Quibi streaming service shutting down after less than 1 year

Enlarge / It’s not a great tombstone, but… well, we’ll just leave it at that. RIP Quibi.

reader comments

101 with 84 posters participating, including story author

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Quibi, the video-streaming service designed to revolve around smartphone screens, is no more, according to The Wall Street Journal.

After launching only in April this year, with a $1.75 billion infusion of cash and the leadership of former NBC bigwig Jeffrey Katzenberg, the service is ending as part of the closure of its holding company, Quibi Holdings LLC, according to “people familiar with the matter,” the WSJ says. The news was delivered directly by Katzenberg to the LLC’s investors on Wednesday, according to the report.

The writing appeared to be on the wall as soon as Quibi’s primary sales pitch—quick-burst videos designed to attract the average on-the-go smartphone user—fell apart all over the United States in the wake of coronavirus-related shutdowns. (People just weren’t watching videos on their phones as much this year while, say, commuting on crowded trains or going to and from schools and universities.) This issue was compounded by Quibi’s surprising lack of home-friendly ways to watch its content, with zero major launches on set-top platforms like

Roku, Apple TV, or Amazon Fire TV.

This fact wasn't made clear to critics ahead of Quibi's launch, which is the primary reason why I had anything nice to say about it when the service went live. As I wrote in April:

> *Quibi's preview slate left me entertained enough to recommend installing the service's generous 90-day free trial at launch, even if Murder House Flip wound up being one of the platform's more boring "this could've been on normal TV" options in the end. After trials run out, the service costs $5/mo with ads, or $8/mo without them—and by then, we'll see how its daily, news-driven content (unavailable in preview form) fits into the Quibi promise of entertainment designed around smartphone consumption. And in the meantime, I hope Quibi doubles-down on that Sesame Street-like quality and cranks up the nerdy content. YouTube is proof positive that the eight-minute format can work great for gadgets, games, science, and health, which Quibi sorely lacks as of press time.*

That generous free-trial period clearly didn't win over enough paying Quibi customers, and fire-sale offers soon followed, most notably last month in the form of a free six-month membership giveaway as part of a weekly T-Mobile Tuesday promotion.

Sluggish membership uptick didn't move potential buy-out possibilities in Quibi's favor, either. The WSJ reported last month that Quibi pitched itself to a number of larger companies, including Katzenberg's former NBCUniversal colleagues, only to fall short. The WSJ cited one big issue in Quibi's portfolio for potential buyers: it didn't *own* many of its series. In my opinion, it's hard not to imagine such a pitch landing in either Facebook's or Twitter's dockets. That they would turn down a bargain-bin opportunity to claim original, phone-friendly content for their phone-centric

platforms says a lot about Quibi’s sales pitch.

The exact timetable for Quibi’s closure has yet to be determined or announced—leaving the possibility open that its “closure” might be followed by some sort of end-of-life period as opposed to a near-immediate shutdown. We’ll keep an eye out for updates on that front for however many Ars readers currently subscribe to the service.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1716315

AOC makes explosive Twitch debut with over 435,000 Among Us viewers

Enlarge / Just a normal discussion of video game murder with a sitting House member.

reader comments

327 with 113 posters participating, including story author

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Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) drew more than 430,000 concurrent viewers to her first-ever Twitch stream Tuesday night.

Ocasio-Cortez’s 3.5 hour *Among Us* session—which she used in part to encourage viewers to vote—included fellow Rep. Ilhan

Omar (D-Minn.) and popular streamers like Pokimane and Disguised Toast, who responded rapidly to an off-handed tweet invite on Monday. And just in case you were wondering, Omar tweeted out the specs of her (very nice) gaming rig.

The debut instantly made Ocasio-Cortez—who admitted to having little experience with *Among Us* beforehand—one of the most popular streamers on the Amazon-owned video streaming service. Her peak of 435,000 viewers put her in the top 20 most popular streams ever on the site, according to data gathered by TwitchTracker, an echelon that's dominated by major gaming brands with massive marketing departments. As of this writing, the AOC Twitch account has over 571,000 followers, and her debut video clip has attracted over 4.73 million views.

> *AOC talks healthcare with @Hbomberguy, who is from the UK, where healthcare is free. pic.twitter.com/3wMUZXpuF7*
>
> *— Brennan Murphy (@brenonade) October 21, 2020*

In between gasp-filled games full of *Among Us*' usual accusations and back-biting, Ocasio-Cortez directed viewers to "make a voting plan" via IwillVote.com. She also found time to talk about universal health care with her fellow players and share some thoughts on the world-building of *Among Us* itself. "When it comes to video games, it's the lore," she said on the stream. "How did these people get here? What year are we in? Et cetera."

A new kind of politicking

Ocasio-Cortez previously appeared on Twitch last January, when she called in to a charity-focused *Donkey Kong 64* stream raising money for Mermaids, a UK-based gender-dysphoria charity. "The added layer of discrimination [that trans people face] makes these issues much more acute in these crises than they usually are on average for other people," she said at the

time. “It’s important we do talk about these issues in the economic frame but not let go of the fact that discrimination is a core reason for the economic hardship.”

As we said back then, appearing on Twitch reflects a new kind of “go where the voters are” politicking of the type that used to be exemplified by politicians going to state fairs and pretending to be interested in butter sculptures.

The use of Twitch also highlights gaming’s unique role as a social gathering place. As we wrote:

> *Perhaps more than any other artistic medium, games provide a handy latch point for that kind of casual secondary social interaction. Meeting friends at a concert or a movie or a book reading might offer some opportunities for socializing, but those events often demand too much attention to really allow you to focus on your fellow attendees. The right kind of game, though, can serve as a kind of conversational background noise, not taking too much attention away from your companions while also providing just enough distraction to smooth over any lulls (see also: road trips and sporting events).*
>
> …
>
> *“When people ask me what Twitch is, my default answer is that it’s a place to watch people playing video games. But that’s really an incomplete answer. These days, Twitch is just as often a place where watching video games serves as a convenient excuse to gather with like-minded streamers and viewers in the closest thing we have to a live digital town square.*
>
> *The game itself is increasingly beside the point. The chance to gather together around the game is what makes these online gatherings special.*

Elsewhere in politicians-in-gaming news, Joe Biden's presidential campaign has rolled out virtual signage for use in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and recently introduced its own island full of Get out the Vote imagery.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1716195

"Here we go": Disney drops one last teaser for The Mandalorian S2

reader comments

43 with 38 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Pedro Pascal stars as the titular character in *The Mandalorian*, returning to Disney+ for a second season on October 30.
We're just a little over a week away from the season 2 debut of *The Mandalorian*, the Emmy-nominated, first live-action *Star Wars* TV series. And Disney+ has decided to whet our appetites with one last "special look" teaser for the series.

Created by Jon Favreau and starring Pedro Pascal as Din Djarin, the titular Mandalorian, the series takes place a few years after the fall of the Empire and before the emergence of

the First Order. The basic premise is that after the defeat of the Empire in *Return of the Jedi*, there was a period of chaos and lawlessness as a new government struggled to emerge from the wreckage. Pascal's bounty hunter is "a lone gunfighter in the outer reaches of the galaxy, far from the authority of the New Republic."

The first season garnered 15 Emmy nomination for its eight-episode freshman outing. And it easily landed a spot on our top TV shows of 2019. "Favreau's brainchild has proven to be a killer vehicle for the most *Star Trek*-like storytelling yet in a live-action *Star Wars* product," Ars Tech Culture Editor Sam Machkovech wrote at the time. "Even better, its freak-of-the-week and brand-new-planet progression has been paired with a proper samurai story, as anchored by the religious, fervent, and conflicted Mando himself."

Gina Carano, Carl Weathers, and Giancarlo Esposito are all returning for the second season as Cara Dune, Greef Karga, and Moff Gideon, respectively—the latter having survived being shot down by Karga and The Mandalorian in the season finale. New S2 cast members include Rosario Dawson as Ahsoka Tano, Anakin Skywalker's former Jedi Padawan, who is now a spymaster for the Rebel Alliance; Katee Sackhoff as Bo-Katan Kryze (reprising her voice role from *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels* animated series), who leads a Mandalorian group known as the Nite Owls; Timothy Olyphant as Cobb Vanth, a former slave who now has possession of fan favorite/bounty hunter Boba Fett's armor; and Temuera Morrison as Boba Fett (apparently resurrected from the dead, since the character died in *Return of the Jedi*—or did he?). Wrestler Sasha Banks has been cast in an as-yet-undisclosed role.

The first trailer dropped last month, although it didn't offer many details beyond the vague official premise: "The Mandalorian and The Child continue their journey, facing enemies and rallying allies as they make their way through a dangerous galaxy in the tumultuous era after the collapse of

the Galactic Empire.” Mando received instructions to reunite The Child with his own kind, although exactly where that species might be lurking is apparently something he’ll have to figure out for himself. It *will* involve seeking out “an order of sorcerers called Jedi”—sworn enemies of the Mandalorians in eons past. And one scene in the trailer featured two green-skinned aliens engaged in a boxing match, prompting fans to speculate that we’ll be seeing more of the Gamorreans this season.

Disney is still playing its cards close to its chest with this latest teaser, and there’s not a ton of new footage. But we do learn that Djarin also wants to locate other Mandalorians to guide him on his quest, which will likely lead him to the Nite Owls. There’s the briefest glimpse of the blue-skinned, amphibious Mythrol (Horatio Sanz) that Djarin captured in the opening scenes of the S1 pilot episode, so we might be seeing him again. And we get a look at Djarin’s iconic jet pack in action.

The Mandalorian S2 debuts on Disney+ on October 30, 2020.

- Pedro Pascal returns as bounty hunter Din Djarin in S2 of *The Mandalorian*.
- A welcoming party: Cara Dune (Gina Carano) and Greef Karga (Carl Weathers).
  YouTube/Disney+
- Djarin and The Child need their help.
  YouTube/Disney+
- A daunting trio.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Djarin needs to make a few repairs.
  YouTube/Disney+
- TIE fighter alert!
  YouTube/Disney+
- Stormtroopers give chase.
  YouTube/Disney+

- Cara Dune has her game face on.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Greef has Cara’s back.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Our first glimpse of the iconic Mandalorian jet pack.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Fly, Mando, fly!
  YouTube/Disney+
- All for The Child.
  YouTube/Disney+

Listing image by YouTube/Disney+

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1715998

New ex-Blizzard game studio formed to pick up a fallen RTS mantle

reader comments

47 with 41 posters participating

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It seems like every few months, we hear word of a new studio formed by Blizzard Entertainment veterans, which isn’t always newsworthy. But after a rough stretch for Blizzard’s roster of real-time strategy games, the latest cast of Blizzard veterans

starting a new shop has put a bright new gleam in our figurative axe.

Frost Giant Studios made its formal debut on Monday, and it's composed of serious names from the original *StarCraft II* team: its production director, lead artist, lead designer, and lead co-op designer. Those staffers are joined by the lead campaign designer of *WarCraft III*'s expansion pack *The Frozen Throne*, along with a former Blizzard senior writer, a former Blizzard engineer, and a former Blizzard program manager.

As part of its announcement, Frost Giant made its mission clear via a single Twitter post: "We're launching a new game studio to build the next great RTS!" That same slogan was repeated over and over in Frost Giant's announcement video, with each of the company's eight representatives offering some version of that language.

While the studio wasn't ready to announce specific game details, Frost Giant President Tim Campbell confirmed he is already serving as director of "our first project," implying that at least one RTS game is in the studio's pipeline already.

Ladder to climb?

This news comes in the wake of Blizzard Entertainment formally sunsetting the content pipeline for *StarCraft II* on Thursday of last week. Blizzard says that game will continue to see updates to support matchmaking, unit balance, and other operating issues (much like *StarCraft: Brood War* continues to receive), but the studio will no longer develop new add-on content like missions, commanders, and "war chests."

For some Blizzard fans, the wounds are still arguably fresh from another major RTS release, as well: the woeful launch of *WarCraft III: Reforged*. (Yes, that came out all the way back

in January of this year.) Fans are *still* waiting for that updated game's rollout of ladders or other ranked-multiplayer options, which were *removed* from the game when Blizzard shut down its "original" branch. Between that deprecation and other issues that have lingered many months (and patches) later, the game's updated version has so far been the worst of both worlds: angering existing fans and failing to bring in new ones.

That double-whammy of news, and the lack of new RTS announcements from Blizzard in some time, may have driven serious interest in Frost Giant's announcements, as the new company's site (and its solicitations for hires) crashed soon after its unveil. In the meantime, the studio's YouTube announcement video remains live, embedded below:

[embedded content]
Frost Giant announcement video.
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1715911

PS5 will use downloadable updates to control game-by-game fan speed

reader comments

98 with 68 posters participating

Share this story

- The PlayStation 5 comes with everything seen here. Some assembly required. Batteries not included. From Sony!
- Air vents!
- The entire rear of the system is pretty much one big air vent.
- The stand at the base of the (vertical) system is attached with a single large screw.
- The stand and the screw sit alone.
- In horizontal orientation, the stand snaps into place without tools.
- The white panels on the sides of the system can be slid off without tools.
- The cooling fan draws air from both sides of the system.
- The massive cooling fan itself.
- One of two “dust catcher” holes that should be easy to vacuum out after extended use.
- This panel for PCIe storage expansion can be opened with a screwdriver.

Earlier this month, Sony gave us the first peek inside the PlayStation 5 in the form of a teardown video that examined the upcoming console piece by piece. Now, Japanese specialty site 4Gamer has posted an interview with the Sony hardware design engineer featured in that video, Yasuhiro Otori.

That interview (Google Translate, ResetEra user translation) goes into a lot of nitty-gritty detail on the design decisions behind Sony’s uniquely shaped console and focuses heavily on the unit’s heat dissipation technology. One of the most interesting tidbits on that score is an apparent plan to “optimize” the speed of the cooling fan on a per-game basis via downloadable system updates.

“Various games will appear in the future, and APU [accelerated processing unit] behavior data for each game will be collected,” Otori said. “Based on this, there is a plan to

proceed with the optimization of fan control."

That performance analysis will be based on data sent from a temperature sensor on the APU and three others mounted on the PS5's motherboard, according to the interview (the highest measured temperature will be used to determine the fan speed). 4Gamer surmises this aggregate data may be particularly useful "when a game with a high load continues for a long time, [making it] possible to increase the rotation amount of the fan and enhance the cooling performance even at the expense of quietness."

In the interview, 4Gamer notes that the system's 120mm diameter, 45mm thick fan, which directs air to both sides of the dual-sided motherboard, "is quite large and thick for an electric fan mounted on a game machine." That allows for slower turning compared to a larger fan, leading to a "high degree of quietness… under normal usage conditions."

In the teardown video, Otori said the PS5's increased size led to "a dramatic improvement in terms of processing power and quietness" over the PS4. Initial hands-on reports from Japanese press confirmed that general impression, which should be good news for PlayStation owners used to loud system fans that spin like jet engines under heavy load.

Cooling at cost

Otori also addressed the PS5's unorthodox use of liquid metal conductor as a TIM (thermal interface material) below the CPU. That gallium alloy can be highly corrosive to the aluminum often used in heat sinks, though, so the PS5 has a silver-plated block to prevent corrosion where its heat sink meets the APU, Otori said.

Even with this unorthodox design, and even with the increased cost of the liquid metal TIM itself, the decision to use it helped lower the overall cost of the PS5, Otori said. That's

because the liquid gallium TIM allowed Sony to get the same cooling performance from a cheaper heat sink.

- The PS5's Ultra HD Blu-ray drive and an insulating layer that Sony says reduces noise and vibration from spinning discs.
- One side of the motherboard, featuring the CPU…
- And the other, featuring a ring of RAM chips near the center.
- Sony says it tested the PS5's liquid metal heating conductor for two years before putting it in the system.
- Sony says this heat sink uses a pipe with a "shape and airflow [that] make it possible to achieve the same performance as a vapor chamber."
- The PS5's 350W power supply is a big boy.

Otori said cost reductions also came into play when deciding on the PS5's physical dimensions. At one point, Otori said, the company was considering a design that would "reduce the height and widen the width accordingly." That sounds like it would have made the system's shape more akin to the shorter, squatter Xbox Series X (when both systems are standing vertically).

Besides aesthetic considerations, Otori said changing the PS5 dimensions in such a way would have made it difficult to fit the PS5's components on a single motherboard. That would have, in turn, complicated the arrangement of the system's components quite a bit.

"With two boards, the manufacturing cost and the difficulty of heat dissipation design increase," Otori said. "It means that the design requirement to make it look thinner when placed horizontally and the design requirement to reduce the cost with a single board are intertwined."

Other tidbits from Otori's interview:

- Otori says “there is no difference in cooling performance between vertical and horizontal installation,” in case you were worried.
- The PS5’s 350W power supply is built with slits in the front and rear, to allow direct air flow from the system’s cooling fan.
- The optical drive, on the other hand, is completely sealed in a layer of double insulation that “functions as a suspension and absorbs vibration from the optical drive module.”

Listing image by Sony / Youtube

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1715728

Review: Don’t call it a comeback—The Boys returns better than ever in S2

reader comments

47 with 27 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Superheroes abuse their powers rather than using them for good in *The Boys*, which just concluded its second season.
In my review of *The Boys* S1 last year, I called the Amazon

Prime series “a wickedly funny, darkly irreverent adaptation” and “ideal late-summer therapy for anyone who has grown a bit weary of the constant onslaught of superhero movies.” I wasn’t alone in my love for the show: *The Boys* was a massive hit, and that success has continued with S2, which was the most-watched global launch of any Amazon series to date, pretty much doubling the show’s worldwide audience. S2 is even better than its predecessor, deftly tackling timely themes and hot-button issues, while never sacrificing all the biting satire and good, gory fun that we loved about S1. And can we just give Antony Starr an Emmy already for his stunning performance as Homelander?

(Spoilers for S1 below; some spoilers for S2, but no major reveals.)

The Boys is set in a fictional universe where superheroes are real but corrupted by corporate interests and a toxic celebrity-obsessed culture. The most elite superhero group is called the Seven, headed up by Homelander (Starr), a truly violent and unstable psychopath disguised as the All-American hero, who mostly bullies his supe team into compliance. The other members include A-Train (Jessie T. Usher), who boasts super-speed but has also become addicted to the experimental performance-enhancing substance called Compound-V. The Deep (Chace Crawford) can breathe underwater, thanks to having gills—voiced in S2 by Patton Oswalt during a hallucination sequence—and converse with marine creatures.

Black Noir (Nathan Mitchell) is a silent Ninja-like superhero with enhanced strength and agility who never speaks, while Queen Maeve (Dominique McElligott) is Homelander’s former girlfriend who suffers from burnout and a bit of guilt-ridden PTSD from all the horrors she’s witnessed on the job—many of them, it must be said, inflicted by her own team, especially Homelander. Finally, there is relative newcomer Starlight (Erin Moriarty), who quickly becomes disillusioned with the Seven even though joining them had been a lifelong dream.

Homelander’s counterpart as the head of the titular “boys” is Billy Butcher (Karl Urban), a self-appointed vigilante intent on checking the bad behavior of the Seven, especially Homelander, who brutally raped Butcher’s late wife. Butcher recruits an equally traumatized young man named Hugh “Hughie” Campbell (Jack Quaid, son of Dennis Quaid and Meg Ryan) to help in his revenge, after a juiced-up A-Train literally runs through Hughie’s girlfriend, killing her instantly. Rounding out the crew are Marvin, aka Mother’s Milk (Laz Alonso), Frenchie (Tomer Capon), and Kimiko, aka The Female (Karen Fukuhara). She has enhanced strength and healing abilities thanks to being (forcibly) injected with Compound-V.

Bloodied but unbowed

- Butcher (Karl Urban) is probably the most wanted man in the world right now.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- In the S1 finale, Butcher discovered that his wife Becca (Shantel VanSanten) was alive and raising her son by Homelander.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Homelander (Antony Starr) shows he kinda sucks at fatherhood.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Giancarlo Esposito plays Vought International CEO Stan Edgar
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Butcher finds his way back to his Boys
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Meet the Boys: Laz Alonso as Marvin T. “Mother’s” Milk (MM), a former Marine who oversees the group’s operations.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Meet the Boys: Hughie Campbell (Jack Quaid) and Frenchie (Tomer Capon), a munitions and communications expert.

YouTube/Amazon Prime

- Still one of the Boys: Kimiko, aka the Female (Karen Fukuhara), who developed enhanced strength and regenerative healing powers after being injected with Compound V.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Homelander can still play the superhero patriot to an adoring crowd.
- Give Homelander the finger, get zapped by his laser eyes.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Starlight (Erin Moriarty) is technically a member of the Seven, but secretly in league with Hughie.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- A-Train (Jessie T. Usher) has superspeed but has become addicted to Compound V.
  Amazon Prime
- Queen Maeve (Dominique McElligott) shows her sass.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Ousted from the Seven, The Deep (Chace Crawford) enters therapy.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Homelander is really not happy about having a new member of the Seven join without his input.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Meet Stormfront (Aya Cash), who has plasma-based abilities.
  Amazon Prime
- The girls of the Seven get it done.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- The Boys in the crosshairs.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Butcher came prepared.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- The Deep tries to get back into the Seven’s good graces.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime

In S1, Butcher & Company tracked the source of the compound back to Vought International, the parent corporation behind the Seven, which had been using it to create more superheroes. But someone else had gotten their hands on Compound-V and was using it to create super-powered terrorists, in order to manipulate the US government into welcoming the Seven as a super-extension of the military.

The various subplots included budding romances between Hughie/Starlight, and Frenchie/Kimiko; Deep getting kicked out of the Seven for sexual harassment and being assigned to a small Midwestern town instead; the revelation that Queen Maeve is bisexual and had a secret girlfriend; and A-Train's continued abuse of Compound V caused him to have a heart attack, sidelining him from the Seven. Oh, and the Seven are down a member after the Boys took out Translucent (Alex Hassell), a perverted voyeur who could turn himself invisible by changing his skin into a carbon meta-material that warped light around him.

The S1 finale ended with a major cliffhanger: Butcher, intent on blowing himself up and taking Homelander with him, changes his mind when the psychotic superhero tells him he has discovered that Butcher's ex-wife, Becca, is still alive—and raising her son, the result of her rape by Homelander. That's pretty much where S2 picks up. Per the official premise:

> *Butcher, Hughie and the team reel from their losses in Season 1. On the run from the law, they struggle to fight back against the superheroes, as Vought, the company that manages the heroes, cashes in on the panic over the threat of supervillains. And a new hero, Stormfront (Aya Cash), shakes up the company and challenges an already unstable Homelander.*

The fugitive Boys are holed up underground, soon rejoined by the missing Butcher, with the goal of capturing a supe terrorist who has been going around blowing up people's heads

with his/her telekinetic abilities. Starlight is a secret ally, thanks to her relationship with Hughie, but Butcher doesn't trust any supe, and is frankly more interested in finding Becca. Tracking down the terrorist is simply a means to that end. And Hughie is angry and disillusioned with Butcher for dragging him into the fray and then abandoning the group for weeks on end.

Things aren't exactly peaceful with the Seven either. Homelander's dominance of Vought is challenged when CEO Stan Edgar (Giancarlo Esposito) brings on a new member—the aforementioned Stormfront, who quickly wins over the public with her sassy charm, just as Homelander's approval ratings are sinking. Still in exile, the Deep joins the Church of the Collective in hopes of boosting his self esteem and regaining his spot with the Seven. A-Train faces competition from Shockwave (Mishka Thébaud), another superpowered speedster who might replace him on the Seven. A vindictive Homelander cruelly outs Queen Maeve, and the resulting Vought PR campaign selling her as an LBGQT role model ("Brave Maeve") further stresses her relationship with girlfriend Elena (Nicola Correia-Damude).

It's Homelander's world, we're just living in it

- A useful ally meets a mysteriously messy end.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Stormfront's true colors start to emerge.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- She's still lauded by an adoring public, thanks to Vought's expert spin machine.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Kimiko ponders her revenge.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Homelander is just a wee bit jealous of all the media

attention Stormfront is getting.
YouTube/Amazon Prime

- Psycho-Superhero foreplay.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Ain’t supe-love grand?
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- We finally meet Lamplighter (Shawn Ashmore), a pyrokinetic former member of the Seven with ties to Frenchie’s past.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Claudia Doumit plays an ambitious congresswoman named Victoria Neuman, who targets Vought.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Trial proceedings against Vought do not go as planned.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- A suspicious Homelander gives Starlight his best menacing treatment.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- These walls can’t hold our Starlight.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- A-Train and Deep are anxious to hear if they’ve been readmitted to the Seven.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- The Boys look on as the girls get it done.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Butcher and Becca try to protect their son, Ryan (Cameron Crovetti)
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Homelander is distraught at experiencing another personal loss.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime
- Butcher bonds with Ryan.
  YouTube/Amazon Prime

One of the best things about *The Boys* is that it’s ultimately a character-driven show: we care about these characters, even the purported “bad guys,” and are invested in their fates. The

best new addition to the cast is Cash's Stormfront, who openly rebels against Vought's image makers and canned talking points, while gently mocking Starlight's goody-two-shoe compliance and urging her to break out. She's a spirited, independent-minded take on the Cool Girl (the real deal, not a pretender), and oh-so-easy to like—so naturally she has a deep dark secret of her own, along with a hidden agenda that involves Homelander.

The show may be called *The Boys* and give Urban's Butcher top billing—and Urban, as always, is terrific. But ultimately it belongs to Butcher's supe mirror image: Homelander, who easily ranks among the most complicated and fascinating villains in the genre. In scene after powerful scene, various complex emotions play effortlessly across Starr's face as he responds to the situation at hand. Starr's performance is so good, you sometimes wind up feeling bad for this monster.

Yes, he is a narcissist, utterly lacking in empathy and morals; his megawatt smile that he flashes to the crowds during public appearances never quite reaches those cold eyes. And yes, he's highly unstable and unnecessarily brutal. He zaps a random bystander in the crowd who flips him off, and when Vought brings in a supe named Blindspot (Chris Mark) to audition for the Seven—a blind youth with super-hearing who uses it to navigate the world—Homelander brutally destroys the kid's ears before declaring him useless in a fight.

But Homelander is also psychologically tormented, having been raised in a laboratory, with too much power for there to be any real discipline. (*You* tell a superpowered toddler with deadly laser eyes he can't have another piece of cake.) He longs for love, but has no idea how to win it, never mind keep it. Just ask former Vought vice president Madelyn Stillwell (Elisabeth Shue) from S1, a mother figure who was the only person who genuinely loved him—and he killed her in a fit of rage for deceiving him about his son. He plays the good father figure to Ryan (Cameron Crovetti), but then tries to teach him

to fly by shoving him off the roof of the house. Stormfront seems to be the only one who can handle him—and together they are a super force to be reckoned with.

We also get an expanded colorful cast of superheroes beyond the Seven. There's the shapeshifting Doppelgänger (Dan Darin Zanco), and Gecko (David Thompson), who has fallen into a life of seedy disrepute, exploiting his regenerative abilities to earn a dubious living. (People basically pay to chop off various parts of his body to fulfill their violent fantasies, and marvel when those body parts regenerate.) We finally meet Lamplighter (Shawn Ashmore), and learn more about his link to a tragedy in Frenchie's past. And the hilarious throwaway scene where the Boys encounter Love Sausage (Andrew Jackson), whose exposure to Compound-V gave him a stretchable prehensile penis which he can deploy as a weapon, plays out exactly how you'd expect.

Final verdict: the second season of *The Boys* is another wildly entertaining ride, keeping things fresh and viewers eager for more. The identity of the head-exploding telekinetic terrorist is a great final twist, setting up the third season, which is already in development. There will be even more to come from this world of supes-gone-bad. Amazon has already fast-tracked a spinoff series (as yet untitled) set in an exclusive college for young supes. According to Deadline Hollywood, it will be "an irreverent, R-rated series that explores the lives of hormonal, competitive Supes as they put their physical, sexual, and moral boundaries to the test, competing for the best contracts in the best cities."

All episodes of *The Boys* S2 are now streaming on Amazon Prime.

Listing image by YouTube/Amazon Prime

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1713317

PlayStation 5 UI revealed: “Activity” shortcuts, picture-in-picture

reader comments

21 with 19 posters participating, including story author

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- On-screen help and tips to get through tricky levels? Pretty smooth, PlayStation…
- …but you need to be a paying PlayStation Plus subscriber to access these in-game tips.
- Those hints come attached to “Activities,” a new feature that warps players directly from a menu to a particular level or challenge. The above series of cards appears in PS5’s “Control Center,” which appears mid-game with a tap of the “PlayStation” button.
- The “Control Center” honestly looks quite unwieldy in the video, requiring a lot of taps to sort through “Activities” and find live content like “games my friends are playing.”
- Like, why is my friend’s “shared screen” the first option here? Do I get to tell my PS5 that’s not a high priority for me in this series of cards? That’s still unclear.
- If simple pictures aren’t good enough as hints,

PlayStation 5's "Activities" feature also includes video tips.

- You can launch these in a picture-in-picture mode that largely resembles Xbox One's failed "Snap" mode.
- If you really do care about a friend's shared screen, you can also load it in the same picture-in-picture way as the in-game tips.
- Or slot it as a PiP overlay on top of your gameplay screen. I, for one, have zero interest in a tiny view of my friend's gameplay while I'm concentrating on my own adventuring, but maybe I'm an outlier.

Sony's drip-feed of PlayStation 5 information continued on Thursday with a surprise reveal of the upcoming console's "Control Center" interface. Sony has typically been bullish on updating its system menus between console generations, and the PlayStation 5 is clearly no exception.

The biggest feature revealed in this week's video is "Activities," a system-level companion to most consoles' "trophy" or "achievement" lists. In the case of PS5, when you're playing a supported game, you can tap into the Control Center to see levels, quests, or objectives that are available in your game (content you've already reached or unlocked, not spoilers). The idea is that you might have blown through a platforming level from start to finish but missed hidden items and collectibles needed to unlock a PS5 trophy.

Tap one of these Activity cards, and you'll quick-load into the relevant part of the game (thus flexing the PS5's NVMe 4.0 loading-time boosts) then be presented with a series of hints for any objectives or collectibles you've missed. At this point, if you're a paying PlayStation Plus subscriber, you can tap these hints to see pictures or video to guide your way instead of grabbing a nearby phone or laptop to search for a user-made tutorial. Then tap an additional button to leave these hints open in picture-in-picture mode.

Sony’s video doesn’t clarify how many games we should expect these hints to appear in or whether Sony itself might build these hints and systems for non-Sony games. From the look of things, it will be up to individual game developers to build Activities and related hints.

The video additionally confirms a funky picture-in-picture option for at least one type of video content: your friends’ gameplay feeds. This requires your friend to tap “screen share” on their own system, at which point you can slap their video feed onto your screen, either as part of a dedicated column or as an embed on top of your own gameplay.

We at Ars Technica aren’t partial to watching friends’ gameplay feeds while playing games. One game at a time over here, please. But we have other ideas for the feature, which currently raises an interesting question. While the rest of the video included a look at the “main menu” interface, which can be accessed with a double-tap of the PlayStation button and better resembles the game-library interface of PS4, the video’s narrator made clear that Sony wasn’t ready to reveal PS5’s “media” suite of features.

Xbox One launched with “Snap” as a way to embed media apps in a sidebar next to whatever game you were playing, only to retire this feature in 2017. Among other things, killing the feature opened up more processing power to games. But the PS5 appears to have power to spare for things like video streaming; does this mean we should expect media apps like YouTube, Twitch, or Netflix to work as picture-in-picture feeds, so that you can watch your favorite binge-worthy series while grinding through dailies in *Destiny 2*, *Warframe*, and the like? Currently, Sony isn’t saying.

- PlayStation 5’s main menus, reached with a double-tap of the PlayStation button on your controller. Pick from various games here.

- PlayStation Store is built directly into PlayStation 5's menu instead of requiring a boot into a separate app à la PS4.
- PS5's series of advertisements and alerts are all collected in one tab. As of press time, it's unclear whether users can disable this.
- If you can't tell, that light gray text on the right reads, "Speak into the microphone," to show off the DualSense gamepad's built-in mic feature.

This second gallery offers a look at the main menu interface, which was only briefly explored in the video. Among other things, it appears to confirm that the PlayStation Store interface is now directly tied to the main menus instead of requiring a boot into a separate app, and its advertisement-filled "Explore" tab essentially keeps the rest of the game-choosing interface clean instead of placing ad-filled blocks on any default pages.

Additionally, we finally got a confirmation of what we'd long assumed: that the DualSense controller's built-in microphone will enable instant speech-to-text messaging, should you wish to quickly send a message or photo caption to friends without hunting and pecking over an on-screen keyboard.

Should you wish to hunt for more PS5 clues, the original video is embedded below.

[embedded content]
PlayStation 5 Control Center reveal
https://arstechnica.com/?p=1715307

Gaming chairs or work from home chairs? Ars tests two under $500

Enlarge / The Secretlab Omega (left) made a better first impression, but Anda Fnatic (right) won me over in the end.
Secretlab / Anda

reader comments

186 with 128 posters participating, including story author

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One of the most important accessories of every home office frequently gets overlooked: the chair. With this year's COVID-19-related social distancing and mandatory remote work, many of us are spending a lot more time behind a desk at home than before—and without the right chair, that extra time can translate into discomfort or outright back pain.

I've never had much luck with "cheap" office chairs—a $350 mid-back office chair frequently turns into a throne of pain without sufficient extended breaks to get up and move around. Trendy Aeron chairs provide somewhat better ergonomic support for extended periods of seated work—but their $1,100 and up price tag is a little hard to swallow for many of us. This leaves the home office worker's secret weapon—the gaming chair.

It has been my experience that you get more—and more comfortable—chair for your money when you shop for gaming chairs. They're designed for maximum comfort and ergonomic support for long seating periods, and they're generally

designed to support larger and heavier people than office chairs are as well. And they need to do it within a reasonable budget.

When the lockdown hit the Salter household earlier this year, it wasn't long before I knew I need a new chair—and a $1,069 Herman Miller Aeron was out of the question. After some searching online and reading user reviews at Reddit, I decided on the $420 Secretlab Omega. Not long after my purchase arrived, Anda reached out to ask me to review its $450 Fnatic—which worked out well, since I have one downstairs office (for escaping my kids to work) and one upstairs office (for working, but staying accessible to the kids).

Secretlab Omega

- The dire warning about not touching the lever had me a bit on edge—what they don't tell you is there's a locking bolt keeping it from moving anyway.
  Jim Salter
- The presentation on this little assembly toolkit is fantastic—but the Allen wrench doesn't provide enough leverage, and I had to go fetch my own.
  Jim Salter
- The provided Allen wrench (bottom) only fits these bolts from the long axis, as shown—the other tip is sized for differently-sized bolts.
  Jim Salter
- This locking bolt secures that seatback adjustment lever we were warned not to touch. Wish they'd said so to begin with!
  Jim Salter

Secretlab Omega (2020 Series)

(Ars Technica may earn compensation for sales from links on this post through affiliate programs.)
When you first open the Omega's shipping container, you're presented with perfectly sized and shaped foam blocks with neat cutouts for every part of your new chair, and an equally neatly presented little toolkit to assemble it with. The assembly instructions are printed in full color, with photographs, in a single, large poster-sized sheet.

The assembly process itself is a bit hectic, particularly if—like I did—you're assembling the chair without a helper. There are rather dire warnings about not moving the seat back adjustment lever prior to fully assembling the chair—these had me more on edge than I needed to be; at the very end of the instructions you discover that the lever in question was completely secured with a locking bolt. If you don't go out of your way to do things out of order, you'll be fine.

There were, however, a couple of real problems with the assembly—it required a pretty Herculean effort to get the back crammed tightly enough against the seat to bolt the two together, and the Allen wrench provided for the task turned out to be inadequate. The two sides of the Allen wrench are sized differently, and the bolts that only fit its long axis needed more torque than I could give them—I ended up needing to use my own set of Allen wrenches to properly secure the seatback to the seat base.

Aside from those issues, assembly was relatively straightforward.

- Secretlab Omega is a high quality, no-nonsense chair—the pseudo-leather looks and feels very good, and the padding is incredibly firm.
  Jim Salter
- I appreciate the Omega's low-key styling. It looks much

less out of place in an office setting than most gaming chairs do.
Jim Salter
- Build quality is extremely good on the Omega. Nothing rattles, shakes, or feels flimsy.
Jim Salter
- The branding on the rear of the Secretlab chair is a bit more brash than on the front.
Jim Salter

Once assembled, the Omega blew me away from the moment I sat in it. The pseudo-leather has a very fine, low-lying grain and looks and feels very high quality. The padding is incredibly firm—the chair feels very much like the driver's seat of an expensive sports car. There was no hint of rattle or looseness in the chair itself or its casters when rolling it out of the carport, down the sidewalk, and then carrying it into the house.

One word of warning: both of these chairs are *heavy*. Office chairs typically weight in at about 25-35 pounds—the Secretlab Omega weighs 66 pounds, and the Anda Fnatic we'll cover in the next section weighs 72 pounds. Having a partner available to help lift and carry as necessary makes life a lot easier, especially if you've got stairs to navigate.

Anda Fnatic

- Presentation in the box is not something Anda cares about—"it's all crammed in there good enough."
Jim Salter
- Instead of a big assembly poster, Anda went with the more traditional booklet, with two steps shown per page.
Jim Salter
- Continuing a trend, Anda's toolkit isn't attractively packaged—it's stuck inside pasteboard-backed blister packaging—but it actually works better than Omega's did.

Jim Salter

- These dust covers were the one unhappy part of assembling Anda Fnatic. They don’t seem to fit the chair, until you realize they literally deform to fit under pressure from their bolt.
  Jim Salter

Anda Seat Fnatic Edition

(Ars Technica may earn compensation for sales from links on this post through affiliate programs.)
Opening the box for Anda Fnatic doesn’t have the same “wow factor” that it did for Secretlab Omega. The packaging presentation is best described as “it’s all crammed in there just fine,” and there are no fancy foam blocks with custom cutouts or custom boxes for the tools provided.

However, the actual assembly process for Fnatic is much smoother and easier. The traditional assembly booklet, with only two steps per page, is much easier to follow. There are no dire warnings about pieces you mustn’t touch, all the bolts are the same size, and the included Allen wrench provides plenty of leverage to tighten them properly.

There also wasn’t a struggle to squash the seatback against the base while bolting them together; for the most part, this installation was very smooth. The only hassle I had involved the little plastic dust covers, which cover the bolts on the side of the chair. They don’t seem to actually fit the chair at all—and that’s because, technically, they don’t.

It seems as though the dust covers should snap onto the sides of the chair, then get secured with a single bolt apiece. In reality, they don’t snap on—they don’t even fit—*until* the bolt is tightened down fully, which deforms the soft plastic cover

to lie flat against the side of the chair. Once you figure that out, the dust covers are fine—but figuring that out took a while, and I suspect more than one Fnatic owner has probably given up on the dust covers and just thrown them away.

- Anda Fnatic is a lot funkier looking than the Secretlab Omega. Most of that apparent funk turns out to be for good reason after you've spent time with it.
  Jim Salter
- Both Fnatic and Omega came with neck pillow and lumbar pillow. On the Omega they seemed weird and unnecessary; on the Fnatic they fit much better.
  Jim Salter
- The Fnatic has a much more interesting profile. My kids love the bold orange-on-black color scheme.
  Jim Salter
- The rear view of the Anda Fnatic is a little less gamer-y obnoxious than the rear view on the Secretlab Omega.
  Jim Salter

Once assembled, the Fnatic didn't give me the same "wow factor" that the Omega had. Its pseudo leather upholstery has a rougher, more raised grain that's easily visible and reminded me of a basketball's. The padding, while thick and very comfortable, isn't as firm as that on the Omega. And there was some noticeable rattle from the casters and from the chair's arms as I rolled it down the sidewalk to the front door.

On the plus side, the through-holes at the top of the chair give excellent mounting for the included neck pillow—and the chair's own design makes that pillow more practical than the Omega's does, with a more pronounced curvature to the chair back. The lumbar pillow also feels more like an integral part of the Fnatic, where the Omega's seems like an afterthought.

As with the Secretlab Omega, this is a heavy chair—at

approximately 72 pounds, it’s twice or more the weight of a typical office chair. Consider having a helper available to move it once assembled, especially if you’ll need to carry it up or down stairs.

Conclusions

These are both excellent chairs, although they’re quite different in look and feel. For the first week or so, I greatly preferred the Secretlab Omega, with its understated good looks, fine-grained covering, and ultra-firm padding. But after several weeks of use, the orange-and-black Fnatic grew on me—it’s now my favorite chair.

Although the Fnatic is a little loose and rattly in construction compared to the Omega, it’s significantly more comfortable—especially for long seating periods. Sitting for too long in the Omega without a break can result in red lines on your thighs if you’re wearing clothes that bunch. That’s not ever a problem in the Fnatic, which stays comfortable for hours on end—even if you forget (or refuse) to get up and take hourly breaks.

We should also talk about suggested height and weight limits for each chair. Secretlab Omega is designed for people from 5’3″ to 5’11” and 240 pounds. If you’re taller than 5’11”, you’ll probably want to upgrade to the more expensive Titan (up to 6’7″ and 290 pounds, for $460) or Titan XL (up to 6’10” and 390 pounds, for $540).

Anda Fnatic is designed for people from 5’10” to 6’10” and supports up to 330 pounds (recommended) or 440 pounds (maximum). Smaller folks may be better off with the Omega—its relatively straight back makes it more forgiving for people who aren’t tall enough to reach the top of the headrest. But people tall enough to fit it properly will appreciate the Fnatic’s deeper spinal curvature and better-integrated neck and lumbar pillows.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1715055

Xbox Series X unleashed: Our unrestricted preview

reader comments

89 with 62 posters participating, including story author

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- Glamour shots with Xbox Series X and its accompanying gamepad.
  Sam Machkovech
- Notice that the top array of venting dots looks different depending on the angle? That’s intentional on Microsoft’s part.
  Sam Machkovech
- Should you choose to place your new Xbox Series X console on a set of stairs, Ars Technica cannot be held liable for any tripping or stumbling on your part.
  Sam Machkovech

If you’d like to estimate Microsoft’s confidence in its upcoming Xbox Series X console, start with the fact that the company gave us a console three weeks ago… and didn’t hang around to see what we’d do with it.

That’s not how cutting-edge hardware previews tend to work.

There are supposed to be multiday events! And corporate handlers! And finger sandwiches! But mostly, there's supposed to be control on the manufacturer's part, in terms of swapping in new hardware or addressing failures the moment something might go wrong for a prospective critic. At such events, staffers may as well wear shirts that read, "We're still working the kinks out on that."

Obviously, the massive, in-person events didn't happen this year. So what do you do as the industry's game-console underdog in order to convince people that your $500 console is better than the other $500 console? One of Microsoft's answers, apparently, was to drive a truck full of "PROTOTYPE"-labeled Xbox Series X consoles to critics' homes *far* earlier than we expected.

Today, after a few preliminary articles, I've finally been given the go-ahead to preview anything about the console that I want. (Not "review," "preview.")

From what I've tested so far, the company has good reason to be confident about this quiet, efficient hardware. Unless I'm missing something huge—even Red Rings needed longer than 22 days to manifest—my hardware experience has so far been quite smooth. As a computing device, Xbox Series X may go down in history as one of the most remarkable machines ever made—as compared to other products in its era, power level, and price.

But a piece of hardware is only as good as the software that it runs. While Microsoft has good reason to be confident about Xbox Series X as a big, honkin' box in your living room, the same can't be said for the range of software we've seen thus far. There's a lot to talk about with this console, so strap in as we jump from topic to topic and break down what a $499 gaming console can offer in 2020.

Hardware and orientation

-
  The “non-final” Xbox Series X, photographed before we powered it on.
  Sam Machkovech
-
  The “non-final” Xbox Series X, photographed before we powered it on.
  Sam Machkovech
-
  Xbox Series X, in vertical orientation.
  Sam Machkovech
-
  The bottom stand is non-removable. Part of that may have to do with certain system parts being exposed by the open grating of this side of the system (which may or may not appear in the “final” retail version of the console).
  Sam Machkovech
-
  Perspective, as compared to a Nintendo Switch—which, let’s be clear, operates at a *very* different power threshold than a 4K-ready, 12 TFLOP console.
  Sam Machkovech
-
  Perspective, as compared to a Nintendo Switch.
  Sam Machkovech
-
  Back-of-X ports. The front includes one additional USB Type-A 3.1 port.
  Sam Machkovech

Let’s start with the system’s physical design, which I’ve now lived with for 22 days—in both horizontal and vertical orientations. You’ll likely experiment with both when you unbox Series X, whose cuboid structure (11.6 inches tall, 6 inches long, 6 inches wide) is a rarity in consumer electronics. Think of the common phrase “slot into your entertainment center,” and you can imagine receivers, DVD players, and other electronics that share a certain shape: not too tall, but plenty long and/or wide. You probably have shelves perfectly set up for these things to slide into.

The only “recent” exception I can think of isn’t a good one: the GameCube, one of Nintendo’s lowest-selling consoles.

To get my preferred entertainment center to accept the Series X, I had to adjust its shelves so that the system’s vertical orientation, topping out at six inches, would have enough clearance room. (The gargantuan PlayStation 5’s horizontal orientation reportedly tops out a hair above four inches, but its other dimensions, 15.4 x 10.2 inches, will still crowd out your other devices.) The Series X fit down there. It was fine. Then I looked at it and got a bit sad.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1713837

Review: Healing and hope in Star Trek: Discovery’s third season

Enlarge / “The Federation isn’t just about ships. The Federation is its people.”

reader comments

111 with 73 posters participating, including story author

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The most frequent complaint leveled against *Star Trek: Discovery* during its first two seasons was: “This doesn’t *feel* like the *Star Trek* I remember.” The critics did indeed have a

point—from the outset, *Discovery* tried to lean into the modern streaming prestige-drama mold, while also retaining its Starfleet soul. Those two goals don't necessarily align, and as a result *Discovery* sometimes seemed like a show that simply couldn't make up its mind.

In its third season, however, *Discovery* has finally picked a side. The show is now all-in on venerating the optimistic, wide-eyed Federation fans want to remember from the '80s and '90s, and it's bringing back the old planet-of-the-week format to do so. Now, the show's inner conflict has taken a whole new direction: for a story all about leaping a millennium into the future to explore the strangest possible new world, *Discovery* for the most part plays it startlingly safe.

(Spoilers below for the first two seasons of *Discovery*.)

Back to the Future

When we last left our heroes at the end of season 2, Commander Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green) had just strapped herself into a winged time-travel suit and yeeted herself into a wormhole. This particular space-time disruption carried her straight out of her normal time and into the far-flung future, with the USS *Discovery* hot on her heels.

Her shipmates agreed to this perilous one-way journey to stop a rogue AI, called Control, from ending all life in the galaxy. They had a rough plan for what to do on arrival: settle on Terralysium and take up the Luddite life. But wormholes are notoriously unreliable (with one major exception), and the crew had no way to guarantee specifically when or where they might end up. After surviving her disorienting crash into the future, then, Burnham has two main questions. First—when am I? And second—is there life here? *Any* life?

- Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green) zips into the future in her spiffy time travel suit.
- Anxiously checking to see if *Discovery* made it, too.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- The crew finds a new ally in Cleveland “Book” Booker (David Ajala).
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Saru (Doug Jones) and Tilly (Mary Wiseman) do a bit of exploring.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Group hug!
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- The future looks pretty futuristic.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- A Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh) sighting.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Tig Notaro returns as Jett Reno.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Our favorite couple is still together: Paul Stamets (Anthony Rapp) and Hugh Culber (Wilson Cruz).
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- Taking command.
  YouTube/CBS All Access
- A budding romance.
  YouTube/CBS All Access

We learn the answers to both questions almost immediately. The year is 3188: 930 years after *Discovery*‘s second season, and about 790 years into the future from the farthest along we’ve been in a *Star Trek* timeline in any previous outing (*Star Trek: Picard*). Happily for everyone involved, the answer to her question about life is a resounding “Yes!” And so off we go with Michael to explore this brave new world.

The first life Burnham collides with is Cleveland “Book” Booker (David Ajala), a traveling rogue with a speedy ship and an enormous cat. Book is our guide to the future, a

charismatic font of exposition who explains to us that Burnham & Co. have arrived to find themselves a hundred years on the wrong side of "The Burn."

The Burn—you can hear the capital letters every time someone says it—was a mysterious, theoretically impossible, apocalyptically destructive event that not only took out the vast majority of the galaxy's dilithium, but also any unfortunate ship or facility that happened to be powered by dilithium at the time. In short, the galaxy is suffering a fuel crisis you could think of as a network-safe *Mad Max: Starfleet Edition*, and any organization—like, for example, the Federation—that relied on ubiquitous warp drive to maintain itself has basically fallen apart.

The people aboard the *Discovery*, however, did not give up everyone and everything they knew to save the future only for that future to suck, and they say as much on-screen. And so our heroes, badly in need of something to do with themselves now that they are cut adrift, blunder into doing what plucky Starfleet officers have always done best: staring down a massive problem and deciding to fix it, against overwhelming odds.

The one-hour conflict

Discovery has new blood at the off-screen helm as well as at the on-screen helm, and it shows. In short: season 3 is absolutely *Star Trek* in the classic mold, where problems can be solved, where diplomacy can reign, where clever Starfleet officers can think their way out of any trap, and where the Federation and its ideals are Good, Actually, for this fallen world.

While the main storyline of the second season became extremely timey-wimey, recursive, and downright perplexing at times, the new season appears to be reverting to a straightforward, linear approach to storytelling. CBS provided reviewers with

advance screeners of the first four episodes, and each of those episodes follows a startlingly familiar format for *Next Generation* fans of old: there is an A plot, on the planet of the week, and a B plot, usually among the crew. These conflicts arise, are explored, and are largely completed by the end of the hour, freeing the *Discovery* to visit a new world and start all over again next week.

The first two episodes of season 3 are a little rough—and not necessarily the way they're meant to be. Yes, Michael's drop into the far future means she's a stranger in a strange land, but that fish-out-of-water storytelling is quickly subverted when you realize the land isn't actually all that strange. The Federation may not be a dominant force in this new pan-galactic political scene, but the story of the galaxy in the Federation's absence is still being told with the same tropes you could describe in your sleep. At one point, for example, we visit an Old West saloon in everything but name, complete with the swinging half-height doors. The story told inside plays almost note for note as you'd expect, straight to the (admittedly fantastic) barfight at the end, and the piling-on of heavy-handed cues feels a bit insulting.

It feels like a hundred years

A galaxy that has gone more than a century without the hand of the Federation guiding it is packed with cynics, and rightfully so. Somehow, though, every time the *Discovery* finishes its mission of the week, the hard-edged doubters it met along the way have been converted into wide-eyed dreamers who think maybe, just maybe, the Federation is worth finding again.

The Federation as a collection of ideals always has been greater than the sum of its parts—but admiring something from afar is always easier when you don't have to deal with the reality of it. The last 25 years of *Star Trek* content has

migrated away from venerating the Federation—instead, it has poked the hornets' nest of contradictions underlying a theoretically peaceful empire that nonetheless clogs its "exploratory" vessels with guns and partakes in rampant colonization. When the Federation is absent from the galactic stage, though, you can easily paper over those cracks and instead point to it as a shining beacon of hope.

A sense of humor and a sense of hope

Despite these quibbles, though, *Discovery* absolutely sells its story and its starry-eyed outlook on the strength of its cast, old and new alike. Burnham and Book have more chemistry in their first 30 seconds on screen together than Michael and Ash Tyler had through two solid seasons of their alleged romance. Ensign Tilly's (Mary Wiseman) brilliant, bumbling optimism remains the beating heart of the crew. Newcomer Adira (Blu del Barrio) manages to be both young and a genius without falling into the "shut up, Wesley" space. And the work Doug Jones does through layers of alien makeup to bring Saru to life, to leadership, and to true captaincy is simply astonishing.

What *Discovery* does blessedly leave behind from the '90s is the styrofoam sterility that filled *Next Generation*. *Discovery* and its crew are wonderfully messy: they hug, they cry, they bicker, they love. They have palpable, plausible feelings, and the more you get to know them, the more in-character all those emotions feel. Historically, when *Star Trek* isn't careful, it can fall too easily into treating its characters not as people but as roles: The Captain, The First Officer, The Science Officer, The Non-Human One, The Wunderkind, and so on. *Discovery* not only avoids that pitfall—it joyously expanded its vision of who and what a Starfleet officer can be.

Discovery's crew members are alone, and they are lonely, and they and their ship carry battle scars both metaphorical and

literal. Those cracks show, and they frame every decision the characters make. The show is rife with ghosts—everyone left something behind—but even though *Discovery* allows characters to feel and experience their traumas, it doesn't dwell. It deals with grief, but most importantly, it deals with what comes after: the work of living, and finding hope.

Rebirth and rebuilding

When you get right down to it, *Discovery* has always been a show about **rebirth**—sometimes quite literally. Nearly every major character has gone through a transformation since the show began. Michael had to learn to shed her Vulcan upbringing (and both her daddy and mommy issues) to find her humanity and her capacity for leadership. Saru had to learn to shed his species' innate fear to evolve. Dr. Hugh Culber went through a literal cycle of death and resurrection. The list goes on and on.

It seems fitting, then, that this season should concern itself with rebirth on a grand scale. The last 25 years of *Star Trek*—more or less starting with *Deep Space Nine*—have increasingly delved into the problematic aspects of the Federation. In recent years, that view has straight-up pivoted to cynicism, which left a bad taste in many fans' mouths. *Discovery*'s rebirth is the rebirth of the Federation's optimism… which we need more than ever right now.

Art and entertainment are always part of a larger conversation. When we look at *Discovery* and ask, "Why this, why now," the answer feels almost too pat. The people aboard *Discovery* are learning to be a family and to have each other's backs after an unfathomable series of traumas. They are having to learn how to ask for help, to say, "I'm not okay," and to mend when the world they thought they knew had collapsed around them.

Time travel

Production on the season wrapped in February, back when we still had public gatherings and went outside without masks. The season could not intentionally have been about the post-pandemic world in which we now live. Nor could its makers have foreseen that this would be a year of massive civil rights protests and deep political unrest.

But for all that its timing is accidental, *Discovery* could not be more perfect. We, too, are a people living through a troubled time, in need of rebirth and a golden beacon to head to. For 54 years, *Star Trek* has called on us to be our best selves, to heed the better angels of our nature, and to become more than the sum of our parts. Perhaps, this year, we can listen.

All seasons of Star Trek: Discovery *are available to stream on CBS All Access. The first episode of season 3 is available to watch today, and future episodes will become available to view every Thursday for the remainder of the 13-episode season.*

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