Microsoft’s GeForce Now Game Pass offering is aimed straight at UK regulators



Enlarge / Microsoft will offer Game Pass titles to Nvidia GeForce Now subscribers for streaming—a, shall we say, unique gaming setup to come.

reader comments

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There’s a lot to unpack inside the game-streaming news from Microsoft’s Xbox event over the weekend. The shortest, most context-free version of it is that some Game Pass games for PC will soon be available to stream through Nvidia’s GeForce Now if you happen to subscribe to both services.

But most anyone following the company’s quest to acquire Activision Blizzard, currently stalled by UK regulators, can see it as a transparent maneuver in Microsoft’s continuing charm campaign. Microsoft’s opening up of its PC Game Pass library to GeForce Now is predicated on countering the notion that its ownership of game studios, gaming hardware, and a

cloud gaming/subscription service (let alone desktop gaming's most popular operating system) constitutes an unfair vertical monopoly, especially in cloud gaming.

Acquiring Activision Blizzard, the UK Competition and Markets Authority wrote in April, would result in "a substantial lessening of competition" in that country's cloud-gaming offerings, and Microsoft would likely "find it commercially beneficial to make Activision's titles exclusive to its own cloud gaming service," the Authority wrote.

Microsoft had previously signed a 10-year commitment to bringing Xbox library games to Nvidia's GeForce Now game-streaming service. That deal, announced in February shortly after a separate 10-year agreement to offer Call of Duty games on Nintendo hardware, said that work would begin "immediately" on bringing Microsoft's Xbox PC game library and first-party titles purchased in other stores, like Steam, to GeForce Now. Microsoft in March announced a similar library deal with Boosteroid, a cloud-gaming service more popular in Europe. Microsoft Vice Chair and President Brad Smith said in both a statement and a Wall Street Journal interview that these deals were partly based on countering the perception that Microsoft would get Call of Duty from the deal and lock it into Game Pass.

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Game Pass is different from the Xbox library or store, however. Game Pass is Microsoft's all-in-one subscription that lets customers install, play, or stream a buffet of AAA and indie games. By offering Game Pass' PC games collection to people who might not even have a Windows PC, let alone an Xbox, Microsoft could be seen as signaling, in a slightly different key, that it really, truly does not intend to become a monolithic $10-$15 per month requirement for modern gaming.

But there are two big caveats to this offering. One is the word "select," as in the announcement's wording that "Game

Pass members will soon be able to stream select PC games from the library through Nvidia GeForce NOW." "Select" could mean only those games that perform well while streaming or only those games already provably streaming from other storefronts. "Select" could mean "as many games as we feel necessary to continue this hearts-and-minds campaign." It is, in any case, likely to be short of the 442 games currently in the PC Game Pass library. (We've emailed Nvidia and Microsoft for details on "select" and other particulars.)

[Edit, 3 p.m. Eastern, June 12: An Xbox spokesperson tells Ars that Microsoft intends to roll out Game Pass games on GeForce Now "in the coming months," along with, separately and additionally, games purchased through the Xbox storefront on PC. They did not offer clarification on the "select" wording, beyond pointing to the Xbox Wire post.**]**

The other is the configuration one would need to use this offering. First, you'd need a GeForce Now subscription unless Nvidia makes Game Pass accessible through its free, one-hour-limited tier, which is unlikely. That's $10 or $20 per month, depending on how much priority access and horsepower you want. Then you'd need a PC Game Pass subscription, which is $10 per month. You'd also need a really good Internet connection, on the order of 35-45Mbps and less than 40 ms latency to Nvidia's servers. That's $20-$30 per month to stream games you don't own, an odd pitch for a game enthusiast. [**Edit:** Updated PC Game Pass pricing**].**

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Still, it must be said that streaming PC games through GeForce Now is likely to be a better experience than if Xbox offered up its own PC cloud gaming. I would not be alone in not being excited to use the PC Xbox app for game streaming. GeForce Now is essentially just an optimized VNC connection to a Windows instance on Nvidia's cloud. Microsoft's own Game Pass streaming (formerly xCloud) is fine in a pinch but vastly outperformed by Nvidia's offerings. If you already had a Game

Pass subscription or were already paying for GeForce Now and were curious about the other service, it is, at a minimum, worth a look.

It’s worth noting that Activision Blizzard, in its response to UK regulators, doesn’t think much of game streaming at all—or Microsoft’s ambitions toward it. A source told Ars Technica’s Kyle Orland in late May that Activision Blizzard viewed the UK’s response toward the overall deal, based on its cloud-gaming implications, as “totally disproportionate.” The company told regulators that “the cloud gaming model is misconceived,” and that “the massive increase in mobile gaming shows consumers prefer to play games downloaded to their own devices, and streaming is quickly becoming obsolete as mobile processing power explodes,” according to the source.

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