

ISSUE 72

EXPLOITS

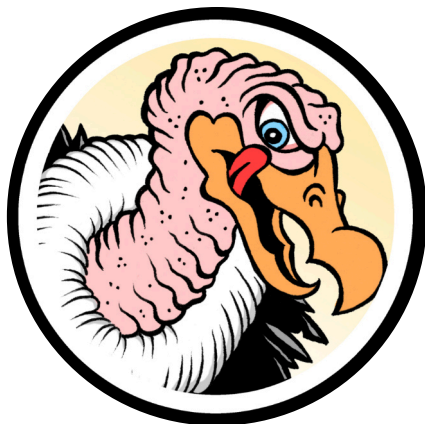
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Van Dennis on
KING KONG

**EMOTIONALLY MAKING LOVE BENEATH the MASK
EVERYDAY • ALL SYSTEMS RED • WHEN EVIL LURKS
• SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF • KINGDOM HEARTS II**



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

The CENTURY-LONG HUMANIFICATION of KING KONG

by Van Dennis

It feels weird that, despite existing for over 90 years now, King Kong's filmography encompasses just ten movies, and that's including this year's *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*, along with two Japanese entries made by Godzilla's parent company Toho. Still, the big ape's cinematic catalog reveals something surprised when viewed in its entirety: a steady progression of character development. Despite starting out as a basic movie monster, King Kong achieved a sort of self-actualization over the decades, thanks to each subsequent filmmaker adding more depth with each incarnation.

Calling the original 1933 *King Kong* "basic" feels a bit harsh, as even in his first outing Kong carries thematic baggage. The core conflict is exoticism clashing with modernism: a beast from a primitive world that is ultimately defeated by "foolishly" climbing up and falling off of one of the most famous pieces of modernist architecture in existence. Kong's kidnapping of Ann Darrow also arguably represented then-contemporary racial anxieties, an on-screen depiction of societal fears over a relationship that went against the norms of the time (it was common for movie monsters from the 1920s through '50s to terrorize white women and be subsequently defeated by heroic white men).

Subsequent adaptations see Kong depicted in much more empathetic ways. 1976's *King Kong* is a messy remake that tries to be a grounded adaptation *and* a comedy at the same time, but it nevertheless depicts Kong as a tragic antagonist. Sure, he kidnaps a hot white lady again, but Jessica Lange's character forms a sort of "bond" with what is ultimately just an over-sized (but still quite dangerous) gorilla. Peter Jackson's 2005 remake is the first movie that *works* to make Kong a character with depth: he's shown to be a lonely king, the last of his kind, who, before his demise, shows an understanding of "beauty." The relationship between beauty and beast here is a true and tragic friendship, which makes this version of Ann Darrow the most fleshed out in Kong's filmography as well.

Finally, there is the modern-day Monsterverse Kong where, despite being unabashed action movies, the titan is actually at his most thoughtfully written. In 2017's *Skull Island*, Kong is plainly explained to be defending his home from invading soldiers and invasive species, and in 2021's *Godzilla vs Kong*, he now talks with people for the first time through sign language.

Across a century, King Kong has evolved from a villain whose demise the audience cheers, to a quasi-protagonist we now empathize with and actively root for to save humanity from much worse dangers. Perhaps this long arc of character development reflects how audiences have developed over the years: instead of seeing a “monstrous” creature as an entity that *must* be destroyed, viewers can now see the unfamiliar “other” as something (or someone) worthy of existence, and even understanding. 🙏





EMOTIONALLY MAKING LOVE BENEATH the MASK EVERYDAY

Throughout my journey of discovering new music on the internet I found that **anime mashups** sometimes reflect the complex entanglement of my feelings better than songs made through traditional means. After all, what better way to contemplate complexity than with a genre that reveals the underlying connected nature of sources taken out of context?

It's fitting, then, that anime mashups help us process the times our emotions were wrung dry. Their sources call for and respond to each other within songs such as "**Emotionally Making Love Beneath the Mask Everyday**" (EMLBME), by **Mere Notilde**, to create unique experiences that let us reminisce over bittersweet moments from our lives.

The foremost manifestation of musical interplay in EMLBME is the lyrical back and forth between the choruses of "**Heartbreak, Heartbreak**" from *Persona 4* and "**Since I Left You**" by The Avalanches. "**Heartbeat, heartbeat, it keeps on pounding/Heartbreak, heartbreak, you tell me goodbye,**" rings in our ears right before we hear "**Since I left you/I found the world so new/E-Everyday,**" an order repeating into a cycle of longing and feeling no

regrets. The beauty of this lyrical conversation is the different ways you can interpret its new context. When I listen to their back-and-forth, sometimes I recall the conflicting mix of relief from having left a relationship and grief from having turned away someone important. Other times, I feel the sting of irony that comes with realizing all the growth I gained after choosing not to chase someone I still think about. It's never just one memory all the time; the things I feel and remember share a presence with the music in a way that's meaningful to me.

Something wondrous about anime mashups in particular, especially complex ones like EMLBME, is that they're blends of sound that can't be found anywhere else yet share sources with other songs. In this song's case, we have ten different songs from *Persona 4*, Daft Punk, The Avalanches, Miles Davis, Deafhaven and The Paradise, some of which have been incorporated into other works before. Like an **intricate design** in the Ottoman Empire's textile tradition, these sources coalesce into a distinct entity that can't be replicated by pure chance and still belongs to a greater collective due to its constituent elements appearing in other creations of the era.

MUSIC

This **interbeing** nature is why I can recognize my individual experiences within the **interpenetrating net of jewels** that is EMLBME and its sources; my memories are unique to me and they're also interactions that I share with the people involved as well as others who've gone through similar situations.

Something I realized in recent times is that the pain and sadness stemming from the people who've left my life show how much I cared for them. Death, distance, regret and all other factors of shattered connections aren't always reversible but at least I can listen to these songs and remember how much of my heart I gave to these titans of my life.

- JUSTIN KIM

PLAYLIST

"Emotionally Making Love Beneath the Mask Everyday - Silvgunner: King for Another Day," by Mere Notilde

"Your Love is Faded [Kanye West ft. Ty Dolla Sign & Post Malone x K-On! Mashup]," by shanahatescoffee

"The Emancipation of Aerith (Final Fantasy VII vs. Mariah Carey)," by I am Jemboy

"Today Again So Ordinary a Person - Yume Miru Kusuri x John Legend," by Triple-Q

"My Neighbor Tupac - Studio Ghibli x 2Pac," by Tatami DAZE

"Dango Encounter - DJ Okawari x Clannad Mashup," by HandBraJeans

"Lazarus in Love - David Bowie vs. Space Dandy," by Triple-Q

"Hello, Clockwork-Star - Feint x Assassination Classroom Mashup," by HandBraJeans

"Something About This Palace," by DaymanOurSavior

"Give Heart Back to Music - Shounen of Nazareth (Daft Punk & Justice x Eureka Seven)," by Shoopfex

"Quote for Truth," by BotanicSage

"Goodbye To A Ghost," by DaymanOurSavior

"I Did Everything to Be There By Your Side [League of Legends x Cyberpunk:Edgerunners Mashup]," by shanahatescoffee

"We Are Never Ever Getting Freesia Together (JP Version) - (K)NoW_NAME x Taylor Swift," by Emydion

"Bamboo Earrings," by BotanicSage

"Haaaah, Ooo-ooo-oooh," by nakinyko

"The Makings of Mai - Bunny Girl Senpai x Curtis Mayfield," by nakinyko

LISTEN ON YOUTUBE



BOOKS

ALL SYSTEMS RED – I’ve enjoyed many books with characters that don’t speak directly to me – books about near futures where a butcher harvests human meat; books of distant pasts where a hero fights brutal wars; books about contemporary assholes who selfishly destroy their relationships with everyone around them. However, when I find a book with a character that speaks to me as much as the Murderbot does in *All Systems Red* by Martha Wells, it just feels like I’ve been seen.

Now at first glance, the main character of the *All Systems Red* may not seem relatable to me. I am not a security cyborg who hacked myself and gained autonomy. I have not murdered 57 people during a malfunction and then nicknamed myself Murderbot. But, with its newfound independence, all day Murderbot craves to do the exact thing I want – watch 700 hours of TV while ignoring all the requests made upon me as a person.

Getting the inside perspective into Murderbot’s mind is really the great trick of the book as a whole. Engaging with a cyborg’s semi-humanity, seeing its desires and needs from its interiority gives life to a book, which in lesser hands, could feel rote and formulaic. Instead, Wells offers a genuinely humorous and intimate portrait of a rogue cyborg who just wants to be left alone. As Murderbot figures out what is happening to its human team, we see a short mystery unravel, nefarious plots by competing teams exposed and Murderbot come close to being a victim of human intervention yet again. However, when Murderbot slips away from its humans in the final act, we feel its victory.

I’ll have to keep reading down the Murderbot Diaries series now to figure out if Mur-

derbot does get everything that it wants. For now, though, I can just hope that it’s out there, living in stasis, watching its stories. Afterall, that’s pretty much the only thing I want to do too.

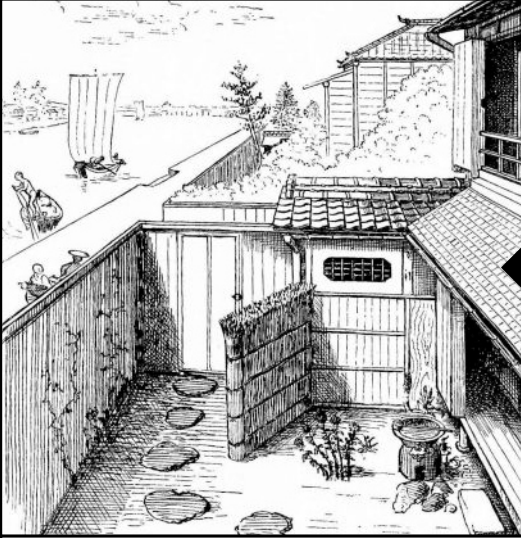
– NOAH SPRINGER



BOOKS

ONE OPERATION JOKER: VOL 1 – Batman falls into a chemical vat and de-ages, and now the Clown Prince of Crime must raise his nemesis to be a good and just man, so he can have his foil.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



JAPANESE HOMES AND THEIR SURROUNDINGS

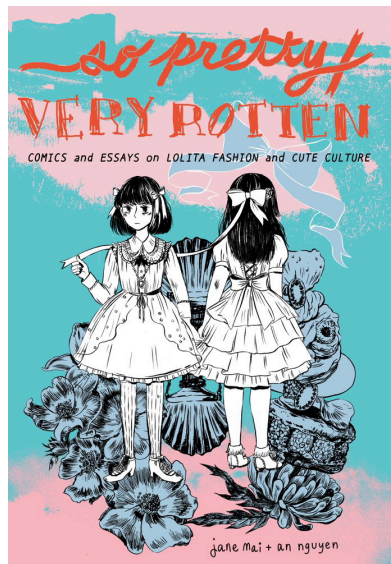
– This wonderful book is, to the best of my knowledge, currently out of print, but if you can find yourself a copy and have at least a passing interest in Japanese architecture, I strongly recommend picking this one up, unless, of course, it costs you an arm and a leg. Scholarship on the topic is a little bit sparse in English and there's no better introduction or general overview of traditional form, structure, and construction.

– JUSTIN REEVE

SO PRETTY/VERY ROTTEN: COMICS and ESSAYS on LOLITA FASHION and CUTE CULTURE

– This was a real blast from the past! I grew up with visual kei and lolita culture due to some people I know well and it has a special place in my heart. This collection by Jane Mai and An Nguyen is a classic text for anyone who's curious about the interconnections between philosophy, music and counterculture centered on expressing oneself in a way that defies traditional definitions of gender and societal roles. There's even a couple translated contributions by Novala Takemoto, best known for his cult hit *Kamekaze Girls*. This book is extremely rare now, but if you ever access it somehow, devour it. It's a great time capsule of fashion history and the pros and cons of expressing oneself through couture.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



MOVIES



WHEN EVIL LURKS – A decidedly different take on the possession film, *When Evil Lurks* (2023), from Argentina, goes in directions both sledgehammer-violent and subtly nuanced, all while creating myriad ways of thinking about the concepts at hand.

Starting in rural Argentina, the film slowly introduces us to evidence of some possibly supernatural event involving the death of a visitor to the region. The slow build of information places us in the position of an outsider looking in and putting the pieces together, at least before things are presented in an unambiguous fashion.

Adding layers to the mystery, the film's dialogue points toward possibly dystopian/apocalyptic explanations for the whole situation and the story plays out in a way that leaves those possibilities open. The terminology used to describe the victims of these "possessions" also reflects the film's setting among people with limited education. Referring to the victims as "the rotten" both prolongs the question of what is really happen-

ing while also acting as an excellent descriptor of the effect that this "demon possession" has on the affected individuals.

As the story moves from rural areas to urban ones, we follow the growing desperation of the main character as he attempts to make people believe him – followed by his utter despair as he begins to understand that it is his own fears that have brought about the worst imagined consequences. The film includes some of the darkest material I've seen in a horror tale in years, but leaves its ultimate solution an open question with many possible answers.

Regardless, the grisly actions of "the rotten" are undeniably awful. I found the setting of the third act in an abandoned children's school to be creepily effective and without a doubt one of the most satisfyingly bleak endings of a horror film I've seen in a long time. There are depths to this film that we will be discussing for years to come.

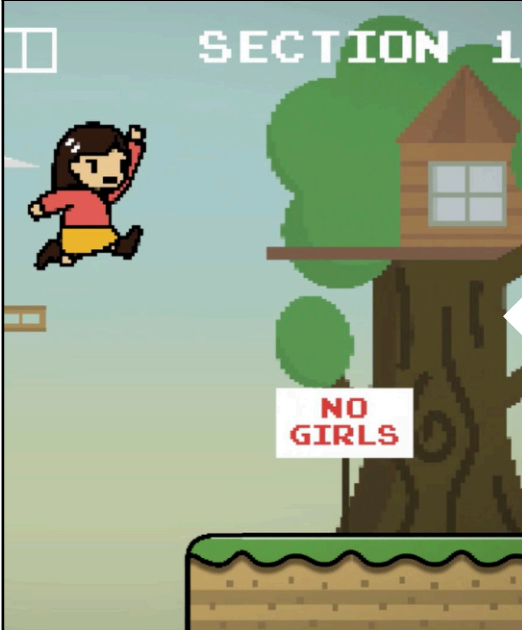
– RODNEY BARNETT

MOVIES

The **ANGRY BLACK GIRL** and HER MONSTER

– In a just world, the lead in the film would be the It Girl for nerdy Black girls everywhere! That aside, this is a really solid B-movie that has some impressively gross practical effects and plays in some fun ways with Blackness and monstrosity.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE



GTFO – Shannon Sun-Higginson's Kickstarter-funded 2015 documentary about sexism in games is a mixed bag (for example, Robin Hunicke, who has since come under fire for allegations of abuse, is featured), but I was surprised that for the most part it's aged pretty well. I wish they had thought to reach out to more than one visible minority creator, but I'm glad that they kept the conversation nuanced with regard to how sexism and bigotry has been present throughout the history of game culture. Often people have cited Gamergate as the main occurrence of hateful behavior, but *GTFO* shows how discrimination is systemic and widespread.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

OPPENHEIMER – When Oppenheimer puts his hat on 1/3 of the way through the movie, it breaks my brain that all I can think of is Walter White becoming Heisenberg in *Breaking Bad*. I think it's on purpose, but the circular references are starting to make me feel insane.

– NOAH SPRINGER

Academics are cool again, maybe.

– JUSTIN REEVE

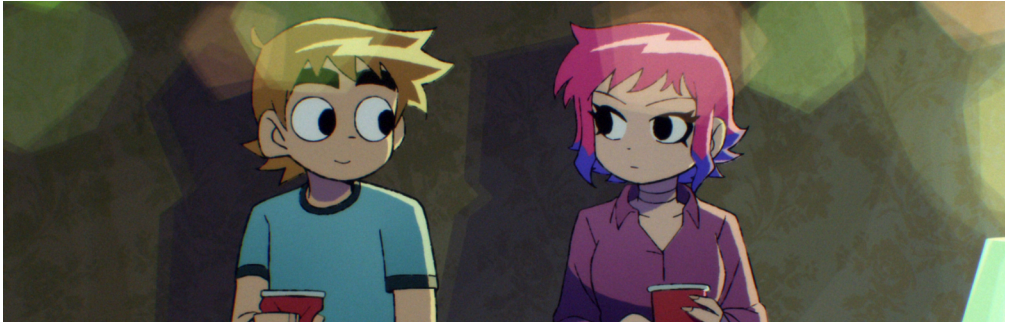


GODZILLA MINUS ONE – Men really will fight a giant lizard instead of going to therapy.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



TELEVISION



SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF – *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* is an 8-episode Netflix original whose tone matches perfectly with that of a 1980s or '90s **Original Video Animation series** (hereafter OVA). OVAs are Japan's equivalent of direct-to-video market productions, except that like Netflix originals, studios often had more resources and time to work on such projects. OVAs are also known for having unique scripts, even if they were spin-offs from a major anime series and that goes for *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* as well. The mini-series focuses on an alternate version of Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel series or Edgar Wright's film adaptation.

I suppose none of the above should be overly surprising as this Netflix original is also produced by Science Saru, the same Tokyo-based studio that handled *DEVIL-MAN: Crybaby* and *Japan Sinks: 2020*. What is surprising is how despite the core value of this show being about telling an alternate version of the cult-classic's story, in wholeheartedly committing to meta-narrative, *Takes Off* is more of a mixed bag in execution than anything else.

I know I'm probably in the minority group watching the show, but I found there were some pacing issues with storyboarding throughout. Especially for the first three episodes, there were often dialogue sequences

where you could count several awkward seconds between a simple character-to-character exchange. This threw off the comedic timing more often than not, which is unfortunate because one of the things that makes *Scott Pilgrim* what it is as a series is its off-kilter yet sincere sense of humor. I associate that humor, alongside its snapshots of Toronto's ever-evolving culture, with the core of the series.

There are many improvements to this iteration of the series that I am here for, however. I love that there was more of a deep dive on the relationship dynamics between Ramona and her not-so-evil-exes for one. I love that there's less sexism and that there was more nuance given to the LGBTQIA+ representation. On that last note, I was particularly happy to see that Roxie wasn't treated like a punchline and that Ramona realized she'd done her dirty in the past. Ramona's hair dyeing sequences were strangely my favorite part of the show, emphasizing her constant experimentation with her identity while at the same time underscoring the *Groundhog Day* themes of the show.

I appreciate that Bryan Lee O'Malley, Ben-David Grabinski and Science Saru were committed to revisiting *Scott Pilgrim* with the goal of strengthening the contexts of practically every character's arc.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

TELEVISION

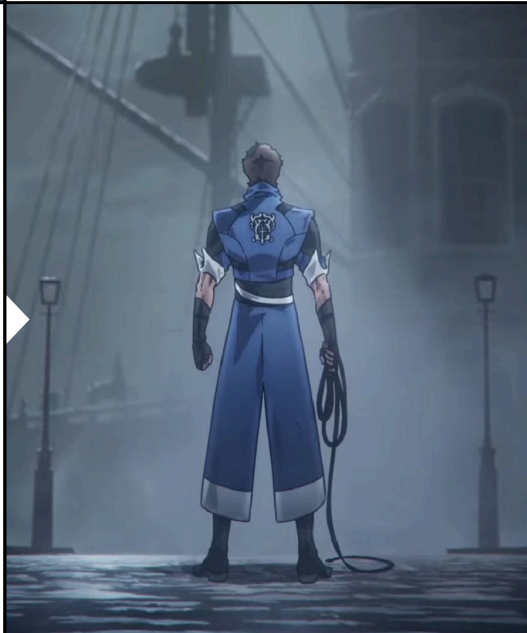


FOR ALL MANKIND – Sounds like a lot of my fellow Trekkies passed on this one for some reason, but basically, in a nutshell, *For All Mankind* is a precursor to *Star Trek*, telling the story of how the world went from a Cold War to . . . ah, um, creating a utopia and exploring the galaxy, apparently.

– JUSTIN REEVE

CASTLEVANIA: NOCTURNE – Clive Bradley's *Castlevania* is what I've wanted from Netflix's adaptation of the series from the start. I want to write more in-depth about the start of this spin-off series, but for now I'll say this: wonderful cast, kick-ass writing team including Afrofuturist Temi Oh (*Do You Dream of Terra-Two?*) and gorgeous visuals. Also, way to bring in Ethnogothic themes of slavery, intergenerational struggle, and the intricacies of revolution without flattening any of the BIPOC representation into stereotypes. To say I'm very excited for season two (which it's already been greenlit for) is an understatement and a half.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



OUR FLAG MEANS DEATH – It took forever for us to finally sit down and start watching this but even with all the praise I never expected to be this emotionally invested in gay pirates.

– ROB RICH



JEOPARDY – I'm laying out this issue and can hear *Jeopardy* is on downstairs; I'm immediately thinking back to when a friend, who is having a terrible time of it recently, said not to worry about him, because he'll be fine as long as he has *Jeopardy*, his comfort TV. I liked that.

– STU HORVATH





KINGDOM HEARTS II – You waited all year for summer to play *Kingdom Hearts II*. You loved the original *Kingdom Hearts*, its fusion of *Final Fantasy* and Disney. Hikaru Utada’s “Simple & Clean” is one of your jams. You plan on spending your vacation playing *Kingdom Hearts II* at your uncle’s house in New Jersey on his PlayStation 2, a console you don’t own. Your cousins, Ric, Arthur and Sasha, accompany you to Game Crazy to purchase the game.

That night you fumble through *Kingdom Hearts II*’s three-hour tutorial. You begin the game as Roxas, not Sora. You whisper, “What’s going on?” With every unfolding story exposition your interest fades. You think that maybe you’re too old, too dumb for *Kingdom Hearts II*. You pass the controller to your cousins. They restart from the beginning. Every explanation of the story convolutes it even more. Your cousins aren’t discouraged by this, or the cargo shorts the characters wear. They relish the verbose ramblings, “So deep!” they shout. They become obsessed. You watch with uneasy amusement.

The next day you make the mistake of moving the PlayStation 2 to your room hop-

ing to salvage the vacation with *Resident Evil 4*. You will never get to play *Resident Evil 4*. Your cousins commandeer the console and your room. Like it or not, it’s *Kingdom Hearts II*. They play till three in the morning. You try to sleep, but Sora, Goofy, Donald Duck and the Disney character cornucopia won’t shut the fuck up. “King Mickey” this . . . “Kingdom Hearts Encoder” that . . . “heartless” . . . “DiZ” . . . “nobodies” . . . “Jiminy Cricket?” . . . “Organization XIII” . . . Your mind shatters.

Two nights become three and three becomes five. You yearn for rest. Your cousins’ collective joy for *Kingdom Hearts II*, the flashy double keyblades and the Disney tunes – those cursed songs! – galvanize them. They beat the game over and over. After six days you’ve amassed over twenty-three hours of lost sleep. “*Kingdom Hearts!*”

Each day you await a game over screen, in hopes of rest. Instead, with every failure they just pass the controller. “It’s Sasha’s turn next!” *Kingdom Hearts II* – the postmodernist narrative equivalent of an M.C. Escher painting – becomes your villain origin story. Even when turned off, Sora, Mickey, Donald, Goofy and

GAMES

(continued from previous page)

all the characters utter Kazushige Nojima's translated dialogue and songs from *The Little Mermaid* echo inside your head. Your cousins aren't bothered by the incoherent narrative of the game. You sleep no more. In unison they sing "Under the Sea."

You commiserate with the antagonist Ansem – or Xemnas? You can't keep up with the plot twists. All that matters is your shared vitriolic disdain for the protagonists, your cousins and the damn game. You scream "*Kingdom Hearts*" as a double keyblade-wielding Sora mows down hundreds of enemies and decimates your sleep hygiene. You become a nobody, a heartless.

On the eighth day, a storm brews delivering torrential rain. For your cousins, this is a perfect opportunity to continue their binge. In their fervor and adoration of *Final Fantasy* and Disney icons, they forget to save. While they play, the storm causes a power outage. The lights go off immediately after Donald says, "The curse – it's gone!" All their progress is lost. They never return to play. *Kingdom Hearts* is lost to them.

You sleep but will never be the same.

– LUIS AGUASVIVAS



PERSONA 3 PORTABLE – *Persona 3* is the GOAT of the Shin Megami Tensei series, in my opinion. Not arguing with anyone, to each their own. The social links in this one are nuanced and full of great commentary that's surprisingly stood the test of time and also become a great time capsule of Japanese cultural concerns in the early 2000s. Also loving the option of being able to play a female protagonist in this one.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

HOROSCOPE

THERE ARE A BILLION STARS IN THE SKY AND A BILLION PAPER STARS IN THE ROOMS OF
TEENAGE GIRLS ALL AROUND THE WORLD BUT WE'RE ONLY EXCITED ABOUT THE ONES
WE CAN NEVER TOUCH. 🍷