

ISSUE 32

EXPLOITS

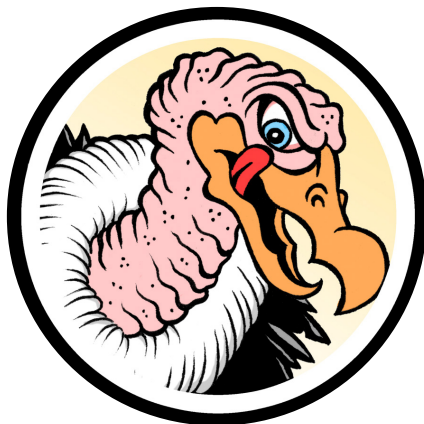
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DEGRASSI: The NEXT GENERATION

• **TOUCHÉ AMORÉ** • **MAZES of POWER** • **BINKY** •
BEAT SABER VTube • **LIZ and the BLUEBIRD**



Editor in Chief | Stu Horvath

EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

Managing Editor | Melissa King

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Movies Editor | Amanda Hudgins

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Unwinnable
820 Chestnut Street
Kearny, NJ 07032

www.unwinnable.com

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This machine kills fascists.

FEMININE FLAILING

by Violet Adele Bloch

So my favorite weird corner of YouTube is *Beat Saber* VTube. Typically, VTubers are the performers behind rigged, motion-captured, automatically animated characters (who are **often, but not always, anime girls**). *Beat Saber* VTube, by contrast, is all about *Beat Saber* (the cyber noir VR rhythm game from Czech developer Beat Games). *Beat Saber* VTubers are typically mute, and seen from behind – the classic third person/over-the-shoulder view. We aren't watching *them*, per se: we're watching the way they play the game.

My favorite *Beat Saber* VTube video (because I'm the kind of person who has a favorite *Beat Saber* VTube video) is **makeUmove's playthrough of "Flamingo" by Kero Kero Bonito**. I've watched it over a hundred times since it went up last October – which is weird, because it's hardly the best thing makeUmove's ever done. She's greatly upgraded her fabric simulations and body tracking since last year, and she's honed her saber technique. Her recent videos are more polished; they show her **effortlessly tearing through blocks** with (usually) **catlike precision**. But, still, her old run of "Flamingo" has a glitchy, framey charm to it, which is something I've never stopped loving.

I think it's the fact that the style behind the avatar is still recognizably makeUmove. Even under the framiness and the twitchy body tracking, you can still resolve the effortless precision and follow-through to each slash. The style shows underneath: it's like clocking a familiar actor under heavy makeup. You couldn't mistake **makeUmove** for **omotea**, for example, even in their special Halloween outfits – the former is all about technique and the latter is all about style.

And it's this display of personality that makes me love *Beat Saber* VTube – it's character building and storytelling, by the rigged motion of an artificial body. By this, there's a certain queerness and genderfuckedness to these characters: they're a weightless femme artifice, one that could be donned by anyone. "*Fans: Are you a man or a woman?*" (reads one comment on **a video by omotea**). "*I'm a dancer. What gender are you? 'Funky' Yeah but what's in your pants? 'Rhythm.'*"

But even beyond this (and beyond the bright colors, and catchy music, and pretty anime girls), the scene has an oddly comforting appeal to me. It's a kind of jagged-edged DIY realness – with barely enough body tracking, and just enough

hair and fabric simulation, the artifice is always acknowledged, never smoothed over. makeUmove's take on "Flamingo," then, might be a more full embrace of this medium's janky, bewitching artificiality. It's a representation of an archetypal feminine body, with little of the grace of that body's tradition.

Rather, it's a glitchy, imperfect imagination of femininity, embodied with a loose, jittery plasticity; a tactile experience that deeply recalls my own. It's a depiction I wish I saw echoed more often across media: female bodies not as curated, flawless objects, but as the graceless, mutable things they are. 🍷





TOUCHÉ AMORÉ – Jeremy Bolm has found success writing poetic songs about how unpoetic he thinks he is. The Touché Amoré songwriter has spent the past decade being a monument, a figurehead for the beaten, the broken and the damned. Their 2013 release *Is Survived By* confronted the existential dread of leaving a legacy as an artist. *Stage Four*, released in 2016, found Bolm mourning his mother’s death. An overwhelming response to that record’s brutal honesty and pain found the band a legion of new fans pouring their grief into the still grieving frontman.

On *Lament*, the group’s latest release, Bolm addresses this parasocial relationship. The record is incredibly dynamic and dense, a feat even for one of the most consistent bands currently working in hardcore and emo. The most melodic of the already melodic hardcore band’s output, Bolm’s singing on *Lament* blurs the line between screaming and clean vocals. This blurring hits on one of my favorite themes on the album.

“I’ll Be Your Host” is the song most directly about the frontman’s struggle with being an idol. The title itself implies a parasitic relationship, one Bolm unwittingly got tricked into simply by trying to live his dream. The track calls out the blind faith of fans when he screams “I’m a shell of my former self, can you tell when I’m babbling?”

Bolm’s own self-confidence is called into question here. Historically, he hasn’t always seen eye to eye with fans on Touché Amoré’s music, having been on record claiming *Is Survived By* (an 8.0 from Pitchfork and a fan favorite) is the band’s worst album.

Lament makes a concerted effort to emphasize the difference between helping fans through their trauma and being supported yourself. Nowhere is this more clear than the album’s closer, “A Forecast.” Bolm’s words come through cleanly over a piano melody as he calls out his own bandmates for their lack of emotional support over the past half decade of mourning.

MUSIC

The people I thought would reach out,
turns out they would not
On the anniversaries of the worst kind of
days, my phone was mostly silent
One excuse was “giving space”
It’s not like I wrote some lyrics detailing
the exact events
Some profit off the album and most I
just consider friends

These lyrics are uncomfortable, but their inclusion on the record is a testament to Bolm’s bandmates. Bolm is the muse, but the band shows conviction by powering through the discomfort to give their friend much needed catharsis. In another timeline, they might have had to listen to them sung on stage every night. An ongoing global pandemic has ensured that no one will be hearing these songs live for many, many months.

We have all failed people. I often obsess over the ways I’ve failed loved ones, but rarely do I turn my attention to the ways we’ve failed our idols. *Lament* is a stark reminder to treat people like people, no matter how much you think you understand them.

— BRYN GELBART



PLAYLIST

- “The Swimming Pool Song,” by Laura Jane Grace
- “Reminders,” by Touché Amoré
- “Brakeless,” by The Wonder Years
- “Nothing Changes,” by PUP
- “Not Tonight, Jeff,” by The Ground Is Lava
- “hand crushed by a mallet (Remix),” by 100 geecs
[feat. Fall Out Boy, Craig Owens, Nicole Dollanganger]
- “Boomer,” by Bartees Strange
- “Death Parade,” by Open Mike Eagle
- “You Want It Darker,” by Leonard Cohen
- “Hudsonville MI 1956,” by La Dispute
- “Swaying leaves and scattering breath,” by envy
- “Nice And Blue (Pt. 2),” by mewwithoutYou
- “Forget Me,” by The Promise Ring
- “A Forecast,” by Touché Amoré

LISTEN NOW ON SPOTIFY



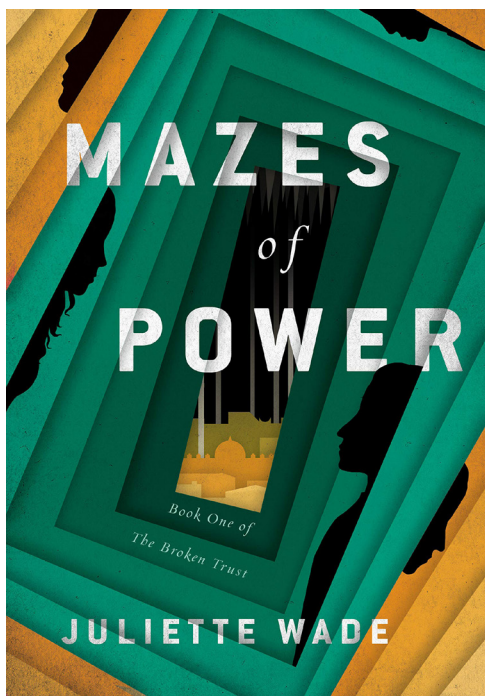
BOOKS

MAZES of POWER – Juliette Wade's *Mazes of Power* (2020) is a densely plotted political thriller set in a society with an extreme caste hierarchy. For fans of world building fantasy suffused with politics, there's a lot there to enjoy. It's also an unabashedly queer novel, and one complicated by the biopolitics of its world.

Mazes focuses on two brothers, named Tagaret and Nekantor. They are high-caste and respectively repudiate and crave political power. While Tagaret's self-centered perspective might provide a dash of realism for a sheltered teenager, it also means he only recognizes societal problems when they become personal. Chapters written from Nekantor's perspective are more grating, as Wade lays the blame for his bigotry and wickedness at the hands of his compulsions. Both are subjects formed by the caste structure of their society.

The nature of that subjection is key to how Wade handles a distinction between caste and class. Thinking in terms of class alone ignores the ways that systems of domination bind themselves to biology and reproduction. In contrast, caste systems use a combination of bodily traits and accumulated wealth to deepen divisions in society. While class politics are a regular feature of science fiction, the biopolitical dimensions of caste feature less often. The characters of *Mazes* are steeped in the etiquette and power structures of caste and feel they are responsible for upholding those same structures. With that in mind, is it any wonder that Wade's characters have difficulties with transgression and power?

Much of *Mazes'* political story springs from the relation of class hierarchy and biology. That political story is set off with a deadly fever, endemic to the highborn. The complicating factors of queer romance are likewise inflected



by caste politics: Tagaret pines after Bella, a highborn girl with whom he is forbidden social contact, even while beginning a sexual relationship with his best friend and male schoolmate, Reyn. While Wade could have allowed for Tagaret and Reyn's relationship to manifest only as the result of strict gender segregation amongst youths, she instead provides them with scenes of emotional honesty and longing.

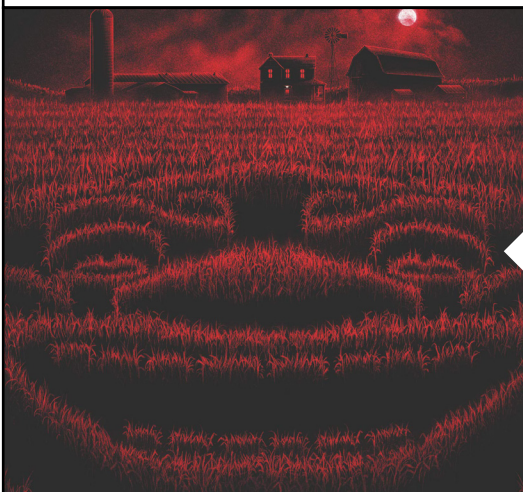
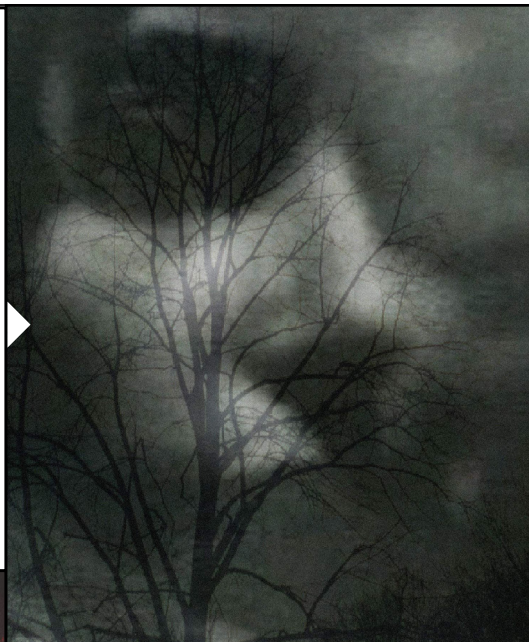
As Tagaret forms an alliance with Bella in the shadow of Nekantor's schemes, his intended resistance to surrounding society deepens. With it, so does his sense of injustice, especially as it is directed towards women and members of lower castes. As Tagaret tiptoes towards a wider perspective, he remains limited by the biopolitics of caste. In future books, I wonder whether he will face the contradictions of his personal transgressions and turn his rebellion to face the larger structures of his society.

– DON EVERHART

BOOKS

LITTLE HOUSES, BIG FORESTS – Little Houses, Big Forests is a book dedicated to wandering. Combining personal, literary, and photo essays, Siouxzi Connor develops a sense of lostness (explicitly) in line with Solnit, Sontag, and Sebald. Little Houses, Big Forests is for seasoned wanderers. Like backpackers, nomads, loners, and essayists, Connor is unafraid to linger on one feeling, word, or woman. Like this, prose and inter-text weave together a densely populated map that veils the everpresent desire of Connor's work. In this sense, it is a book of yearning.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

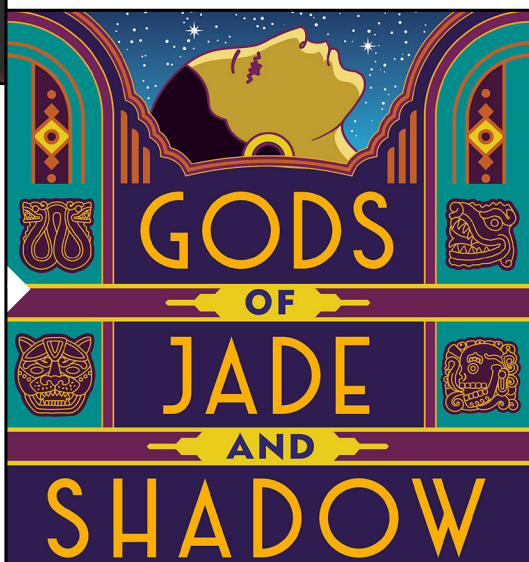


CLOWN in a CORNFIELD – The answer to that age-old question: What if one of R. L. Stine's more teen-focused books morphed into a gory, clever-but-never-too-jokey, post-*Scream* slasher about the legitimate horrors of hate, "Making America Great Again" and a generation raised amid active shooter drills?

– ORRIN GREY

GODS of JADE and SHADOW – This isn't a review so much as a literary thirst post. There were chapters of quotes I wanted to clip and save like flower petals between journal pages. It's a luxurious book, the kind of book that makes you want to call it "prose" when you talk about it. *Gods of Jade and Shadow* had the kind of gorgeous world building that you spend four years failing to develop in undergrad and the rest of your life dreaming of accomplishing

– AMANDA HUDGINS



MOVIES



LIZ and the BLUEBIRD – The first girl I loved as a girl said she fell for me when I flipped her ponytail. Walking down a hallway, the sun shining just ahead, I followed her and that swaying ponytail towards the light. I considered it like a cat caught by the swirl of a loose thread and reached out for her. *Liz and the Bluebird* is about **the color of the sky** in those moments.

Naoko Yamada's 2018 film is a story of accompaniments. It's her second collaboration with Kensuke Ushio, the pair demonstrating their synchronous ability to represent the personal, hidden moments of youth. As Yamada's gaze peaks through beakers atop desks and peers around the resonant hallways of the school, Ushio incorporates the ambient sounds of the protagonists' childhoods. Their footsteps, **set to coprime tempos**, and the swish of their skirt's fill in the quiet, percussive soundtrack of desk chairs and marimbas.

And Reiko Yoshida, who's written the young director's entire filmography, showcases her mastery for voicing adolescence. Beginning with *K-On*, the pair began to search for purpose in music and girls. In *Hibike! Euphonium*, Yamada would complicate the casts' obvious parallels with subtler emotions and messy histories to shape them. Much nar-

rower in scope, masks come to define *Liz*; deceptively coaxing us into the false security its subjects feel. It is the apotheosis of Yamada and Yoshida's previous pursuits

Mizore and Nozome take on the eponymous roles of the fairytale and **composition** to perform a duet. But their characters don't match their instruments. The film disorients the viewer as a whirlwind of emotion, perspective, and understanding reverses the girls' own interpretation of their role in the others' life. Moving from animation to watercolor to **decalcomania**, the girls reach their understanding independently – not as reflections, but two like halves. And then, they play.

Liz's ending isn't a major chord. Yamada recognizes the harder reality that we may be with the right people at the wrong time, that attraction isn't compatibility, that deeper, beneath the skin, feelings remain unknown and unresolved. Mizore confesses and Nozome rejects her. But Yamada's presentation of the girl, the frame cutting out just below the eyes, betrays sincerity. She says the last thing the last girl I loved told me: thank you for everything. Her true feelings – and how Mizore sees them from behind her ponytail – are kept between the two. **It's something girls will understand.**

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

MOVIES

BLACKPINK: LIGHT UP the SKY – I don't know anything about Blackpink, the K-Pop group, but this documentary is probably one of the best of the year. It's also like a warm hug. If you're looking for an incisive dive into entertainment culture, this isn't it, but if you're looking for insight into the creativity of K-Pop, then this documentary delivers. There is an interesting narrative constructed around the growth of these women as both performers and as people. You see them gain confidence in themselves, but you also see that they're not done. The final scene where they discuss a future where they're older, where they're in their 40s and are married and are maybe doing a reunion tour, it speaks to a future distant and unknown.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



ONIBABA – This has been on my to-watch list for over a decade, ever since I bought a book of horror movie posters back in '06. I happened to take a peak a couple weeks ago and suddenly, it was streaming. Set during the civil war in 14th-century feudal Japan, *Onibaba* tells of two women, scraping to survive by killing stray samurai who happen across their path, and the man who comes between them. With lush cinematography full of long reeds and sex, director Kaneto Shindo draws the most out of the relatively sparse set design through lighting and framing. Deep shadows and sharp highlights criss cross the scenery, lingering on the claustrophobic horror of the long grass, reinforcing the power of black and white cinema. By the end, when the old woman screams, "I am a human being," we are left wondering what lengths we will go to for jealousy, and what lengths they will go to to survive.

– NOAH SPRINGER



HAUSU – *Hausu* is transcendental cinema. Frames are laid on top of one another to create psychological and temporal expression. Characters are cut out and used as animations on the screen. There is a complete disregard for normative tone, and instead a hope for showing the complete bumper car ride of emotions that life takes us down. And it's all to express the violence of post World War intergenerational trauma. Go watch *Hausu*.

– WAVERLY



TELEVISION



DEGRASSI: The NEXT GENERATION – In the before-times I used to relish being a person without a TV. But after exhausting the usual attempts at new hobbies, reading until my eyes are sore and going for the government-sanctioned daily walk I feel boredom creeping in and I'm craving something else. When I hear about the PlutoTV app, the novelty of continuous TV without the ability to pause fills me with sentimentality. Perhaps it's the deliciousness of not having to choose what to watch that appeals the most and in a time where my energy is already zapped, I'm happy for an app to do the work for me. When I see that there is a dedicated 24-hour *Degrassi* channel, I am obsessed.

As a Canadian living abroad, unable to see my family except virtually, *Degrassi* takes me back. For that brief time, I'm transported to a reality filled with pithy banter, early 2000's fashion and hormonal teenagers in their feelings. Sure, there are serious crises too: school shootings, suicide and rape among the most harrowing, but none of them are a pandemic. None of them involve being locked away from family and friends for a long period of time.

None of them are my reality. So, I get a break. I get to vicariously live through the extreme situations that these 13-18-year-old Canadians are navigating.

There is more than enough material to chew on in its 14-season history and I love watching Emma, Manny and the gang grow up. There is a joy in knowing what's going to happen but wanting to watch it play out, nonetheless. Not being able to pause the show gives a sense of immediacy that is currently lacking with streaming services. I'm transported back to childhood, quickly running to the bathroom or getting a snack during the commercial break to avoid missing any of the show. Watching the gang eat pierogies and drink cans of Mug root beer in the cafeteria, talking in their broad Ontario accents makes me feel closer to my country, to my family. To a different time. Nostalgia has a lot to answer for but during these precarious times I'll take what I can get. What will I do to emotionally survive this pandemic? Whatever it takes. I know I can make it through.

– OLGA ALEXANDRU

TELEVISION

TALE of the NINE-TAILED – An on-going Korean drama that manages to pack a lot into every single episode. A single hour could contain a woman being possessed and nearly murdered, brothers fighting and someone getting struck by lightning and you'd still miss the ominous priestess, the footless dragon god in a well and the cannibalism. This makes it sound darker than it is; *Tale of the Nine-Tailed* manages to be quite fun, layering comic relief among the drama of an immortal fox spirit who lost his one true love 400 years ago and is waiting for her to be reincarnated.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



The VOW – What if L. Ron Hubbard had been banished from the US right after writing *Dianetics*? What if instead of getting an entire state to believe he drew golden plates out of a hat that only he could read, Joseph Smith was arrested and charged with fraud? Well, in *The Vow*, we kind of get to see what would happen – at least what would happen in 2018 America. HBO's new true crime series takes us through the NXIVM kerfuffle in excruciating detail, showing exactly how “genius” Keith Reniere conned a bunch of rich, white folk into believing his bullshit. In the end, I'm not sure we understand the mind of a narcissist much better, but we do get insight into the foundations of a cult, and we get to see first hand how intelligence and economic class are not an immunization from a charismatic douchebag. Now if only they would tell me what NXIVM stands for. Please, somebody explain this to me.

– NOAH SPRINGER

VIOLET EVERGARDEN – *Violet Evergarden* is a dramatization of the writer's pursuit – to put to words. Haunted by an “I love you,” the titular protagonist's struggle to write represents her disorientation as a child soldier in the cultural rhetorics of a newly post-war fantasy Europe. Taking up epistolary genres from the opera to the battlefield, Violet attempts to orient herself as an auto memories doll. Ghostwriters of sorts, these lavishly dressed women articulate ones “(t)rue feelings.” Embellishing her logical positionality, Violet struggles to capture the expressivity and depth of others emotions in her role. But her positionality shifts as her character grows, learning to to process emotion for the first time and write persuasively too. While every writer should watch *Violet Evergarden*, this one's for the rhetoricians

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



GAMES



The BINKY SERIES – There are 22 games in the *Binky series created by gisbrecht*, and almost all of them retain a simple set of elements. A confined frame, reused assets from obtuse, forgotten media and some joke on games culture. If someone wanted a traditional videogame, *Binky* may put them off. But with some time and thought, *Binky* reveals an entirely new universe of games to its players. A Binkyverse.

In *Binky XIX: Dinosaur Island*, Binky the non-binary dinosaur stands in the foreground of the frame atop of a bed of flowers, mountains just behind. Old footage from a claymation dinosaur animation plays on loop in the background while raindrops fall down. An ESRB TEEN rating sits in the top right corner indicating that the game is for cool teens, but not because of any explicit rulings: it's just a cool game. Binky can move around the frame of the game, but there are no screens to be seen outside of this. You have seen everything in the game within 45 seconds.

Binky exists as the purest evocation of computational play. There aren't any loss states or achievements to be gained. There is no long term narrative theatrics or special effects. Binky does simple things, like pull out their umbrella and walk around their birthday party. Due to these simple actions, all you can

do is mess around with the collage of images on screen. Press the keys, move things around, then reflect on how those actions make you feel and think. At the heart of games, isn't that why we play?

Just as important to the Binky games themselves are the fictional games industry which introduces each game. In these introductions, absurd jokes about the game industry can be found. On the page of *Binky VI* a developer talks about not being allowed to take sick leave, so they made a game about Binky curing sickness – a note on developers not caring for their employees' pain, but exploiting it for their work. On the page of *Binky VIII* a fictional professor of game studies is quoted: "To master the game, you must know it inside and outside, leftwise and rightwise." Doctor Brain, Department of Game Studies, Mars University FF09-A" The Binkyverse is a world of absurdity and camp, both things which our industry of games lost a long time ago.

Every *Binky* title deserves more attention than I can give in this writing. However, due to their short, non-committal nature, the best way to experience *Binky* is to play through a large portion of the games in one sitting. It's not often you have the chance to explore an alternate reality like the Binkyverse.

– WAVERLY

GAMES



SUPER MARIO GALAXY – The aesthetics and story in *Super Mario Galaxy* are completely bonkers. You might think this would make it a bad game, but *Super Mario Galaxy* is actually quite a bit better as a result. You play as a plumber who saves a princess from a turtle which is intent on taking over the universe with a fleet of pirate ships. The characters look like they came from some sort of cartoon.

How do the aesthetics and story make it a good game? They open up your imagination for the mechanics. These are every bit as bonkers. They include jumping from one planet to another in search of stars. You often find yourself moving sideways or even upside down. You sometimes have to switch between movement in two and three dimensions. It's bonkers, but the result is a very good game.

– JUSTIN REEVE

NI NO KUNI: WRATH of the WHITE WITCH

– I'm sorry *Ni No Kuni* :c I wanted to play you through but I couldn't. Your themes are everything I love. You make emotions into material in ways that my heart didn't know it needed. But I just don't want to play you right now. Maybe I will another day, far away from now. But not today.

– WAVERLY



AMONG US – I'm bad at games like *Werewolf*.

My attention span is short and lying isn't very interesting as a mechanic. Where *Among Us* is actually interesting is that lying is not the only mechanic to the game, nor is successfully lying the only way to win.

Also in one round of playing with strangers, Gingy tattled on an Imposter by outing that she had seen them “yank a man in half like a mozzarella stick,” which is just imagery that sticks with you.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



HOROSCOPE

I don't know about the stars
but I've been reading the
sound waves from my local
fireworks and they say that
the police should be abolished
and sorry for scaring your
pups. 🐕