

ISSUE 83

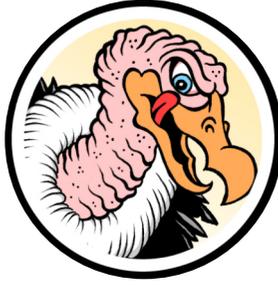
EXPLOITS

FEBRUARY 2025

an **UNWINNABLE** publication



BLU-RAYS • RONNIE SPECTOR • WHAT a DUMMY
• NIGERIAN BOOK CULTURE • VAMPIRE SURVIVORS •
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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COVER: *VESUVIUS ERUPTING AT NIGHT*, 1768, BY WILLIAM MARLOW

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This machine kills fascists.

BLU-RAY is DYING

by David Shimomura

Back in December, a critical blow was struck to the physical media landscape. LG quietly discontinued its Blu-ray players. I don't say this because LG made the best one, or the most affordable. Or that it was a good value proposition. I say this because right now, there are really only two companies that make them, and one of them is winding down.

Those of us who have championed physical media never saw it coming. Honestly, I think most people don't realize how dire the situation actually is. It was one thing for stores to stop carrying Blu-rays; it's another for the companies that make the machines that play the discs to just cease to exist.

Right now, if you don't want a videogame console, only Sony and Panasonic continue to produce Blu-ray players. However, last summer, Sony stopped production of recordable discs for the consumer market. That's coupled with Sony producing two versions of the PS5 that come without an optical drive. That's not to say that Sony is phasing out its game discs and movies *yet*. But it isn't an encouraging sign. Especially when the brand's own website lists three of its four players as out of stock.

This has always been the challenge of physical media. It's not enough to keep a VHS tape in a cool dry place — you also have to maintain a VCR. But the VCR repair store is gone, and there was never really a Blu-ray player repair store. And at least with the VCR, DVDs were looming. And after DVDs, well. But surely something will take the place of Blu-ray?

The promise of streaming has also eroded, and quickly. While Netflix was always happy to ask to upcharge us for 4K streaming, Max recently downgraded all subscribers and asked for more money to restore the privilege. I can't imagine how long it will take until internet service providers find a way to charge for the additional data. All of that is to say nothing of the instability of the rights that keep certain movies and TV shows constantly entering and leaving the pool of what is available.

I'll likely be buying a nice 4K Blu-ray player in the near future. A small measure to future-proof myself against the possibility that one day a firmware update will kill my PS5. And yes, of course, there are still DVDs. People are still making DVD players, right? And there's someone to repair them if they break? Still, though, nothing to be done about their maximum 720 resolution.

Here at Unwinnable we regularly remind each other that if you'd like to have something available to watch at your leisure, if you really care about it, it's probably worth buying the disc. But that has always been said with the assumption that the devices that play the discs would continue to be somewhat easily available. Soon, that might be the case and the idea of owning a movie or TV show to watch at one's leisure will be a luxury afforded to very few. 🍷



MUSIC



RONNIE SPECTOR – Since January of 2013, most of my Friday nights have been spent playing board games with a group of friends, including Unwinnable’s own Stu Horvath, who hosts our board game club in his converted garage/club house. Over the years, some of the regular participants have changed and there is a constant churn of the games we play, but there has been one constant: players taking turns spinning records while we play.

The regulars are mostly dudes in the same age group, so we share a lot of musical taste, but everyone’s vinyl collection is like a fingerprint or a snowflake, or a snowflake’s fingerprint: a totally unique-to-the-individual reflection of the random live shows, record stores and flea markets visited. Aging and having children have increasingly made Friday night games my main social outlet and the best way for me to discover new (and old) musical obsessions. Recently, the whole of board game club experienced this sort of obsession – a mass hysteria over an album released nearly 45 years ago.

Longtime Unwinnable contributor, Ian Gonzales, who holds the distinction of being one of board game club’s founding members,

showed up one Friday just before Christmas with an album none of us were familiar with: Ronnie Spector’s first solo record, *Siren*. Spector is, undeniably, a legend. From her numerous hits throughout the ’60s with The Ronnettes, to her iconic vocal in the chorus of Eddie Money’s “Take Me Home Tonight” from 1986, Ronnie Spector’s raw, utterly distinct voice is foundational to American music.

By the time *Siren* was released in 1980, Spector had already suffered through a horribly abusive marriage to super-producer and super-murderer, Phil Spector. As Ronnie wrote in her autobiography, the producer decimated her career by refusing to allow her to perform for years, surrounding their house with barbed wire and guard dogs to prevent her from leaving. The few times she was able to leave the house on her own, she had to drive with a life-sized dummy of Phil in the passenger seat. Seriously! He even lobbied the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame attempting to prevent The Ronnettes from being inducted, arguing they were not important enough to music to be honored. Anyway, the possibility of Phil Spector burning in torment for all eternity is as good a reason as any for Hell to be a real thing that exists.

MUSIC

Siren was not a hit album. It didn't chart at all, wasn't released on CD until 2008 and isn't available on Spotify. The album doesn't even have a Wikipedia page! It's as close to a lost album as you can get these days. Nevertheless, when it was played at board game club, the group was enthralled. The first track is a cover of "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow" by The Ramones. The original recording, featuring an uncharacteristically clean guitar tone for the band, is slower and more mellow than typical Ramones songs. Spector's version, starting off with a simple but killer guitar riff not found in the original and Ronnie's crackling voice singing, "Woah, oh, oh / Woah, oh, oh / I love you," is practically menacing.

The choice of a Ramones cover is a fitting start, as many of the songs have an almost post-punk feel. And the musicians backing Spector are a who's-who lineup of CBGB regulars of the era. Members of the Mink Deville Band and Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers form the main backing band. The guitars on the album, by the likes of Cheetah Chrome of Dead Boys, buzz with chaotic energy. Ronnie Spector would go on to have Joey Ramone produce her solo EP, *She Talks to Rainbows*, in 1999. She even provided backing vocals for two tracks on *Project 1950*, an album of covers released by The Misfits in 2003, when bassist Jerry Only was the band's lead singer. Basically, Ronnie Spector was punk as fuck.

For all the stripped-down grit of *Siren*, though, Spector's '60s era roots are still present. The second track, "Darlin'," features a shuffling beat, standard rock chord progression and pop-R&B style backing vocals. But even here, a sloppy, distorted guitar solo comes along to remind the listener that this

isn't quite like the polished girl-group songs of Spector's youth. The song "Tonight" showcases the album's genre straddling, with a dirty, dissonant guitar riff that leads into a poppy, familiar feeling vocal melody.

The production may reach its quirky height with "Boys Will Be Boys." The song features a piano intro into a dark guitar riff, into an energetic but muted guitar chugging along under the verses. Synth stings let you know something weird is going on, despite the conventional R&B backing vocals. After the bridge, the song practically falls apart with a mini solo featuring a laser gun guitar tone. It's weird and fun as hell.

Fittingly, the album ends with a swaying love-letter to '60s pop rock, "Happy Birthday Rock 'N' Roll." The under-produced feel of the whole album shines through here. What



MUSIC

would otherwise be a standard tune winds up feeling like a great drunken karaoke party, as the song ends with a medley of '60s hits including The Ronettes' biggest hit, "Be My Baby" which reached #2 in 1963.

Unfortunately, the only song on the album I could not find a way to stream is a total banger, "Any Way That You Want Me." Written by Chip Taylor (who is, bizarrely, the younger brother of actor and right-wing nutjob Jon Voight), the song's chorus nearly copies the chord progression of the songwriter's biggest hit, "Wild Thing," made famous by The Troggs. That band also had a hit with "Any Way That You Want Me," but The Troggs' version is boring garbage compared with Spector's. The track is slower than most of the other tracks on *Sirens*, picking up in the chorus with great call and response vocals between Spector and the backup singers.

My favorite part of the album comes halfway through "Any Way That You Want Me," when the song breaks down and Ronnie sings over a simple hi-hat and the guttural chug of a guitar, while echoey backing vocals provide

some "Doo doo doo doo doo's" straight out of The Ronettes biggest hits.

It was at that moment on that fateful game night, with those haunting backing vocals peppered into the break down section of the track, that I picked my head up from whatever game we were playing to declare, "This album is fucking badass." The group, marveling at the album's greatness, started discussing our collective desire to also own this LP. Stu did a quick search and discovered the album could be purchased on Discogs for just \$5. He was going to grab a copy. The rest of us wanted copies too. It being Christmas time and all, Stu generously offered to buy everyone their own copy, mostly because it would be funny to purchase 5 copies of a decades old album that barely made a blip when it was released.

A week later, we all got our copies of this hidden gem, and I've been listening to it regularly ever since. Hopefully, it will be released to stream again at some point, but I think the funniest possible outcome would be if all of you, dear readers, went out and got your own copies of *Siren*. You won't be disappointed.

— ED COLEMAN



MUSIC

PLAYLIST



“Be My Baby,” by The Ronnettes

“Here Today, Gone Tomorrow,” by Ronnie Spector

“Darlin’,” by Ronnie Spector

“Tonight,” by Ronnie Spector

“Boys Will Be Boys,” by Ronnie Spector

“Settin’ The Woods On Fire,” by Ronnie Spector

“Let Your Feelings Show,” by Ronnie Spector

“Anyway That You Want Me,” by The Troggs

“Dynamite,” by Ronnie Spector

“Happy Birthday Rock ‘N’ Roll,” by Ronnie Spector

“This Magic Moment,” by The Misfits (feat. Ronnie Spector)

“You Belong To Me,” by The Misfits (feat. Ronnie Spector)

“Take Me Home Tonight,” by Eddie Money (feat. Ronnie Spector)

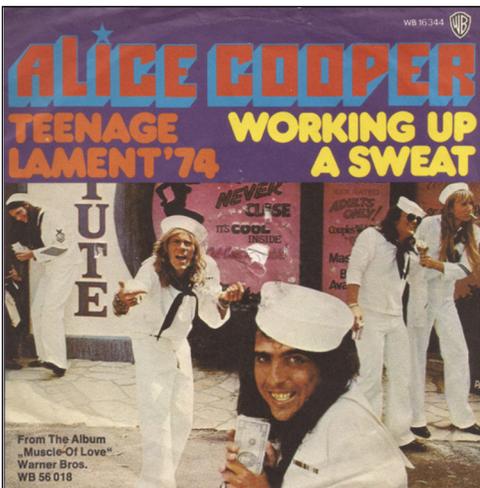
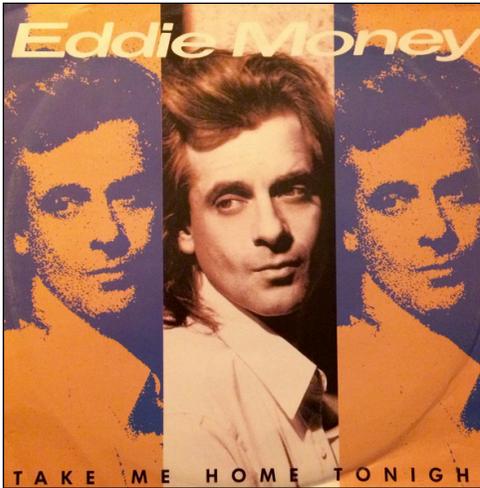
“Say Goodbye To Hollywood,” by Ronnie Spector & The E Street Band

“Try Some, Buy Some,” by Ronnie Spector

“Teenage Lament ‘74,” by Alice Cooper (feat. Ronnie Spector, Liza Manelli, The Pointer Sisters)

“Baby, I Love You,” by The Ronnettes

[LISTEN ON YOUTUBE](#)



BOOKS

NIGERIAN READING CULTURE – Often, Nigerians are stereotyped as a nation with a poor reading culture based on ancient beliefs that have seeped into modern popular culture in the country. It's believed that Nigerians are excited about books only for educational purposes, for those pursuing formal degrees, and it's not far-fetched. The phrase, "The best way to hide something from Black people is to put it in a book," might resonate with this stereotypical perception of Nigerians. Despite being the most populous African nation, Nigerians often see reading as a means of earning a degree rather than for self-development or leisure. So, when I discovered the X (formerly known as Twitter) community, "The Goodies Who Read," I was fascinated. The group has garnered viral posts about books and conversations, encouraging Nigerians to explore books through recommendations.

However, the community thrives on pirated books. Piracy isn't hidden, though. Users share their email addresses to receive pirated copies, and other users willingly share free PDFs. Despite this, the X community fosters literary conversations and brings entertaining and light-read books to a wider audience. Given Nigeria's large population, there is potential to popularize Nigerian works.

The price of a published book in Nigeria starts at around 4,000 naira (\$2.5) in a country with a monthly minimum wage of 70,000 naira (\$43.75), leading to accessibility problems. While on Western BookTok, viral books often receive more than 500,000 reviews on Goodreads, the most popular published book in Nigeria, "Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad" by Damilare Kuku, has amassed only 6,322 reviews on Goodreads despite going viral. While "The Goodies Who Read" commu-

nity indicates the demand for Nigerian books, publishers like Masobe, Farafina, and Cassava Republic have not explored different options, such as a subscription-based model similar to Amazon's Kindle Unlimited. They could offer affordable monthly plans by partnering with private or government organizations as a form of digital library, which is currently absent in Nigeria.

A similar platform, Okadabooks, launched in 2013 by Okechukwu Ofili, failed due to its focus on locally self-published books rather than the broader Nigerian literature. Masobe Books, the biggest publisher in Nigeria, limits the digital accessibility of their books. *Fimi Sile Forever; Heaven Gave it to Me*, a queer novel by NnaNna Ikpo, has suffered from this digital inaccessibility. A new subscription model could attract government and private subscription-based sponsorships without being burdened with improving the reading culture in the country through book-buying. Maybe then, Nigerians might be able to find out what everyone's been hiding in these books all along.

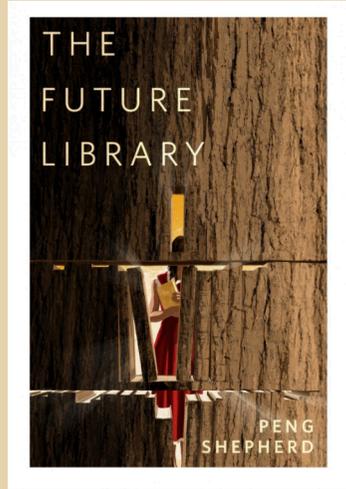
– OBINNA TONY-FRANCIS OCHEM



BOOKS

The FUTURE LIBRARY – Peng Shepherd's novelette is must-read cli-fi, in my books. It's delicate with its metaphors when it could've easily have become ham-fisted. The language of trees is discovered by a sapphic couple working on The Future Library project, a forest raised for the purpose of illustrating how humans and the earth's stories are intertwined. This one's best read without too much foreknowledge, so I'll leave it at that. But Shepherd accomplishes in 40 or so pages what 1000-page tomes of SFF wish they could accomplish with world building. And it's a near future that we can all, unfortunately, easily extrapolate.

– PHOENIX SIMMS



BOWLING with CORPSES & OTHER STRANGE TALES from LANDS UNKNOWN

– I love Hellboy, but my favorite things that Mike Mignola has ever done are the odd little stories in *The Amazing Screw-On Head & Other Curious Objects*. When I say that the new tales in *Bowling with Corpses* are all in that vein, know then that it is basically the highest praise I can muster.

– ORRIN GREY

HURRICANE SEASON – Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season* is a book that if played even slightly differently would have made me very irritated. But somehow she takes an overwhelming and often crass style and uses it to create brutes and outcasts and lost souls with deeply deeply complex internal lives. Also does some real stunning work with blurring the "victim/perpetrator" lines while still being clear where power lies.

And witches? They never die, not really.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE



MOVIES



MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING – It is 1995 and I am sick in bed. The only tape in my tiny combination TV and VHS player is *Much Ado About Nothing*, adapted by and starring Kenneth Branagh, opposite his then-wife Emma Thompson.

My fever peaks and so does the Sicilian sun, baking down on what must surely be the most attractive cast ever assembled on film. I am about 12: very precocious, tumbling into puberty by the second, slack-jawed at the gilded, sweat-sheened skin, the thundering of the glossy chestnut horses, the tanned bosoms bursting out of white cotton dresses. The acting makes sense of the words in a way that it never does when I puzzle through the reading myself. I weep, I flail at my duvet, I develop a lifelong fascination with Kate Beckinsale. I dream of candlelight vigils and bursting grapes.

A glut of Shakespeare adaptations arrived in the '90s with as much razzle dazzle as the Bard could bear, Baz Lurhman's generation defining *Romeo + Juliet* being the standard

bearer. (Eventually we started seeing adaptations into actual teen movies; as great as *10 Things I Hate About You* is, it was not from the same vein and therefore didn't punch me in the guts.) These films dressed the Bard in a wig and glitter, put gold on his eyelids and Vaseline on the lens. They cut my reality with daydreams for weeks. I skipped out of the cinema after *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and bought all the green glitters in the Sephora in the nearest town.

It is 2024 and I am in a COVID fever that tastes like batteries, and there's only one film for this affliction. I haven't watched it since the TV from my teenage bedroom gave up the ghost but it's still perfect: the leather trousers on the soldiers, the unbelievable vitality and plump youth in every frame, even the weird turn from Michael Keaton. Sighing and dozing off, I dream of another wave of Shakespeare adaptations for Gen Z to trip out on, and I am content.

– HANNAH FLYNN

MOVIES



HELLINGER – Hey, guy who played Hellinger; I want to hire you to record audiobooks. Call me and we will v e r y s l o w l y talk about it.

– ORRIN GREY

JIM HENSON: IDEA MAN – Probably a must-watch for Muppet fans. The documentary covers Jim Henson's career from inception to untimely end, with a presentation that almost seems like something the man himself would have put together. Also it gets sad.

– ROB RICH



POLICE STORY – There's a reason Chan became a worldwide phenom, with *Police Story* an early and essential step in that journey. Every scene feels like it could be his last. Everyone gets in on the action, especially Maggie Cheung, nearly unrecognizable in comparison to her work with Wong-Kar Wai. It's a shame *Supercop* spoiled the magic with all the '90s grunge overdubs, but this first entry is the result of pure drive and hunger.

– LEVI RUBECK

RE-ANIMATOR – Herbert West is such a med student, I'm surprised he experienced any consequences and didn't instead get his research funded for life.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



BURNT OFFERINGS and **The SENTINEL** – The rare two for one blurb – is there a better midnight double feature about old creepers in attic windows?

– NOAH SPRINGER

TELEVISION



WHAT A DUMMY

WHAT A DUMMY – *What a Dummy* was a sitcom that played in syndication for one season, between September 1990 and May 1991. That may sound nondescript right now but it's going to get increasingly difficult to believe.

Like a lot of sitcoms, the premise of *What a Dummy* revolved around an outsider character who comes into – and upends – the lives of a (presumably generic) suburban family. Think *Alf* except that, instead of a cat-eating alien, the outsider character in *What a Dummy* is a living ventriloquist dummy named Buzz.

With bright orange hair and huge, rolling eyes, Buzz is pure nightmare fuel, brought to life via an animatronic puppet created by Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff Jr., whose special effects credentials include everything from *Aliens* and *Monster Squad* (Woodruff is the one in the gillman suit) to *Starship Troopers* and *Smile 2*.

The family that Buzz crashes is perhaps the most archetypal sitcom family imaginable. Besides the mom and dad, there is the Poochie

kid, the nerdy kid and the little girl who is some kind of vat-grown export of the character played by the Olsen twins in *Full House*. More surreal even than the show's premise is the fact that the Poochie kid is played by a very young (but still very recognizable) Stephen Dorff.

All of this makes *What a Dummy* sound more like an Adult Swim parody of a sitcom than something that actually aired in the early '90s, and yet it's even wilder when you actually see it. Perhaps fortunately for us all, there appears to be only one surviving full episode currently available on YouTube, where you can at least get a feel for the show.

From that and a handful of episode synopses online, the plots covered in the single season of *What a Dummy* appear to be standard sitcom fare, from interpersonal conflicts to weird neighbors and problematic plumbers. The surviving episode involves the Poochie kid trying to pretend to be the nerdy kid in order to get a girl, while the dummy just hangs out, making wry commentary and *Fatal Attraction* references.

– ORRIN GREY

TELEVISION



DELICIOUS in DUNGEON – Conventional wisdom might suggest the talents of legendary studio Trigger are wasted on the gustatory interests of *Delicious in Dungeon*, but what makes it work is how cloth and characters are animated so tenderly in quiet moments that shatter to dramatic action.

Whether my heart is swelling over my baby lesbian girl-failure's latest comedic woes – Frog suits! Frog suits! – or cheering on her forbidden ancient blood runes with tears in my eyes like a proud parent at graduation, I am a little bit obsessed over everything on screen.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

OVER the GARDEN WALL – Did I talk about this one yet? I don't remember. But this little miniseries is one hell of a Vibe, and has been a traditional seasonal rewatch for tons of folks for good reason. Maybe not *this* specific season, but it's still a great show year-round.

– ROB RICH



SILO – I've been watching this one for a while and I have to say that *Silo* has obvious *Fallout* vibes. This really doesn't detract from the show, but it definitely distracts, at least in the first few episodes. The show takes a while to really get going and hit a strong stride, but if you're into mystery, psychology, suspense and science fiction, along with a little bit of political economy, I can certainly suggest this one.

– JUSTIN REEVE



HOME MOVIES – This is just an reminder that if you haven't ever watched *Home Movies*, you should drop everything you're doing and watch *Home Movies*.

– NOAH SPRINGER



GAMES



VAMPIRE SURVIVORS – *Vampire Survivors* debuted in 2022 but I don't recall watching much of it then. I heard a lot about it, put it on my wishlist on various platforms, but never got around to playing it. When I finally did for the first time in 2024, what struck me more than the clever meta narrative that I had never heard or seen allusion to, or the soundtrack that's so good I have it on rotation while I drive, was the absolute calm I felt.

While I'm sure many people did stream online for others to watch, and that there's countless playthroughs of the game on YouTube, it did strike me that *Vampire Survivors* is probably a horrible game to watch. When actively in a round of gameplay (i.e. not in the menus between maps), there is nowhere for your eyes to take a break – it's constant particle effects and moving sprites. On top of the fast-paced soundtrack, there's unending beeps and bloops to indicate when different systems are incrementing and interacting with each other. Although that's not uncommon to videogames in general, the massive quantity of sounds to parse – in addition to the deluge of visual information – is understandably a lot for a viewer to take in.

However, as a player, all this competing sensory information makes me feel as though, for the first time in a long time, I am firing on all cylinders. No part of my brain is idly wondering about social media or my next meal or the movie that's coming out next weekend –

it's all one hundred percent focused on making sure my sprite doesn't touch other sprites, and optimizing my item combinations to maximize damage so I'm not underpowered for the current difficulty curve of the round I'm playing. And much the way viewers would be overwhelmed with a game like *Vampire Survivors*, it stands to reason that many players are likely overwhelmed by the abundance of information presented to them. So, what's the difference between those of us who joyfully swim in this tsunami of player feedback, and those of us who need a break from playing *Vampire Survivors*?

My unvetted theory is one of ADHD (maybe neurodivergence more broadly; the umbrella is wide and welcoming). Where dopamine for the non-neurodivergent brain hits and lasts, one explanation for some neurotypes associated with ADHD diagnoses is that dopamine gets moved along in your brain before it gets a chance to really sink in and deliver pleasure. So, you need more of it to get the same amount of satisfaction as someone without that neurotype. And thus, a dopamine jackpot like *Vampire Survivors* engages me so thoroughly that, rather than frenetic reactions, I feel a quiet peace that for me has been hard to duplicate in any other way. It may be the next social media trend to self-diagnose with: When you play *Vampire Survivors*, does it calm you down, or stress you out?

– FRED BANKS

GAMES



DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD – I'm enjoying it so far, particularly the hopeful tone Bioware managed to strike without it feeling too happy-go-lucky. I'm unsure I like that Bioware highlights every time a choice mattered on screen, but I get why they chose to go the Telltale Games route here. And I do appreciate that my choices matter, even if I appreciate more that I can cuddle and boop the griffon whenever I want.

– PHOENIX SIMMS

HALO REACH – *Reach's* narrative punches land weightlessly due to poor audio mixing and a complete lack of pacing (maybe I was supposed to ponder over load screens on the original hardware longer, I don't know). It's a good a *Halo*, if you remember – or, playing these games for the first time as an adult, realize – *Halo* is schlock. Even the good ones (whatever that means to you). But you couldn't make old *Halo* today. Not because of anything about its unironic pedaling of American jingoism or 20th century gender politics, but because *Halo Infinity* has about as many hours of cutscenes as *Reach* has an entire campaign start to finish.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



JEDI: SURVIVOR – I was fond of 2019's *Fallen Order* and the way or sort of hybridized Metroid-style "search action" and Dark Soulsian level-up and respawning mechanics wrapped in a candy-coated Star Wars shell. But I still wasn't prepared for just how much better on pretty much all fronts *Survivor* was after finally getting around to this at the tail end of 2024 (for \$15, too!). Seriously, it's fantastic. Both mechanically and otherwise.

– ROB RICH

HOROSCOPE

COCOA AND NESTING. 🍫