Alan Wake II preview: A waking nightmare



Enlarge / I just wanted some toilet paper from the General Store… what the heck is that?!

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Over a decade ago, the release of *Alan Wake* cemented Remedy Entertainment—then best-known for the *Max Payne* series—as the arbiter of mind-bending, original, and somewhat experimental experiences that blend traditional action-adventure gameplay with atmospheric environments and existential dread. Despite a generally favorable critical response, slow sales stifled the game's franchise potential (launching the same week as *Red Dead Redemption* certainly did *Alan Wake* no favors). In the years since its 2010 release, however, *Alan Wake* has become something of a cult hit; a remastered version that dropped in 2021 renewed interest and paved the way for the sequel's announcement at the Game Awards later that year.

Alan Wake II has been a long time coming, but the 13 years in between games have given Remedy even more time to hone its game-development chops. At a hands-off, closed-door session during Summer Game Fest Play Days in Los Angeles, Remedy reps showed off the sequel's progress with a live demo. According to Remedy, it's the developer's most ambitious game ever—and it shows.

What is dead may never die

Alan Wake II picks up over a decade after where the original left off, but don't expect to see the titular character in the early hours of the game. Instead, the opening chapters put players in the shoes of FBI Agent Saga Anderson, who has come to Bright Falls to investigate a series of ritual murders alongside partner Alex Casey (who shares a name with the protagonist from Alan's in-game novel series and looks suspiciously like Max Payne).



Enlarge / Welcome to Cauldron Lake.

One of those sacrificial murders was none other than Agent Nightingale, whom fans will remember as the trigger-happy, typically inebriated ex-FBI agent from the first game. Of course, few things actually stay dead in *Alan Wake*, which is why Anderson and Casey have found themselves trudging through the woods tracking the rogue agent's apparent footprints. Once again, the words found on scattered manuscript pages are coming true all around Agent Anderson, and she has discovered

that light is her best defense against the shadowy figures that inhabit the darkness.

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The search takes them to Cauldron Lake, a hotbed of paranormal activity where the line between fiction and reality becomes blurrier than a tabloid photo of Bigfoot. Even though the lake is quite literally a thing of nightmares, there's something comforting about seeing it again. It's just as atmospheric as ever; during the demo, the fog set in, rain began to fall, and crows cawed in the distance. It's a gloomy setting, but strategic lighting and pops of color from the local fauna ensured that it wasn't too difficult to see what was going on.



Enlarge / Just saying hi…

A key difference from the first game is the options players are presented with. According to a Remedy representative, there are different paths a player can take, a refreshing change from the fairly linear *Alan Wake*. Once the titular character is unlocked, players can switch back and forth between Wake and Anderson. Their stories are told in parallel

as a single campaign with a unified ending, but there’s no right or wrong order in which to tackle each chapter, Remedy says.

Combat, perhaps the weakest point in the first game, also looks like it has been significantly improved. It’s less frantic and more strategic; Anderson’s extensive FBI training has apparently given her the ability to steadily shine a flashlight and aim a gun at the same time. While ammo and supplies are still scarce, it’s easier to make every bullet count when the approach to combat is more thoughtful. It certainly looked more fluid in our hands-off demo, although it’s hard to say if that’s because of a new design philosophy or the Remedy player’s familiarity with the game.

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