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EXPLOITS

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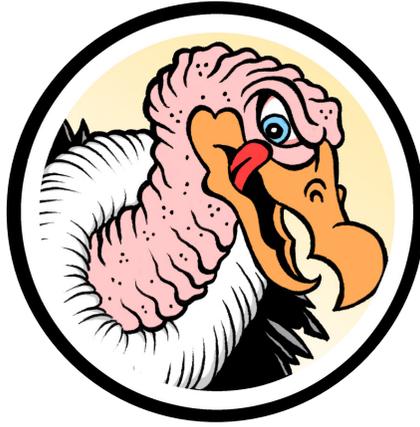
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Evan Dennis on
**A TALE of TWO
GODZILLAS**

CELESTE • PIRANESI

**• IVAN VASILIEVICH CHANGES PROFESSION •
ER • DISCOVERING MUSIC**



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

A TALE OF TWO GODZILLAS

by Evan Dennis

One of the longest enduring myths in cinema was how there were supposedly two distinct endings to 1962's *King Kong vs Godzilla*: in the American release of the movie, King Kong was the kaiju that emerged victorious, while in the original Japanese cut of the movie, Godzilla came out on top. For decades, this falsehood was widely accepted, until the 1990s with the rise of home video and easier access to original Japanese media; in both versions of the movie, King Kong lives while Godzilla is lost to the ocean's depths, presumably defeated. While it was a lie, there being two different endings made sense; Godzilla was thought of as Japan's hometown hero, so why was he instead the antagonist on both sides of the Pacific?

Having appeared in over 30 movies across nearly seven decades, Godzilla's been depicted in nearly every role imaginable for a giant movie monster. An analogy for nuclear weaponry and the misuse of its power, nature's vengeance, defender of the earth, even the embodiment of vengeful souls killed during World War II. While the Showa era movies (1954 to 1975) saw him evolve from a vehicle of pure destruction to a kid-friendly, almost superhero-like role fighting more outright villainous monsters, the Heisei era (1984 to 1995) onwards to the present day has mostly seen the monster in all Japanese media as at best an antihero who still causes massive damage, while usually still being an antagonist of sorts that has to be dealt with by the film's end. Given that Godzilla was originally a direct metaphor for the damage of nuclear bombings and tests, this antagonistic aspect enduring to this day isn't surprising, but what's truly odd is how in American depictions, Godzilla's role has mostly been the exact opposite.

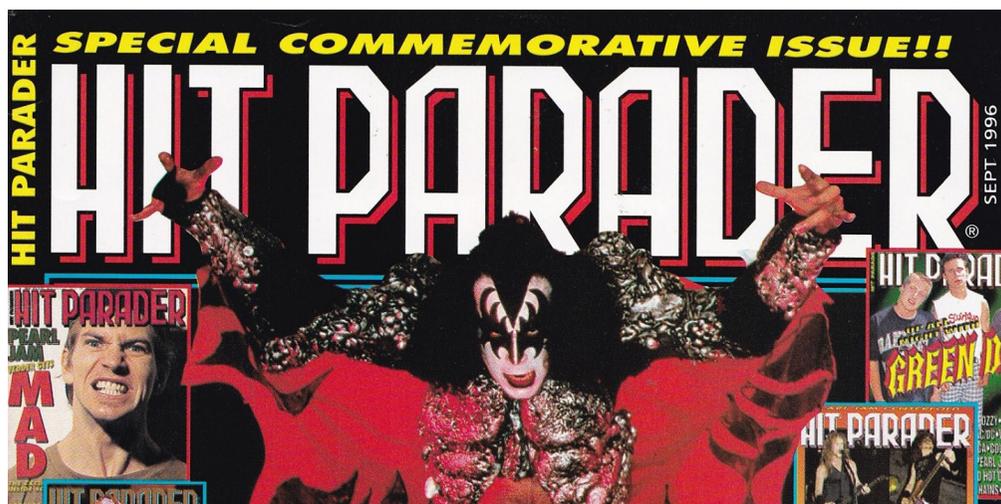
For as much shit the 1998 movie takes (and deserves), it is arguably the one American incarnation of the monster that keeps Godzilla as an antagonist. Sure, the monster isn't complicated with no underlying, meaningful themes to speak of, but Zilla is still the obstacle that has to be overcome. The other two big pieces of American Godzilla media (the 2014 and 2019 movies), however, feature Big G as a straight up antihero; he destroys buildings, causes tsunamis and wipes out San Francisco and Boston, sure, but we're meant to root for him as he saves us from

far worse threats. This isn't to say the character has fallen back on being a basic superhero (the 2014 movie has plenty of clear connections to real world disasters like Fukushima, Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami), but it's striking to see the difference in how the character has been depicted between two countries.

Godzilla's more amicable depiction in American media isn't completely surprising, due to a combination of wanting to make him more likable for mainstream audiences, how the US was the country that used

nuclear weapons on Japan in the first place and how we've never truly had a first-hand reckoning with the existential threat of said weaponry. Meanwhile, Japan has continuously revisited the character due to nuclear mishaps, with Godzilla's reintroduction in the 80s being a response to Three Mile Island, and 2016's *Shin Godzilla* being a clear commentary on the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and the subsequent crisis of the aforementioned Fukushima power plant. But it must be said that while the gulf between these two approaches is wildly different in tone and intent, neither is "incorrect". The character has taken on a dozen different roles across dozens of continuities, and even King Kong has gone through a similar evolution of being a straightforward monster in the 1930s, while ending up as a far more sympathetic character in the 2000s and 2010s. No matter the creative team or the time he's in, the one constant about the king of the monsters is that he's never "just a monster." There's always something more to him than that. 





DISCOVERING MUSIC – I spent my middle school and early high school years living in a rural town that banned MTV because they didn't want kids watching *Beavis And Butt-head* (legend has it some kids tried starting a fire after seeing the show and that was the end of that). This place was also more than an hour away from the nearest shopping mall and further still from any actual organized music scene or culture. Since this was the mid-90s to very early 2000s and we didn't have a computer at home until a little while later, finding and obtaining new music required what we'd consider some extreme measures today.

My primary means of hearing new music came from a modern rock radio station that broadcast from the nearest major city (which wasn't that close). That covered the grunge and alternative rock bases that were popular at the time, but that was about it. I'd also pick up copies of mainstream rock and metal magazines like *Hit Parader* and had a subscription to *Guitar World*, which occasionally would make me aware that heavier and edgier bands existed (mostly from the emergent nu-metal scene and long-haired death metal bands

that I frankly found terrifying because I was a weak idiot).

Actually hearing any of those bands was another story though. Occasionally you'd hear a snippet of something cool during a skateboarding segment on ESPN or maybe a late-night show would get System of a Down or A Perfect Circle or something on. Sometimes I could download an extremely low-quality video on a school computer and listen for 30 seconds before getting kicked out of the computer lab.

None of these were great options, so I started buying CDs sight unseen based on what I could piece together from print reviews and interviews on dead tree media. I could only buy albums, one at a time, when my family took 90-minute drives to the nearest shopping mall. Then I'd maybe scan the liner notes to see who the band thanked and see if I could find any names I recognized the next time I went to Sam Goody.

This sounds unthinkable now, not only because it's a risky way for a kid to blow what little money they have, but because half of the previous paragraph probably sounds like an

MUSIC

alien language to anyone under 25. Yet the hit rate for this method was shockingly high, and sometimes pushed me to check out stuff I'd otherwise ignore.

It was an objectively stupid time for music discovery in a lot of ways, and if anyone tries to tell you the old days were better, let me say emphatically, *"No, the fuck they were not."* But if nothing else, I do miss the sense of satisfaction that came from finding something for myself, even if it took hard work and blind faith. Spotify has given me most of the history of recorded music at my fingertips, but when I have access to everything while owning nothing (aside from a modest collection of vinyl records, all of which I heard first on a non-physical digital format), it never lands quite the same way.

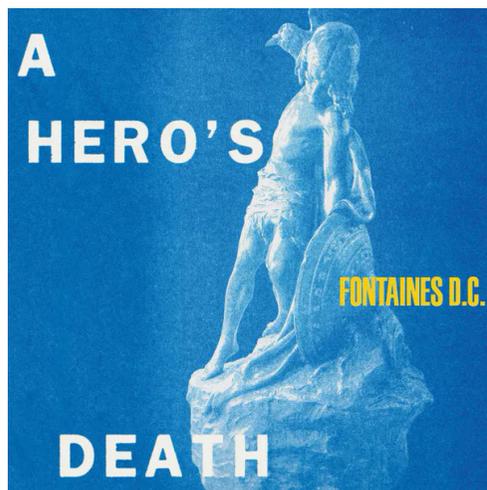
Things are better now, I tell myself, and I'm right. Or, at least, so I think.

— BEN SAILER

PLAYLIST

- "I Don't Belong," by Fontaines D.C.
- "Dakota," by Fog Lake
- "Wishing," by Deep Sea Diver
- "Ritchie Sacramento," by Mogwai
- "Sails," by Elephant Tree
- "At It Again," by Slow Pulp
- "Silverspoon," by Teenage Wrist
- "The Call," by Madlib
- "The Shining but Tropical," by Wild Pink
- "Cry of Love," by Crippled Black Phoenix
- "Nostalgist," by Caspian
- "Singing," by Sun June
- "Hypogelum," by Cara Neir
- "Spectres," by God Is An Astronaut
- "Family Farm," by The Hold Steady
- "Glimmer," by A. A. Williamss

LISTEN ON SPOTIFY





PIRANESI – As Piranesi wanders through the House, he maintains a reverence for its walls and statues. He gives thanks to the House for his general well-being. He deifies the House and gives it his religious faith. For Piranesi, the House is all he knows, and he finds reassurance and peace by engaging with his faith.

This peace becomes complicated when Susanna Clarke reveals her titular character's origin within the House. His faith is exploited and manipulated by the person who trapped him in the House, as extended time in the House causes memory loss for its inhabitants. Piranesi's memory loss leads him to forget that he is a prisoner, with his faith being portrayed as a coping mechanism for the unfamiliarity and the harsher lifestyle that comes from living there.

Despite this, *Piranesi* does not demonize this faith. Instead, it becomes a source of stability for Piranesi, even when he discovers who he once was and why he is in the House. The reverence to the House is vague and flexible enough to change with Piranesi. His faith

is still a coping mechanism, but it is one that allows him to move forward rather than keep him trapped.

What makes this faith so compelling is how personal it is. Piranesi's journal is the only source that we have on him and the House. We see him struggle with his faith and his relationship to the House, but that faith grows with his greater understanding of the world instead of clashing against it. It showcases how powerful faith can be, and how for many people, that type of faith is what keeps them moving forward in their lives.

While our world is more familiar to us than the House, it can still be unkind and mysterious. Faith for Piranesi and for many of us is not our sole understanding of the world, but instead something that gives a sense of meaning and hope. When Piranesi returns to the real world, his faith in the House still guides him. Even in a new unfamiliar world, Piranesi still finds that "The Beauty of the House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite."

– WILLIAM DOWELL

BOOKS

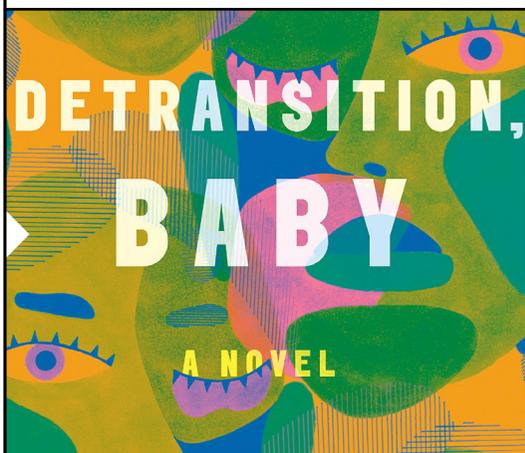


MY STARRY SKY – *My Starry Sky* is an interesting webtoon about the perils of falling in love in your youth. It's an interesting take on friends to enemies to lovers, itself an overused trope, but it has some divergence on that path. There is actual growth in the story lines, even as it plays into the stereotypes you expect. It's also great that the teenage love interest has hair that is made of stars; it plays into the feelings you have when you're young and it feels like the person you are infatuated with is impossibly out of reach.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

DETRANSITION, BABY – What annoys me most about *Detransition, Baby* is how Torrey Peters has been credited with developing an understanding of the trans community that is little more than observations of intracommunity problems framed as rich, delicious drama for a conspicuous audiences consumption. Peters isn't the first person to talk about what will forever now be known as the juvenile delinquent elephants problem, but as a wealthy white trans woman in Brooklyn, she has the name and a platform to/from cis people to make it her own contribution. Which isn't necessarily Peters' own doing, but let's not pretend excessive literary fiction made for trans Brooklynites and cis tourists is some new frontier of Firsts to celebrate.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS – This is a hard poetry collection to do justice in words beyond “Go read this now!” It's wide-ranging, seamlessly moving between the personal and the political, from harrowing detail of the war in Vietnam to childhood stories. Form and structure are putty in Ocean Vuong's hands, drifting between styles with ease – even sometimes drifting out of English and into Vietnamese.

Playing with the echoes of the violence of US imperialism past and present, Vuong carves out a touching piece of mastery.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE



NIGHT SKY WITH EXIT WOUNDS

OCEAN VUONG



IVAN VASILIEVICH CHANGES PROFESSION

– It's hard to know why certain movies from a given country end up becoming popular internationally, while others languish in obscurity. It helps if it's popular in its home country, obviously, but it's not a silver bullet.

Leonid Gaidai was one of the most popular and successful directors in the Soviet Union, but his films are tragically under-seen outside of the former USSR. You could argue this is due to their specificity in Russian culture which international audiences can't understand or appreciate, but I don't think that's true. His 1973 film *Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession* is a total crowd-pleaser: the kind of fun action-adventure comedy that Hollywood made so well in the 1980s, but a decade earlier and a half a world away.

The film is sometimes sold in English-speaking territories as *Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the Future*, under the same commercial logic that led to a dubbed version of *Le Samourai* being released as *The Godson* to capitalize on *The Godfather*. But the comparison feels apt: although a very different time travel story to *Back to the Future*, it has a similar total commitment to being big, loveable entertainment, without sacrificing all the offbeat touches that make it unique. It's rooted in Russian culture and humor, but it has every right to be a comedy classic in the English-speaking world.

Shurik (Aleksandr Demyanenko) is building a time machine. He accidentally sends the superintendent of his apartment building, Ivan Vasilievich Bunsha (Yury Yakovlev), along with a burglar who was in the middle of robbing Shurik, back to Ivan the Terrible's time. Meanwhile, Ivan the Terrible (also played by Yakovlev) jumps forward to 1973 Moscow. Hijinks ensue. Vasilievich poses as Ivan the Terrible: the burglar, who poses as a duke, says *this* Ivan looks nothing like Ivan the Terrible, despite them being literally identical. Ivan the Terrible, meanwhile, is confused by elevators, and also everything else about the 1970s. People mistaken him for Vasilievich and figure he seems to be having some kind of nervous breakdown.

Ivan Vasilievich Changes Profession executes classical styles of comedy with a particular flair. It's full of farce that would make Oscar Wilde proud: the mistaken identities and escalating misunderstandings in both timelines are the core of the film's humor, carried off by Yakovlev's killer dual performance. But its slapstick is what really shines. The epic final chase combines physical comedy with genuine tension in the manner of Buster Keaton. It's no wonder it became hugely popular in Russia. The weird thing is that it didn't everywhere else.

– CIARA MOLONEY

MOVIES

ROBOT JOX – Okay, yes, this movie is very not good. It's kind of weird, a little scattered, the special effects are definitely dated, and the world building feels kind of random. I don't care.

I don't care because it's a movie that revolves around giant robots duking it out one-on-one, like ridiculous futuristic gladiators. Growing up it was my *Pacific Rim* before we knew who Guillermo Del Toro was. I freaking adore this terrible movie.

– ROB RICH

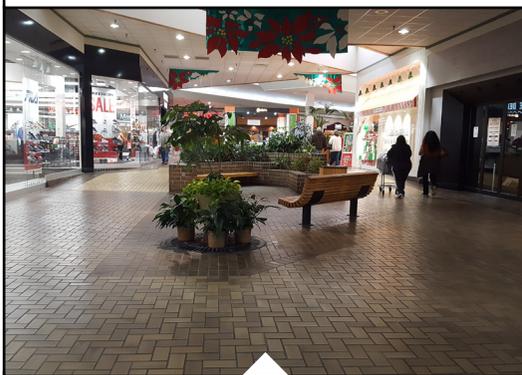


BURN, WITCH, BURN – I checked this 1962 film (also called *Night of the Eagle*) because it is an adaptation of Fritz Leiber's excellent novel *Conjure Wife*. That Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont wrote the screenplay was a bonus.

What a delightfully odd movie! In a nutshell, a psychology professor (the riveting Peter Wyngarde) scorns superstition and is upset to learn that his wife (Janet Blair) is a witch. He demands she stop practicing witchcraft, despite her claim that it is actively protecting him and enhancing his career. Hijinks predictably ensue, mostly of the psychological variety, but there is an extended sequence with a giant eagle that manages to be explicitly and suprisingly frightening.

I'm not sure where the commentary on gender politics winds up at the end, but it doesn't really matter. Filmed gorgeously in black and white, shadows loom, eyes shine, night oceans beckon. Even if the coherence unravels a bit at the end, it's a ride worth taking. Also, look up Peter Wyngarde [on Wikipedia](#) if you want further fascinating, if tangential, reading.

– STU HORVATH



JASPER MALL – There is something deeply fascinating about dying malls – they're liminal spaces, their emptiness uncanny. We expect them to be as they were when we were children, bustling and full, monuments to capitalism, and their desolation and disrepair feels wrong, the modern equivalent of a moldering Victorian home.

Jasper Mall is a documentary set in the fading end cycle of one such dying mall, where all of the anchor stores have left and you're left with just a few hold outs, where the most common visitor to the mall are the elderly walkers who are themselves slowly dying out. It's a quiet rumination and character piece, and it's worth a watch.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



TELEVISION



ER – *ER* is a time capsule. It straddles the 90s and 00s such that the show almost says more about what happens in the background than what happens in the text. Over 25 years later, many of the patients who didn't make it through the earlier seasons might survive if the therapies and diagnostics of today were available to them.

The multi-season storyline that inexorably ties it to specific, named conflicts around the world seem to both date it and keep it eternal. Well, those and the ever-present specter of gun violence in America and Chicago. Heart-breakingly, though in the early days of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq military doctors trained in urban trauma centers, it's been long enough that those military doctors are now training the urban trauma centers.

While the final season – the one I am now just finishing for perhaps the third or fourth time – lags far beyond the peaks, it shows more about where “doctor/hospital” shows would go. Competing with *Grey's Anatomy*

forced sexier storylines, more jokes and less focus on the dire situation of urban hospital environments. As the show got older, the doctors got younger. Long gone are the days where Anthony Edwards gets his turn at sowing his wild oats. Although, Stanley Tucci gets a strangely steamy arc. That's weird. It's far from “great TV” but excellent in the way it demonstrates where the themes of the “doctor/hospital” show would go and how they would be carried forward. And yet, it remains true to the world of *ER*. In a high stakes place like a county hospital there is an endless churn of interns, residents and attendings. Beautifully, the nurses are the constant.

While not the first attractive-doctors-with-problems show, and certainly not the last, it's the one I keep coming back to. The thing about time capsules is that they often don't just show you how different things were, they show you how much they've stayed the same.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA

TELEVISION

The MAGICIANS – The main character looks like my close friend/ex-boyfriend and idk how to feel about it.

– MELISSA KING



GRACE and FRANKIE – I’ve had a great time watching *Frankie and Grace* over the last week or so. It’s been a real fun binge with great performances on all counts. Watching Frank and Gracie deal with the fallout of their lives collapsing in their 70s has made me feel a little more normal about anything that feels like my life is collapsing in my 30s. After watching *Grank and Fracie* all week, I’ve definitely developed a parasocial relegation with the characters too. So much so that I think, when *Frace and Grankie* reach its last season this year, I’ll finally be able to get the name of the show correct.

– NOAH SPRINGER

STREET DANCE of CHINA (SEASON 3) – There’s something very odd about watching a post-COVID show while you yourself are still in a state of social isolation, but that is the case with *Street Dance of China*. The show opens with a dramatic post-apocalyptic sequence about the country surviving the virus, about how they couldn’t come together and now they can. And then they DANCE. The dancing itself is fantastic – both from the celebrity judges (the set up of the show is a bit like *The Voice*, where judges make teams and then attempt to “coach” those teams through to the finale) and the contestants themselves, and it’s a deeply humane show. While every episode is incredibly long (2.5 hours), they are not packed with unnecessary drama over who will lead teams during challenges or pointlessly stressful eliminations that make contestants think they are going home.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



GAMES



CELESTE – *Celeste* is not only about climbing a mountain; it's also about scaling your own insurmountable heights of anxiety. As Madeline, players hike toward the peak of Celeste Mountain, but they also see Madeline gradually overcome her anxiety. Such a depiction of mental health is rare in games, with few titles presenting mental health as an integral part of one's life, rather than an obstacle to overcome. By focusing on her journey towards better mental health, *Celeste* foregrounds Madeline's struggles as a relatable fable – a reflection of the troubles that players who, like Madeline, deal with anxiety, depression, or other mental illnesses face daily.

Like myself. A few summers ago, two friends and I decided to summit Mount Washington, one of the tallest peaks in the northeastern United States at 6,288.2 feet. We were not prepared. After nearly six hours of non-stop trekking, my body and brain were exhausted. My anxiety overthrew logic and reason and I sat down, refusing to continue to the peak a mere 500 feet above me. Not knowing what to do, my friends scuttled up the rocks to seek help from the park rangers.

The calm breeze and tranquil view of the wilderness juxtaposed sharply with my pained, frantic attempts to breathe. To calm down, I used a technique Madeline employed in-game: imagining a golden feather floating on her breath. With every inhale, the feather floats down and, with every exhale, it rises. That was

the first tool she gained to control her anxiety, and as a power-up to crest the mountain.

By imitating the way Madeline breathes in *Celeste*, I was able to control the pace of my own breathing. I imagined the feather rising and falling; my chest loosened as air filled my lungs. By the time my friends returned, I was adept at keeping the feather balanced and in control. I was ready to finish the hike.

The climb was still rugged and full of obstacles. Every few steps I would stop, my muscles screaming and my anxiety trying to creep back. But then I'd think of this feather, take a few deep breaths and press forward. With each step up rocks or a comically large staircase, I imagined the little checkpoints on Celeste Mountain that countdown Madeline's progress. At the top, the first thing I did was take a photograph. I wanted a keepsake to remind myself of the sweat, pain, tears and ultimately, my personal triumph over this journey.

Where most games fail, *Celeste* understands that anxiety is not a disability; it is a vital part of who many of us are. Having anxiety or depression does not make you inherently broken, but it's what makes us human. Madeline and I both achieved our goals only after coming to terms with the fact that it's okay to not be okay. When you accept anxiety as a part of yourself, you may reach greater heights than you ever thought possible. And I have a picture to prove it.

– MIK DEITZ



AMNESIA: REBIRTH – Are you afraid of the dark? The game is all about fear of the unknown, so you might want to avoid *Amnesia: Rebirth* if you panic when the power goes out, but you'd be missing some great architecture if you do.

Amnesia: Rebirth takes place in Algeria. The year is 1937. Having survived a plane crash, you wander the desert for a while before happening upon a fortress built by the French Foreign Legion. With its tall towers and columned courtyards, the building is definitely beautiful, but what makes the fortress interesting is that it conveys a strong sense of place. You come to understand what it means to live somewhere like this. Walk around the fortress and you'll come across dining halls and dormitories. Armories. Chapels. Offices. You get the impression that people have actually been here.

The other buildings in *Amnesia: Rebirth* are every bit as interesting. As an archaeologist, I appreciated the dig site in particular. Supposing that you aren't afraid of the dark, I can't recommend *Amnesia: Rebirth* enough. The structures are definitely worth exploring.

– JUSTIN REEVE

LITTLEWOOD – I bought *Littlewood* for my Switch a few weeks ago thanks to someone singing its praises on social media and I have to say I do not regret spending that \$15.

You get to run around collecting materials to make money, build structures and otherwise expand your little town, but there's no getting stuck with any decisions you make. If you decide you want a building somewhere else, you can just move it. If you regret planting a vegetable, you can remove it and get the veggie you used back. Time is tied to your stamina, so the day will not end until you've either exhausted all of your energy or you decide you want to call it a night.

There's absolutely no pressure to anything and god I wish more games tried this approach.

– ROB RICH



HOROSCOPE

I just learned that in 2016
some nerds updated the zodiac
to better reflect the reality of
the churning night sky so now
I'm a Sagittarius, what the fuck
does that even mean?!?!?!?!? 🍷