Painful*, players are faced with choices that challenge their moral principles, often leading to a sense of emptiness and disappointment. The woeful protagonist, Brad Armstrong, represents weakness at its climax while his daughter, Buddy Armstrong, is the product of that weakness. Brad neglects her, then later on she's kidnapped and abused by her captors. In the world of Olathe, Brad's journey reconvenes the theme of restoration in a shiny red bow, only to be trampled by the weight of disparity and desperation. In a world where survival is not seen as a priority, and fulfillment justifies the means to an end, it's easy to see why various characters are maddened and depressed.

Addiction to that fulfillment comes in the form of pills called “JOY,” which allow whoever takes them to feel nothing. And taking enough of it turns users into freakishly grotesque mutants. The gravitation to that sensation of “nothing” is to break the moral compass, and certain decisions in that world feel unbearable when considering the emotional challenges and backstories that these characters have done to cope with their reality. JOY makes irrational decisions relative to time, where if characters question the impact of their acts it leads to a slow cause and effect – with the latter embracing violent tendencies to make their emotional baggage disappear.

Another subject to highlight is the absence of femininity, which signifies the loss of innocence and lack of trust to cultivate primal nature. Laced with sweat, killings and showboating, the world shows the disconnect of masculinity between expression and status. In Olathe, several characters crossdress – such as Terry and Queen Roger – to portray their idealized femininity from a masculine perspective. However, authentic emotional connections are limited and overshadowed by a sense of control because it is seen as a sign of weakness. The idea that emotions can only be expressed through a feminine point of view amplifies men's loss of control over their masculinity. It creates an area for toxic masculine traits to bloom, sowing the seeds for the destruction of the human psyche and the growth of selfish desires.

Survivability influences the melancholy nature of temptation in Olathe and becomes what fosters lunacy. Buddy is hunted for a hopeful reset of the world because her existence is the “hope” they desire. This escalates further when players realize that they have to be the face of a loving parent and a resilient guardian, but the game reminds the player that Brad is none of those things. The saying goes, “Monsters will breed monsters,” and that compliments the state of Olathe where purposeful tasks become pointless. Consequences

GAMES

(continued from previous page)

are permanent and allude to the negative connotation of grit despite trying to make light of a situation. Brad may be protecting his daughter from danger, but how far will he go and how will the world of Olathe affect the personal development of Buddy?

Trauma, self-hatred and depression can have lifelong effects and hinder one's ability to recover, so Brad may label himself as "weak" due to societal pressure to fix unfixable things. That ultimately leads to him being a prisoner to his regrets – an imperfect person.

– KRISTOFUR CATCHINGS



SOLACE STATE: EMOTIONAL CYBERPUNK STORIES

– This is the kind of cyberpunk narrative I want to see more often: intersectional and incredibly insightful regarding the thorniness of politics in a tech-driven society. The cast of characters are well-rounded, including grassroots members, hackers (both social and technical) and cagey politicians. The game's branching narrative is staggeringly complex, with over 30 possible endings. Definitely give this one a try if you're looking for that fabled game that emphasizes meaningful choices. This might just be the one.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



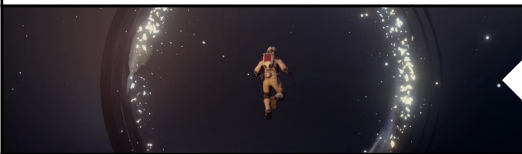
PAYDAY 2 – I'm about 12 years late to this game and have absolutely no clue what I'm doing. In any case, at least I'm not playing as a cop, this being basically cops and robbers, after all.

– JUSTIN REEVE



STARFIELD – There's a STARFIEEEEEEEELD WAITING IN THE SKY.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA



TITANFALL 2 – The (big robot) lads are back in town!

– LEVI RUBECK



HOROSCOPE

1. JOE JONAS IS IN RETROGRADE
BUT TAYLOR SWIFT WAS IN
KANSAS CITY, NEW FOOTBALL
THEMED ALBUM ON THE WAY?

2. GIANT ROBOT LADS FALLING
FROM THE SKIES THAT'S RIGHT
TITANFALL 2 IS BACK! 🏰