Redfall convinced me that always-online for single-player is just stupid

Enlarge / The author, awakening to a horrific era in which he finds himself eternally lusting after games you can play without a connection, driven mad by his impulses to the point where he can no longer keep up his human facade.
Arkane/Bethesda

reader comments

140 with

I have played Arkane's new co-op vampire loot-shooter *Redfall* for about five hours. From what I've seen and experienced, the reviews are right: The set design, art, music, sound, and voice acting are all solid, sometimes splendid. But the actual gameplay is mostly uninspired marker quests, inventory stat comparisons, and brain-dead-enemy shooting with awkward-feeling guns.

I might have liked to play more. We received our review codes at Ars mid-day Thursday, with an embargo set for Monday night. Being a fan of *Prey*, the whole *Dishonored* series, and *Deathloop*, I planned to pack in as much time as I could in what I assumed would be a rich world. I had to travel over the weekend, but no matter: I'd bring my trusty Steam Deck and a good-enough laptop and get some time in on trains, planes, and idle hotel moments.

But *Redfall* does not want you to spend any time offline in its haunted, leaf-strewn New England town, nor on a slow

connection. You need a Bethesda.net account to play *Redfall*, even though the platforms it's available on, Xbox and Steam on PC, both have their own matchmaking and voice chat capabilities. All the buttons and "host/join" prompts make starting a single-player game feel like starting a multiplayer game, just lonelier. But eventually, you can play *Redfall* by yourself after a few clicks.

Until your Bethesda connection drops. Then, within a few steps of your character's feet, you'll be booted out to the title screen, with a warning: "Arknet Connection Lost" or "Connection Error." The first time I tried to play *Redfall* on my Steam Deck on a train, I got this warning. The next time was on a laptop in our hotel, which had typically spotty, login-required Wi-Fi, after about 10 minutes of play.

Figuring that making a connection once to verify my account would suffice, I started the game while tethered to my phone, launched a session, slept the Steam Deck, then woke it up on a plane. I was able to start playing again for about the distance of half a fire hall basement, then I got the big red error boot again. If you're not online, you're not playing. This extended even to Monday morning, when *Redfall* was inaccessible because Arkane was readying a Day One patch.

Advertisement

- One version of a connection problem in *Redfall*, suggesting an "Arknet" connection went down after booting the game.
  Arkane/Bethesda
- The other connection error you might come across, suggesting "a problem connecting to Bethesda.net."
  Arkane/Bethesda

I've emailed Arkane's press representatives to ask if non-connected single player is something that might arrive in a future patch. **[Update:** *Redfall*'s director told Eurogamer in late March that the developer was "looking into" and "working

actively" to allow offline play]. In the meantime, I've come around to the argument that single-player games with an always-online requirement, especially those tied to a single company's server, are all but indefensible.

Given the emergence of portable PC gaming devices like the Steam Deck, with even more devices on the way, making people either tether their phones or wave their hands around for Wi-Fi strength doesn't seem like good gaming business strategy. This requirement also doesn't consider the segment of the US population without a solid Internet connection, who are effectively locked out of exploring such games.

There's a game preservation angle, too. Regardless of whether *Redfall* finds its audience (perhaps after numerous patches), someone might want to play the game in the far future, long after Bethesda has stopped maintaining servers for it. Interesting failures, after all, are often an important part of history. Maybe someone will reverse-engineer a server that can trick *Redfall* into thinking Bethesda is cool with it. Maybe, as Ars noted previously, Arkane, Bethesda, and Microsoft can change their minds, as with *Back 4 Blood* and EA's *SimCity.*

But that seems unlikely. The more I think about it, the more I agree with Engadget's review premise. You can technically buy this game for $70 on PC or Xbox, but, really, it's a Game Pass game. It's meant to be downloaded by those looking for a new co-op experience, tried out, and maybe kept around as its somewhat empty and underdeveloped areas are filled in and DLC drips out. It's a AAA tentpole for the service, however rushed and forced its development.

I'll always feel a bit disappointed with *Redfall*, having previously enjoyed Arkane's arresting worlds and intriguing mechanics. But being locked out of the chance to play this new game when I could have most enjoyed it, separated from the constant web connection that pervades my work and life, adds

another layer of failure to the experience.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1935993