Two demon-hunting siblings reunite to save the world in Helstrom trailer



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[embedded content]
Tom Austen and Sydney Lemmon star as siblings Daimon and Ana Helstrom in *Helstrom*, a 10-episode horror series that hits Hulu next month.
An ethics professor and secret demon hunter reunites with his estranged sister to take on a powerful demonic entity in the trailer for *Helstrom*, an upcoming horror series based on Marvel Comics characters. The 10-episode series debuts on Hulu next month.

Helstrom has a complicated back story. As we reported in 2019, Hulu announced the development of two new Marvel-centric

series, *Ghost Rider* (with Gabriel Luna reprising his role from *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*) and *Helstrom*. The shows were intended to kick off a standalone "Adventure into Fear" franchise that would bring a chilling horror element to the Marvel formula. *Ghost Rider* soon fell by the wayside, and by December 2019, Marvel Television was shut down. That makes *Helstrom* the sole survivor of the planned fear-based franchise. Shooting finished in March, right before the coronavirus pandemic caused most Hollywood productions to grind to a halt. Showrunner Paul Zbyszewski's contract was terminated in April—also due to the pandemic—but he stayed on for postproduction.

The series focuses on two characters from Marvel Comics. First: Daimon Helstrom, the son of Satan, introduced in *Ghost Rider* #1 (1973). He eventually became a recurring character in *The Defenders*. The other protagonist is his sister, Satana (Ana in the TV adaptation), who embraces the occult and her paternal heritage while Daimon chooses to defend humanity. Per the official premise: "The world isn't ready for a Helstrom family reunion. As the son and daughter of a mysterious and powerful serial killer, *Helstrom* follows Daimon (Tom Austen) and Ana Helstrom (Sydney Lemmon), and their complicated dynamic, as they track down the worst of humanity—each with their own attitude and skills."

- Tom Austen plays Daimon Helstrom, an ethics professor who hopes to save those close to him from demons.
- Ana Helstrom (Sydney Lemmon) is Daimon's estranged sister.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Technically, Ana runs an auction house, but her extracurricular activities are a bit darker.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Daimon and Ana's mother, Victoria, has been institutionalized for 20 years.
  YouTube/Hulu

- Ariana Guerra plays Gabriella Rossetti, an agent of the Vatican.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Robert Wisdom is Caretaker, a guardian of the occult.
  YouTube/Hulu
- June Carryl plays Louise Hastings, head of the psychiatric hospital where Victoria is kept.
  YouTube/Hulu
- A strange occult symbol written in blood.
  YouTube/Hulu
- A bizarre ritual?
  YouTube/Hulu
- Unaccustomed to that face.
  YouTube/Hulu
- This can’t be good.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Gabriella is overpowered.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Ring of fire.
- Brother and sister, reunited.
  YouTube/Hulu
- Helstrom lets loose.
  YouTube/Hulu

The first teaser debuted in July at Comic-Con@Home, and the overall tone was pretty much in line with the oft-delayed *The New Mutants*, another attempt to bring elements of horror to the superhero genre. *The New Mutants* was released a few weeks ago, despite many theaters still being closed; apparently there were contractual reasons the film couldn’t be released on Hulu or Disney+. It mostly received mixed reviews and thus far has only grossed about $35 million against a budget that purportedly was between $67 million and $80 million.

Let’s hope *Helstrom* fares a bit better, given that streaming television has been keeping us all sane in these strange times and horror is fitting October fare. In addition to Austen (*The*

Royals, Grantchester) and Lemmon (*Velvet Buzzsaw, Fear the Walking Dead*), *Helstrom* features Elizabeth Marvel (*Homeland, House of Cards*) as Daimon and Ana's mother, Victoria, who has been institutionalized for 20 years; Robert Wisdom (*The Wire*) as Caretaker, a demon-fighting guardian of the occult; June Carryl (*Mindhunter*) as Louise Hastings, head of the psychiatric institution housing Victoria; and Ariana Guerra (*Raising Dion*) as Vatican agent Gabriella Rossetti.

The trailer opens with a voiceover from Caretaker: "For centuries, we've been fighting and keeping track of things that move in and out of this world. The most dangerous ones, we find a way to contain. This is one of the worst ever." Then we see Daimon visit his mother in the institution—except she appears to be possessed by a demonic entity. Cue Peter Gabriel's "My Body Is a Cage" as we see Daimon inform Ana by phone that whatever the thing is inside their mother, it's growing stronger.

Apparently, Caretaker and Louise Hastings aren't sure it's such a good idea to reunite the siblings, but as Caretaker points out, they're dealing with "a demon so powerful it could wipe out all of mankind." So maybe it's worth the risk. I do like Ana's opening line when she finally faces her brother again: "Please tell me the is dead." (Yes, they really bleeped it.)

Helstrom will debut on Hulu on October 16, 2020.

Listing image by YouTube/Hulu

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1709128

Sinister trailer for Haunting of Bly Manor looks like a classic ghost story



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[embedded content]

Victoria Pedretti stars as a governess to two orphans on a spooky estate in *The Haunting of Bly Manor*.

The Halloween season is almost upon us, so brace yourselves for the annual onslaught of horror fare. But we're also getting a good old-fashioned spooky ghost story with the Netflix series *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, loosely based on *The Turn of the Screw* while incorporating several other ghost stories by Henry James. The series is showrunner Mike Flanagan's highly anticipated followup to 2018's exquisitely brooding *The Haunting of Hill House*. The first teaser dropped earlier this month, and now the streaming platform has

released the full trailer.

(Spoilers for the Henry James novel below.)

The Haunting of Hill House shared the top spot in Ars' 2018 list of our favorite TV shows with BBC's *Killing Eve*. We loved Mike Flanagan and Trevor Macy's inventive reimagining of Shirley Jackson's classic novel, at once a Gothic ghost story and a profound examination of family dysfunction. It stayed true to the tone and spirit of the original, aided by dialogue, narration, and other small details from the source material. Small wonder that it garnered award nominations from the Motion Picture Sound Editors, Writers Guild of America, and Art Directors Guild.

Rumors of a possible second season began swirling soon after the series started streaming, and they were confirmed in February of last year. Flanagan's plan was to turn the series into a horror anthology, with a whole new ghost story and fresh characters. He opined in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that the Crain family featured in *Hill House* had suffered enough, and as far as he was concerned, its story had been told. But several cast members will return in *Bly Manor*, albeit playing different characters: Victoria Pedretti, Henry Thomas, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, Catherine "Katie" Parker, and Kate Siegel.

- Welcome to Bly Manor.
- A grand entrance.
- Victoria Pedretti plays Dani, who signs on as governess to two orphaned children at Bly Manor.
- Amelie Smith as Flora Wingrave.
- Flora has an unsettling fascination with the pond on the estate.
- Benjamin Evan Ainsworth plays Miles Wingrave, who seems equally haunted.
- Dani has her own ghosts from her past.

- On the surface, all is domestic tranquility, however.
- T’Nia Miller plays the housekeeper, Hannah Grose.
- Rahul Kohli, aka Ravi of *iZombie* fame, plays Owen.
- Dani tries to bond with Flora in the estate cemetery.
- Every little girl needs a creepy dollhouse replica of Bly Manor…
- … and a creepy doll of her former governess, Miss Jessel.
- What happened to Rebecca Jessel (Tahirah Sharif)?
- Oliver Jackson-Cohen plays Peter Quint.
- Henry Thomas plays Henry Wingrave, uncle to Flora and Miles.
- Jamie (Amelia Eve) and Owen are spooked by something in the old well.
- Yikes! A ghoulish lady of the lake.

As I wrote previously, *The Turn of the Screw*, published serially in *Collier’s Weekly* in 1898, tells the story of a governess hired to look after two orphaned children by their absent uncle at his Essex country house, Bly. Soon after arriving, the governess sees figures of a man and woman she suspects may be spirits. She learns from the grim housekeeper that her predecessor, Miss Jessel, had an affair with another servant, Peter Quint, and both died. They also seemed to have had an unhealthy attachment to the children, Flora and Miles, and the governess suspects the children can see the ghosts, too. Since we’re talking Henry James here, it ends in tragedy.

Literary scholars and critics have been debating the novella ever since it was first published because James was deliberately ambiguous as to whether the governess is seeing actual ghosts or simply going mad and imagining them. That debate carried over to the 1961 British Film adaptation, *The Innocents*, starring Deborah Kerr—probably the best of the many versions of the tale that have been adapted for various media. The initial screenwriter, William Archibald, assumed the ghosts were real; Director Jack Clayton preferred to be true

to James' original ambiguity.

The most recent film adaptation, *The Turning*, released earlier this year, is the worst of the bunch by far, despite a solid performance by star Mackenzie Davis. (Finn Wolfhard of *Stranger Things* costars as Miles.) In that instance, Director Floria Sigismondi—best known for 2010's *The Runaways* and several music videos—largely went with the "insane governess" hypothesis, although the ending is deliberately ambiguous on that score.

We'll have to wait to see which direction Flanagan takes *Bly Manor*, but my money's on at least some of the ghosts being real, judging by the trailer. The official synopsis is very brief: "Dead doesn't mean gone. An au pair plunges into an abyss of chilling secrets in this gothic romance from the creator of *The Haunting of Hill House*." The trailer gives little else away, but it does set an appropriately sinister tone and whets the appetite for the full series.

The Haunting of Bly Manor starts streaming on Netflix on October 9, 2020.

Listing image by Netflix

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1709076

Shock treatment: Ratched is a stylishly gruesome soap opera dialed up to 11



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[embedded content]
Sarah Paulson plays Nurse Mildred Ratched in *Ratched*, series creator Evan Romansky's prequel (of sorts) to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.
One of the most iconic movie villains of all time gets the *American Horror Story* treatment in *Ratched*, Netflix's star-studded prequel, of sorts, to Director Milos Forman's Oscar-winning 1975 film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The series is richly styled and visually striking, and the cast is terrific, but there's very little substance or insight, and the plotting is a meandering mess riddled with holes and inconsistent characterizations. It's basically a body horror soap opera in which everything is dialed up to 11 for maximum shock value.

(Spoilers for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* book and film below. Some spoilers for *Ratched* but no major reveals.)

As I wrote previously, Forman's film is based on the 1962

novel of the same name by Ken Kesey. It's set in a psychiatric hospital in Salem, Oregon, where Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) is sent after faking insanity to escape a prison farm sentence for assault and the statutory rape of a 15-year-old girl. The cold, rigidly controlled (and controlling) Nurse Mildred Ratched (aka Big Nurse, played by Louise Fletcher) rules the place with an iron hand. She maintains order by withholding basic necessities, medications, or patient privileges—with the occasional bit of hydrotherapy and electroshock therapy for especially unruly patients—but McMurphy's rebellious nature challenges her authority.

Their conflict soon escalates into all-out war after she drives another patient, the emotionally fragile Billy (a young Brad Dourif), to commit suicide. McMurphy nearly strangles her to death in revenge and is lobotomized for his trouble. One of the inmates, Chief (Will Sampson), discovers McMurphy in his now-vegetative state and smothers him with a pillow to end his suffering. As for Nurse Ratched, her injuries render her unable to speak—her most potent weapon in controlling her charges. In addition to winning Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay, the film also snagged a Best Actress Oscar for Fletcher. The American Film Institute named Nurse Ratched the fifth-greatest villain in film history.

Kesey was a staunch counter-culture figure who was inspired to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while working the night shift at a mental institution. Kesey convinced himself that the inmates weren't really insane, just relegated to the institution because their behavior didn't conform with social expectations. That conviction resonates throughout both the novel and Forman's film in the person of McMurphy, an unapologetic agent of chaos, although Nicholson's McMurphy begins to have doubts as consequences begin to pile up.

I'm generally a fan of classic films, but I've never liked Forman's *Cuckoo's Nest*. Its themes haven't aged particularly

well, I found McMurphy to be an obnoxious character, and the deep-seated misogyny has always rankled. (It's a men's ward, ruled by a frigid, controlling woman to symbolize the "Establishment," with women invariably being blamed for the men's issues.) Yes, Nurse Ratched was manipulative and cruel, and patients did suffer under her "care," but her character was little more than a cartoonish straw woman for Kesey's anti-establishment views. She wouldn't crack my top 50 list of best villains in film.

Nonetheless, I was intrigued when news of the Netflix prequel series broke, given its stated goal of fleshing out Nurse Ratched's backstory to (hopefully) give us a sense of the woman behind the 1970s "monster." It's too bad *Ratched* largely fails in that regard. Other than the name Mildred Ratched and a few very minor details, the series doesn't have anything in common at all with the character as depicted in either Kesey's novel or Forman's film adaptation.

Welcome to Lucia

- Mildred Ratched (Sarah Paulson) arrives at Lucia State Hospital in northern California, seeking employment as a nurse.
- Assessing the lay of the land.
- Dr. Richard Hanover (Jon Jon Briones) is initially reluctant to hire her.
- Mildred's machinations are successful.
- The real reason she came to Lucia: convicted murderer Edmund Tolleson (Finn Wittrock), her long-lost foster-brother.
- Judy Davis plays Mildred's arch-rival, Nurse Betsy Bucket.
- Huck Finnigan (Charlie Carver) is an orderly who cares deeply about the patients.
- Mildred and Nurse Dolly (Alice Englert) man the front

desk.

- Amanda Plummer plays Louise, the eccentric manager of a seedy nearby motel.
- Charles Wainwright (Corey Stoll) is a man on a secret mission—and an eye for the ladies.
- What is Charles' connection to the wealthy socialite Lenore Osgood (Sharon Stone)?
- Lenore's son, Henry (Brandon Flynn), is a former patient of Dr. Hanover.
- Dr. Hanover seeks to curry favor with Governor George Willburn (Vincent D'Onofrio).
- Cynthia Nixon gives an Emmy-worthy performance as Gwendolyn Briggs, the governor's campaign manager.
- Sophie Okonedo plays Charlotte Wells, a woman whose past trauma has caused her to develop multiple personalities.

Kesey never revealed much about Nurse Ratched's background, other than a brief hint that she was deeply scarred by her time spent as an army nurse during World War II. So there was plenty of room for series creator Evan Romansky to creatively fill in the gaps. A recent film school graduate, Romanksy wrote the pilot script on spec, and it soon found its way to Emmy-winning producer Ryan Murphy (*Glee*, the *American Horror Story* anthology series), who managed to secure the rights to the character, as well as the screen rights to the film. *American Horror Story* alum Sarah Paulson signed on for the title role.

Per the official premise:

> *Ratched is a suspenseful drama series that tells the origin story of asylum nurse Mildred Ratched. In 1947, Mildred arrives in northern California to seek employment at a leading psychiatric hospital where new and unsettling experiments have begun on the human mind. On a clandestine mission, Mildred presents herself as the perfect image of what a dedicated nurse should be, but the wheels are always turning and as she begins to infiltrate the mental health*

> *care system and those within it, Mildred's stylish exterior belies a growing darkness that has long been smoldering within, revealing that true monsters are made, not born.*

The pilot opens with the brutal murder of five priests (and the simultaneous rape of one of them) by a young man named Edmund Tolleson (Finn Wittrock, *The Big Short. American Horror Story*), who clearly has a few issues with the Catholic Church. Only Father Andrews (Hunter Parrish, *Weeds*) survives, a key witness for the prosecution. Facing the death penalty, Edmund is sent to Lucia State Hospital, a mental institution in Northern California run by Dr. Richard Hanover (Jon Jon Briones, *American Horror Story: Apocalypse*). That's when Mildred Ratched (Paulson) shows up and manipulates her way into joining the nursing staff.

We soon learn that Edmund is Mildred's long-lost foster-brother, and she is determined to thwart the execution plans by any means necessary. Let's just say that her introduction to the lobotomy during one of Dr. Hanover's demonstrations comes in quite handy. She clashes immediately with the head nurse, Betsy Bucket (Judy Davis, *Barton Fink*), and finds an ally in Huck (Charlie Carver, *The Leftovers*), a kind-hearted orderly with a disfigured face. Her place at Lucia is solidified when she wins the favor of Governor George Willburn (Vincent D'Onofrio, *Daredevil*), who decides to make the hospital a centerpiece of his re-election campaign on the advice of his campaign manager, Gwendolyn Briggs (Cynthia Nixon, *Sex and the City*).

Body horrors

- Mildred and Nurse Bucket face off over a peach.
- Sedating a patient in advance of the governor's visit.
- Dr. Hanover orders a sadistic treatment to "cure" a patient of her lesbian desires.

- Mildred is disgusted.
- A lobotomy demonstration goes horribly wrong.
- Mildred strikes a deal with Lenore Osgood.
- Dr. Hanover and Charlotte Wells seem to be enjoying the hospital mixer for both staff and patients.
- Edmund has eyes for Dolly.
- Hanover tries a bit too hard to get into the party mood.
- Huck senses something amiss.
- A children's puppet show evokes traumatic memories in Mildred.

The brave cast members all give terrific performances, making the most out of the messy material they've been given to work with here. For instance, Sharon Stone (*The New Pope*) is delicious as the wealthy femme fatale, Lenore Osgood, who seeks revenge on Dr. Hanover for the tragedy that befell her psychotic son, Henry (Brandon Flynn, *13 Reasons Why*) under his care. Sophie Okonedo (who will play Siuan Sanche in the forthcoming *Wheel of Time* adaptation) gets to show off her considerable range as Charlotte Wells, a woman with multiple personalities (some quite violent), whom Hanover hopes to cure with hypnosis.

Briones chews up the scenery with wild abandon as the slightly unhinged Hanover. And Nixon gives an Emmy-worthy performance as Gwendolyn, a lesbian who finds herself sexually attracted to Mildred against her better judgment. Her subdued approach and fine-tuned expressiveness stand out against the over-the-top tone of the series; it's almost like she stumbled into the wrong show by mistake.

Of course, none of this would work at all without Sarah Paulson, who brings this version of Mildred Ratched to vivid life—this time reinterpreted as the victim of truly horrific child abuse, as she and a young Edmund are bounced around various foster homes. (Rosanna Arquette has a cameo as their well-meaning, but naive case worker.) In one particularly effective scene, Gwendolyn coaxes her to attend a children's

puppet show, which becomes—from Mildred's traumatized perspective—a means of telling her tragic story.

The problem is that the character is not consistently written. This Mildred sees herself as an angel of mercy, objecting to Hanover's more brutal "treatments," and befriending Huck with genuine kindness. She's vulnerable beneath the prim aloofness and feels genuine affection for Edmund, as well as guilt over having lost track of him. But in the very next scene she'll take an ice pick to an inconvenient personage without hesitation, or coldly dispose of one of the many bodies that begin to pile up as the season progresses. It's to Paulson's credit that she maneuvers between these wild swings so well.

In the end, none of it is enough to offset the ham-fisted themes and unfocused plotting. *Ratched* doesn't even really work as trashy escapism, since the earlier episodes are a bit of a slog, and a sense of joylessness pervades throughout. That might work in a two-hour film, but over eight hour-long episodes, it just leaves a dank and sour aftertaste lingering as credits roll. Final verdict: unless you're a hardcore fan of Ryan Murphy's darker aesthetic, I'd give it a miss.

Ratched is currently streaming on Netflix.

Listing image by YouTube/Netflix

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1707981

Everyone loves the new couple

on the block in first Wandavision trailer



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[embedded content]
Elizabeth Olsen and Paul Bettany reprise their roles as Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch and Vision, respectively, in Marvel's spinoff series *WandaVision*.
If you were watching the virtual 72nd Primetime Emmy Awards last night, you no doubt caught the debut of a new trailer for *WandaVision*, the first standalone series to be released in Phase Four of the MCU. The studio offered a sneak peek last year during D23 Expo 2019, Disney's annual fan extravaganza. Lacking any actual footage, that teaser was just snippets of *The Dick van Dyke Show* interspersed with snippets of the Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) and Vision (Paul Bettany) from the various MCU films. At the time, I was skeptical of the concept, but this new trailer is quite promising and gives me

hope that Marvel can pull it off.

WandaVision is meant to be a kind of sitcom/epic superhero mashup, with Kat Dennings reprising her role as Darcy from the *Thor* films, alongside Randall Park reprising his *Ant Man and the Wasp* role as FBI agent Jimmy Woo. Kathryn Hahn (*Crossing Jordan*) will play a "nosy neighbor," and Teyonah Parris (*Mad Men*) plays a grown-up Monica Rambeau, daughter of Carol Danvers' BFF Maria Rambeau, introduced in *Captain Marvel*. Within the MCU timeline, it takes place after the events of *Avengers: Endgame*, and its events will directly tie in to *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, currently slated for a 2022 release.

Per the official description: "*WandaVision* will follow the story of Elizabeth Olsen and Paul Bettany's superhero characters, the Scarlet Witch and Vision. The series is a blend of classic television and the Marvel Cinematic Universe in which Wanda Maximoff and Vision—two super-powered beings living idealized suburban lives—begin to suspect that everything is not as it seems."

During last fall's New York Comic-Con, Tom King mentioned that the show would draw on the 2016 comic book limited series by King and Gabriel H. Walta, *The Vision*. In that storyline, Vision "creates" a wife and two children and settles into a seemingly idyllic suburban life in Washington, DC—but things soon take a darker turn. (There's also a comics storyline in which Wanda creates a world where everyone gets their heart's desire, so reality-warping is certainly within her canonical powers.) The studio also released a few set photos earlier this year that confirmed rumors that *WandaVision* would feature the live-action debut of S.W.O.R.D. (the Sentient World Observation and Response Department), a subdivision of S.H.I.E.L.D. charged with handling alien threats to Earth.

- Just married!

- Meet the happy couple: Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) and Vision (Paul Bettany).
  YouTube/Disney+
- “Honey, I’m home!”
  YouTube/Disney+
- Kathryn Hahn plays a nosy neighbor.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Pouring the wine for a dinner party.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Fred Melamed plays neighbor Arthur Heart.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Debra Jo Rupp plays Mrs. Heart.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Wanda senses something isn’t quite right.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Changing channels.
  YouTube/Disney+
- How about a wacky sitcom?
  YouTube/Disney+
- Married… with children.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Rocking an ’80s vibe.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Wanda lives up to her Scarlet Witch moniker.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Vision loose in suburbia.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Wanda tests her powers.
  YouTube/Disney+
- A bird’s-eye view.
  YouTube/Disney+
- Could this be the FBI or S.W.O.R.D.?
  YouTube/Disney+
- Teyonah Parris plays Monica Rambeaau, the grown daughter of Maria Rambeau, BFF to Carol Danvers (aka Captain Marvel).
  YouTube/Disney+

- Wanda and Vision: the perfect couple.

The trailer opens in the style of a wholesome 1950s family sitcom as “Twilight Time” by The Platters plays in the background. (Side note: I will forever be creeped out by this song after it was used in the 1998 *The X-Files* episode “Kill Switch,” co-written by none other than William Gibson.) “This is our home now. I want us to fit in,” Wanda tells Vision, and voila! He suddenly has a more human appearance, just in time for dinner with the neighbors. But they find they can’t answer even the simplest personal questions: when they moved in, where they moved from, and of course, why they don’t have any children (it *is* the 1950s).

That’s the cue to shift into different eras of classic television in succession, including a brief glimpse of Monica Rambeau. It looks like showrunner Jac Schaeffer and the writing team are having a lot of fun with the concept, and that lighthearted energy dominates the trailer. “We are an unusual couple, you know,” Wanda says as we briefly shift back to the 1950s at the end. “Oh, I don’t think that was ever in question,” Vision replies. And it looks like this will be a most unusual series.

There’s no official release date yet, but *WandaVision* is expected to debut on Disney+ in December 2020. (The original plan was for a spring 2021 release, so we’re getting it a bit earlier than expected.)

Listing image by YouTube/Disney+

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1708222

A fond farewell to the weird and wonderful Nintendo DS



Aurich Lawson

reader comments

61 with 43 posters participating

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In December 2004, my boyfriend showed up at my apartment door carrying a box. “I brought you a present!” he said, clearly excited. “Open it!”

‘*Tis the season*, I thought, unwrapping it. I turned the box around. “A… Nintendo… DS? Is this, like… a Game Boy kind of thing?”

As I fought my way through layers of cardboard and plastic to open my new toy, he pulled a matching unit out of his own

messenger bag, opened it up, and began to explain. I had never owned a portable console—I'd barely ever even owned a regular console, I was a lifelong PC gamer—and while I tried to greet the gift with good cheer, I bluntly had no idea why on Earth he had given it to me.

He could tell I was not entirely on board. "Trust me," he said. "It's *great* for the train." I lived in Boston, he lived in Manhattan; we spent a lot of time on trains. "You're going to love it."

I hate to give him bragging rights, but: He was right. My relationship with the Nintendo DS outlasted my relationship with him by more than a dozen years, and I am sad to mourn its passing.



Enlarge / The 3DS XL line was meant for bigger hands and chunkier pixels.
Kyle Orland

This week, we now know, marks the end of an era: after 16 years and almost a dozen total models, the Nintendo DS family of handheld gaming systems is no more. Nintendo sold well over 200 million cumulative units of the dual-screened devices over the years, but times change.

I was not the only person to greet the launch of the Nintendo DS with more bewilderment than joy. The DS was a pretty weird little device when it launched, occupying a niche I wasn't yet aware I wanted it to fill.

Video games on the go were not a new idea in 2004. The DS was in many ways simply the next iteration on Nintendo's incredibly popular Game Boy line of handheld consoles, which first launched in 1989. The DS wasn't even the first one to fold: the last major product in the Game Boy line, 2003's Game Boy Advance SP, featured a rechargeable internal battery and flipped easily shut into a clamshell, convenient for dropping back into your pocket or purse at any time.

The DS, though, was optimized for the dawn of the 21st century. It had Wi-Fi support from the start, primed for a world of multiplayer games yet to come. And the "dual" in "dual screen" was the real selling point. In 2004, the idea of a working, affordable touch-screen device in your pocket was a cool new concept—one that early DS games, alas, mostly used for gimmicks if they used it at all.

I didn't use my launch model, "phat" DS all that much at first. I was wrapping up my last semester of grad school, and I lived close enough to campus that walking was honestly faster than waiting for the T at least half the time. I still preferred books on the frequent, lengthy bus or train rides from Boston to New York—especially because, again, lots of it was grad school reading. Plus, playing *Super Mario 64*—the only game I had, at first—while riding transit gave me motion sickness.

The months passed. I finished my degree and left Boston, moving with my boyfriend into the basement of a brownstone in Brooklyn. I needed to make some quick cash while I was hunting for a full-time job. So when a few weeks after I landed in the Big Apple I found myself walking past a GameStop with a “help wanted” sign in the window, I went in.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1707393

Spelunky 2 game review: Roguelike perfection



Enlarge / Ana (center) is the star of *Spelunky 2*, and she’s on a search for her adventuring parents after they abandoned her to look for treasure on the Moon.

reader comments

25 with 19 posters participating, including story author

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My recent work at Ars Technica has mostly revolved around high-end gadgets like VR headsets, GPUs, and next-gen consoles. It’s fun stuff.

But while swimming through embargoed hardware and frantic news announcements, I keep coming back to a single video game well outside the “next-generation” mold.

Spelunky 2 is likely the most “dated” game I’ll slap the “Ars Approved” sticker onto in 2020. The adjective “dated” works in part because the game’s success builds largely, and loudly, upon the foundation of 2012’s 2D smash *Spelunky HD*… and *that* title builds upon the 16-bit genius of 2009’s freeware original. (Which you can still download! For free! Right next to its source code!)

A certain class of gamer will hear that “*Spelunky 2* is everything good about *Spelunky HD*, only better” and wish to hear nothing more. That’s fair (especially for players who will hold out for the game’s launch on PC in two weeks, after its timed PlayStation 4 exclusivity runs out). The charm of *Spelunky 2*, like its predecessor, comes from how it cleverly shakes a cup full of gameplay and level-construction elements, dumps them onto a table, and shouts “Yahtzee!” as it surprises you again and again. (To be clear, in this game’s case, “Yahtzee” is a synonym for “You died!” You will die repeatedly in *Spelunky 2*.)

No spoilers yet, swear



Enlarge / Between runs, you can find the characters you've unlocked hanging out in a little subterranean village. (The characters are only cosmetic, but their audio-visual differences are still pretty fun to uncover.)



Spelunky 2 [PS4, PC]

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To that end, this article is a mostly spoiler-free exploration of what *Spelunky 2* gets right as a sequel. Primarily, the good news comes in the form of what hasn't changed.

If you've never *Spelunky*'ed before, or if it's been a while, here's a refresher: the object of every game in the series is to progress from the top of a treasure-filled network of caves to the bottom. Like in *Super Mario* games, your side-scrolling, 2D hero has a snappy amount of speed and momentum for running and hopping. As an Indiana Jones-style twist on the genre, your default arsenal includes a whip, the ability to grab onto ledges, and a limited pool of explosive bombs and climbable ropes. All of these core systems still feel responsive as hell, and it's crucial that the game feels *so good* to control, because you need to master its pixel-perfect leaps and dashes to survive its chaos.

Every *Spelunky 2* level is procedurally generated by shuffling and remixing a massive selection of premade level parts. Every time you die, your progress rewinds to the top of the caves, at which point you'll find the world beneath you has been newly remixed. By default, you can't memorize an exact arrangement of monsters, traps, shopkeepers, items, treasure, and secrets, then you optimize your run accordingly. This fact—combined with how the game's dangerous elements can wipe an entire run in an instant—forces players into *Spelunky 2*'s brutal reality: get your act together, or perish.

After my first three hours playing *Spelunky 2*, I kept remarking to myself how surprised I was by seemingly new monsters, items, and tweaks… only to realize how much of that stuff was entirely unchanged from the previous game. I point this out because I'm amazed by how many *Spelunky 2* moments feel incredibly fresh in 2020 without changing the good ideas found in the 2009 original.

Your default whip attack still has a clever amount of "behind your back" momentum. Bats still fly "directly" at your hero in obnoxiously curved lines, making them a surprising nuisance. The freeze ray is still a blast to use, especially when it lets you turn a dangerous foe into a useful block of climbable ice. Monkeys are still freaking jerks who exist entirely to

rob and annoy you. AI-controlled “helpers” are still maniacs who do more harm than good. Stuff like that.

Mild spoilers begin here

- The further you click, the more spoilers you’ll find (albeit mild ones). Let’s start with an expanded multiplayer deathmatch mode. It’s fun, but it doesn’t work online.
- New items at storefronts this time around.
- Riding turkeys is easily one of this game’s best new features.
- You can now go into and out of doors in a level to uncover secret treasures and paths.
- Dark levels require intelligent torch management.
- The new volumetric water and fire effects are freakin’ sweet.
- Multiplayer test on a pair of manticores.
- It’s easy to revive dead friends in multiplayer, thanks to an increased number of respawn points.

Instead of deleting or redefining tentpoles of the original *Spelunky*, the sequel exists largely as a reaction to the game’s decade of fandom. Die-hard fans have continued playing the original version all these years later, and *Spelunky 2* offers fresher stuff specifically for the veteran audience, in ways that organically trickle down to anybody who might stink at the game.

In a recent interview with the SpelunkyCast, series creator Derek Yu explained that one key design pillar for this sequel was to make it feel more like an open-world game, where the likelihood of seeing “every” major gameplay element in a single run is less likely. If you’re going to play the game over and over, Yu figures, why should it always lead from the mines to the jungle to the ice caves? Hence, the first huge change comes from a forking path in every run, where players

get multiple “world” options after roughly every four levels. When the environment is about to change, you’ll have access to at least two doors, and these diverge drastically in terms of the enemies, challenges, and traps ahead.

Without getting too spoilery, some of these environmental changes include new twists on “liquid” physics. Think about *Spelunky HD*, where you might feel compelled to blow a hole into a wall using one of your limited bombs to reach treasure or make progress. That still factors into *Spelunky 2*, but now, think about volumes of liquid that might be shifted or loosed by a bomb, either intentionally or accidentally. Does that liquid contain items? If you swim through that liquid (a new maneuver in this game), could you reach new places? Might that liquid harm you in one way or another? And if you have a freeze ray handy, can you turn dangerous enemies into floating blocks of ice?

Let’s argue

In our early tests, Ars Technica’s Kyle Orland and I had different opinions about these branching paths: which ones are safer, more fruitful, or more interesting. Neither of us dislikes anything in these branching paths. It’s just different enough to foster a compelling disagreement—which, gosh, is absolute *juice* for a game that lives and dies by procedural generation. A great random-adventure game should not only be fun but foster great watercooler talk among fans: “…and *that* got the shopkeeper angry, but then he got squashed, so I rushed to get his loot, only to have a horned lizard trap me in a corner!”

Beyond that major change, there’s just more of everything. More store types, including some that let you trade your accumulated wealth for slot-machine bonuses or tickets into mysterious, treasure-filled vaults. More items, including a deadly crossbow that can be reloaded with any arrow you find

(particularly the ones that shoot out of traps). And more foes and creatures who remix every level with new, dangerous possibilities to look out for, like pesky moles who crawl into and out of ceilings and floors—and thus turn seemingly innocent tunnels full of treasure into potential death traps.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1707500

Review: Netflix debuts two solid German offerings with Biohackers and Freaks



Enlarge / Luna Wedler (left) plays a young medical student with a secret in in the German drama *Biohackers*, and Cornelia Gröschel (right) stars as a diner waitress who discovers she

has super strength in the German film, *Freaks: You're One of Us*. Both are currently streaming on Netflix.

reader comments

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As someone who enjoys discovering lesser-known films and TV series from around the world, I applaud Netflix's continued commitment to bringing a wide range of international fare to its platform—whether it's South Korean zombie horror/period drama, modern Norwegian reworkings of Norse mythology, Arabic supernatural YA dramas, or Belgian sci-fi thrillers. And the excellent sci-fi series *Dark* recently wrapped a mind-bending third and final season on Netflix.

If that's left you peckish for more German Netflix fare, you might check out two recent debuts: a sci-fi thriller series, *Biohackers*, about an ambitious young medical student seeking revenge on her mentor for the scientific sins of the past; and a film called *Freaks: You're One of Us*, about a diner waitress who discovers she has a superpower—and she's not the only "freak" with a special gift. Neither even comes close to the multilayered conceptual level of *Dark*, alas, but both provide well-executed, solid entertainment—and you won't need a chart of multiple timelines to follow the plot.

(Some spoilers below, but no major reveals.)

- Professor Tanja Lorenz (Jessica Schwarz) is a star in the field of synthetic biology.
- Mia (Luna Wedler) is a young medical student eager to study under Lorenz.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Welcome, roomie! How about a beer for breakfast? Caro Cult plays Lotta.

YouTube/Netflix

- Another warm roomie welcome. Sebastian Jakob Doppelbauer plays Ole.
  YouTube/Netflix
- What’s this home science project?
  YouTube/Netflix
- Mia’s third new roommate, Chen-Lu (Jing Xiang) is thrilled about her bio-piano.
  YouTube/Netflix
- The roommates meet Niklas (Thomas Prenn) and Jasper (Adrian Julius Tillmann).
  YouTube/Netflix
- Aww, a genetically altered glowing green mouse.
- A biohackers rave.
- Jasper falls hard for Mia.
- Lorenz also has a corporate biotech lab.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Mia joins the team.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Jasper is evasive about what kind of research is being done here.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Mia finds a damning file.
  YouTube/Netflix
- Flashback to Mia’s childhood.
  YouTube/Netflix
- What happened to the little boy? What was done to him?
  YouTube/Netflix
- Lorenz lecturing the “creators of tomorrow.”
  YouTube/Netflix
- “I’m going to ruin her.”
  YouTube/Netflix
- Jasper is seeing red.
- An emergency response worker suspects a deadly pathogen has been released.
  YouTube/Netflix

Biohackers

As we reported previously, showrunner Christian Ditter is best known in the United States for directing the 2016 rom-com *How to Be Single* and for his work on the 2017 Netflix comedy *Girlboss*, based on the autobiography of Sophia Amoruso, who founded the company Nasty Gal. (*Girlboss* received mixed reviews and was cancelled after one season.) Jessica Schwarz, best known stateside for her performance in the 2006 thriller *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (based on the 1985 novel by Patrick Susskind), stars as Professor Tanja Lorenz. Swiss actress Luna Wedler plays Mia, a young medical student who gets drawn into the world of underground biohacking and illegal genetic-engineering experiments.

Per the official premise: "When Mia begins her medical degree, she seems like any other student. But when she gains the trust of the brilliant Professor Lorenz, it becomes apparent that she's hiding a secret so big it could change the fate of humanity." The series opens with a number of train passengers suddenly falling ill, with Mia—the only one unaffected—trying desperately to save them. But we soon flashback to two weeks earlier, when she arrives in Freiburg to begin her medical studies at the university.

Her new roommates are a quirky bunch. Lotta (Caro Cult) has aristocratic ties and a promiscuous bent. Ole (Sebastian Jakob Doppelbauer) is a hard-core biohacker who posts online videos detailing his extreme experiments on himself and laments his low follower count. And Chen-Lu (Jing Xiang) is a hyperactive, fast-talking genetics whiz who can't wait to demonstrate her "bio-piano" (musical plants) for Mia. When Mia meets Jasper (Adrian Julius Tillmann), Lorenz's right hand, she sees a chance to combine romance with gaining access to the professor's top-secret research—revenge for the wrongs she believes Lorenz visited upon her and her (now deceased) family.

All the right science-y buzzwords are here, and there are no glaringly obvious howlers, although the idea that Lorenz could predict everything about a person based solely on their genetic profile is a major stretch for Purposes of the Plot. She is correct to be *suspicious* of Mia's (faked) DNA profile because Mia has freckles while lacking the primary gene responsible. But even a fairly simple trait like freckles likely has more than one genetic component. This is a minor quibble, since the science is mostly just decorative and secondary to the personal and professional intrigue anyway.

Another minor quibble: one would expect the brilliant Mia—who shows up on day one of class having already done the required reading and plenty more besides—to be familiar with the green fluorescent protein that gives Jasper's pet mouse its greenish hue. The protein was first isolated in the 1960s and 1970s, and scientists have been making animals glow (under UV light) for at least two decades (mice, rabbits, cats, pigs, monkeys, and zebrafish, for instance).

At times, *Biohackers* feels like it's trying too hard to be cool, but the writing is solid (if a bit predictable in early episodes), and the performances are strong (especially Schwarz and Tillman)—plus there are a couple of surprising twists. As is often the case with Netflix shows, it ends on a cliffhanger to set up a potential second season, and it's clear the game has changed dramatically. Pro tip: watch the (easily bingeable) six episodes in the original German with subtitles. Netflix offers an English-dubbed version, but it's pretty awful—especially whoever is voicing Ole as if he were a stoner surfer dude.

[embedded content]
Cornelia Gröschel stars as Wendy, a diner waitress who discovers she has a super power, in *Freaks: You're One of Us*.
Freaks: You're One of Us

If you're more in the mood for a German twist on *The X-Men*,

Freaks: You're One of Us mostly delivers. Per the official premise: "Wendy (Cornelia Gröschel), a young working-class mom, realizes that years of medication have suppressed her latent supernatural powers. She meets a stranger, Marek (Wotan Wilke Möhring), with the same background, and finds out that her co-worker, Elmar (Tim Oliver Schultz), is also similarly gifted. Question is: what will she do with her new powers?"

That's an accurate, succinct summation, and the first half of the film takes the time to flesh things out and set up some interesting dynamics. Wendy and her husband Lars (Frederic Linkemann) are struggling to pay the bills and are on the verge of being evicted. They can't even afford to fill the small pool in the backyard with water. She's due for a promotion at work, but her supervisor, Angela (Gisa Flake) keeps finding excuses to deny the admittedly timid Wendy advancement no matter how hard she works (Angela peppers her with aphorisms from the wise life lessons of Arnold Schwarzenegger instead). Wendy gets no respect from the customers and is frequently harassed by a group of men on her regular nightly walk home from work.

There are also hints of a tragic childhood incident involving Wendy; she's been in therapy for years with Dr. Stern (Nina Kunzendorf). But when she meets the homeless Marek (Wotan Wilke Möhring) by the diner dumpsters, he tells her, "You're one of us" and urges her to go off her meds. She is curious, and frustrated, enough to give it a try. That's when her super-strength emerges. Marek can't be hurt or killed, and her co-worker Elmar (Tim Oliver Schultz) discovers he can channel electricity when he also goes off his meds. (He dubs himself "Electro-Man.")

- Wendy (Cornelia Gröschel) is a seemingly unremarkable young woman working at a local fast food diner.
- Her co-worker Elmar (Tim Oliver Schultz) seems pretty ordinary too.

- Wendy meets Marek (Wotan Wilke Möhring), a homeless person with a secret.
- Dr. Stern (Nina Kunzendorf) has been Wendy's therapist since a tragic childhood incident.
- Wendy's decision to go off her medication reveals her super strength, to the surprise of her supervisor, Angela (Gisa Flake).
- Elmar has his own super power and dubs himself Electro-Man.
- Wendy takes revenge on a few jerks at a local club.
- Tracking down Marek to his secret hideout.
- The three concoct a plan to spring other medicated super-freaks from a local hospital.
- Elmar is really getting carried away with this Electro-Man thing.
- Wendy and Marek, back in the hospital.
- Wendy confronts an increasingly aggressive Elmar.

It's Gröschel's sensitive, nuanced performance as Wendy that carries this film, as she slowly transforms from a meek, somewhat-depressed young woman with low confidence into someone who must now struggle to control a dangerous superpower—and elude the people who would try to muzzle her again. It's initially gratifying to see Wendy exact revenge upon the people who've taken advantage of her meekness in the past, but things begin to spiral out of control when Elmar convinces her they must find a way to use their powers for good—even as Marek urges them both to remain under the radar. ("We can't live with normal people. If they catch us, they'll lock us up.") Naturally, this puts further strain on her marriage, and puts her young son, Karl (Finnlay Berger) at risk.

Unfortunately, after a very strong first half, *Freaks* falls prey to some predictable turns, because—let's face it—even if the term "mutants" is never used, we've seen some version of this story countless times before. We know the beats. That

said, I liked the dry humorous touches, and the film's muted, bittersweet conclusion, which successfully avoids the typical Hollywood tropes when it comes to concluding superhero movies. The ending is not an obvious setup for a sequel, yet it leaves room for some interesting developments should a sequel transpire. I, for one, would be interested to see the next step in Wendy's evolution.

Both *Biohackers* and *Freaks: You're One of Us* are currently streaming on Netflix. In German with English subtitles.

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Netflix's Away splendidly brings a humans-to-Mars mission to life



reader comments

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- Three Atlas crew members on the Moon: Ato essandoh as Dr. Kwesi Weisberg-Abban, Ray Panthaki as Ram Arya, and Vivian Wu as Lu Wang.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- Mark Ivanir plays Misha Popov as a Russian crew member on the mission.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- Ram, left, with the Atlas mission’s commander, Hilary Swank as Emma Green.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- And here’s the whole crew prior to launch: China’s Lu Wang, Russia’s Misha Popov, NASA’s Emma Green, India’s Ram Arya, and Europe’s Dr. Kwesi Weisberg-Abban.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- A shot of the main living area on board the Atlas deep-space vehicle.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- The center of the rotating vehicle has no gravity. The outer parts of the vehicle have some gravity, which made it easier to shoot those scenes.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- Back on Earth the leaders of NASA are confronted with several dilemmas.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- Surgery in space!
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- A lot of the show concerns the families left on Earth. Here is Emma Green’s daughter, “Lex,” with another astronaut supporting the mission.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix
- Lex found a boyfriend while mom went into space.

Diyah Pera/Netflix

- Lu makes an important decision in the season finale.
  Diyah Pera/Netflix

One evening in early November 2017, I met Andrew Hinderaker at a Houston restaurant named Nobi. Located just down the road from Johnson Space Center, Nobi offers a fantastic combination of Vietnamese food and a rich, rotating selection of draft beer. It's a classic Houston joint, a fusion of cultures that is the better for it. As such, the restaurant serves as a popular watering hole for the space set.

Hinderaker and a friend of mine named Chris Jones were starting to write on a television show about a realistic human mission to Mars. "From the beginning, Chris and I have believed that this show should be neither naive nor pessimistic," Hinderaker explained to me. "We believe that there is something aspirational about space exploration, even if the mechanisms that enable it are often bureaucratic."

I loved the idea. Then, as now, I covered spaceflight, particularly the efforts of NASA, other space agencies, and private companies to expand humanity beyond low-Earth orbit. I had thought a lot about the politics and the technology that might one day enable a small band of humans to travel from Earth to Mars, land on the red planet for a while, and travel back. So Hinderaker and I talked through these issues.

None of this is simple, I explained. Mounting a human mission to Mars will require an incredible amount of funding, several key technologies to reach maturity, and sustained support for more than a decade. Almost certainly, it will necessitate the cooperation of several nations. And the current relationships between space agencies in the United States, Russia, Europe, China, India, Japan, and elsewhere are complex, and evolving.

At the end of our conversation, having drained several glasses of Belgian beer, I wished Hinderaker luck.

Human spaceflight

Nearly three years later, Netflix released the first season of the television series *Away*, which tells the story of an international human mission to Mars. Simply put, I found the show to be fantastic. The characters felt real, the politics felt real, and the technology felt real. It's as if the show's creator, Hinderaker, alongside Jones and the other writers assessed the state of play in human spaceflight in 2020, and they did their best to imagine an optimistic scenario for a decade from now.

Unlike so much science fiction on television and in movies today, the emphasis in *Away* is not on space battles or explosions or fancy space hardware. This show is about the people, first, and our all-too-fallible technology, second. This television show puts the *human* into human spaceflight.

Some viewers may be put off by a character-driven show that focuses on people and their complicated relationships, both in space and on the ground. Unlike a lot of current TV, too, *Away* moves slowly. The quiet moments are quiet. The long shots linger. There is plenty of, umm, space for the show and its characters to breathe. Where the hell is Mars, you may be asking? It is largely off screen, but in the background, driving the story forward.

One of the fascinating things about *Away* is that it takes a stab at exploring how astronauts independent of ground control will behave. Even during the Apollo missions to the Moon, crew members faced only a few seconds of comm delays with Mission Control in Houston. On a journey to Mars, seconds quickly become minutes. This gives the crew freedom to make their own decisions and to realize their actions are beyond the reach of flight directors on the ground.

A hopeful show

Because of the actions taken on the way to Mars in the show, some critics have said the five astronauts in *Away* would never have passed the extensive screenings to become crew members. But I suspect traveling into deep space for months at a time will have a profound effect on astronauts and lead to more independence. And while the public view of astronauts may be that of super-heroes, almost perfect people, they are all too human with family issues, egos, and foibles. (They're still almost universally awesome, of course).

There are a few truly implausible events in *Away*. The most glaring of which for me was the uncertainty about whether the *Pegasus* supply ship successfully landed on Mars, a few weeks before the crew's arrival. In the real world, this supply vessel would have launched and landed safely on Mars before a human crew ever left Earth's gravity well. Moreover, there would be satellites in orbit around Mars to image the landing site.

But these are small quibbles. Most of the technology comes across as legitimate, an evolution of existing systems. If the show does not portray enough involvement from commercial companies—it is hard to see NASA reaching Mars without SpaceX, for example—it does the intergovernmental space agency politics well. Bottom line: this show is set in a plausible future.

As Hinderaker said in 2017, the show is aspirational. We could all use a little more of that in 2020. Although it seems unlikely now, one could imagine the United States and China unifying behind an exploration mission for the entire world. And so the show depicts humanity, with all of its flaws and political squabbles, coming together to send astronauts to another planet. It's something we have never done in our 300,000 or so years as a species on our green planet. But if

we’re lucky, it’s something we just might live to see in our lifetimes.

This is the hope I took away from *Away*.

Listing image by Diyah Pera/Netflix

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PS5 retailers have many fewer Digital Edition systems for preorder [Updated]



reader comments

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- Across the country, GameStop locations had many more $499 Standard Edition PS5 systems for preorder than the $399 Digital Edition
- These limited initial preorder supplies sold out in minutes, according to workers at the stores in question.

The $399, disc-drive-free Digital Edition of the PlayStation 5 may be in much shorter supply at US retailers this holiday season than the $499 version with a standard disc drive. That's based on an Ars Technica analysis of PS5 preorder hardware allocations this week at GameStop locations across the country.

Ars was able to confirm the initial PS5 preorder allocations for nine separate GameStop locations. All told, roughly 24 percent of the stock available at these locations was taken up by the Digital Edition, with the remaining 76 percent for the Standard Edition.

The Digital Edition ratios at individual locations ranged from 13 to 33 percent of all the available PS5 preorders, with 20 percent being the most common ratio. Each individual GameStop location in our sample received anywhere from 15 to 30 PS5 units total, with 20 being the most common number.

While this handful of stores doesn't exactly represent a scientific retail survey, the story is consistent enough across multiple locations in multiple geographic areas to suggest a nationwide trend. And while we weren't able to confirm allotments at other retailers on the record, Ars Technica has confirmed with well-placed sources familiar with at least one other retailer about similar PS5 Digital Edition allotment ratios there.

[Update: Best Buy Canada's web site reportedly showed 19,000 Standard Edition and 3,000 Digital Edition pre-orders

available on Wednesday, which would mean just 13 percent of stock was reserved forthe Digital Edition.]

The numbers reported here reflect the initial preorder *supply* of available PlayStation 5 units at these stores; it's not necessarily the relative *demand* for either type of system. All the stores Ars talked to sold out of their initial PS5 preorder allotments within minutes, so it's hard to determine how demand for either option aligns with these supply numbers. However, we have heard some anecdotal reports of preorder customers seeking the Digital Edition but settling for the more expensive Standard Edition when the former was sold out.

Does Sony want to make them?

Neither GameStop nor Sony has responded to an Ars Technica request for comment as of press time, so we're left speculating a bit on the reasons behind the apparent dearth of Digital Edition consoles thus far.

One possibility is that Sony's initial allotment of PS5 units is simply skewed toward the Standard Edition across the board. That could reflect Sony's belief that demand for the cheaper system is lower overall and that the majority of PS5 buyers is willing to invest extra money in a disc drive. Failing that, it could reflect a belief that *early adopters* specifically are willing to spend more money on the "full-fledged" version of the system, while more price-conscious shoppers are more willing to wait for the launch fervor to die down before buying the Digital Edition.

A lack of Digital Edition consoles could also reflect a desire by Sony to maximize hardware revenue at launch. Since the disc drive assembly in the system likely costs much less than $100 for Sony to produce, the Standard Edition likely brings in better profit margins. A Digital Edition sale might be worth more to Sony in the long run, though, as software sales to those customers will avoid any cut to retailers.

- The entire PS5 hardware library, as revealed by Sony.
- Handsome slow-motion pans across the hardware reveal how blue LED lights will glow through the system.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- The all-important “PS” logo.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- The console appears to have one USB Type-A and one USB Type-C slot on its front face.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- Revealed peripherals: the DualSense controller (which we’d already seen).
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- An official charging station! Well, now.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- Sony is continuing its streak of launching a brand-new camera peripheral for a new console.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- Sony’s continued talk of the Tempest 3D Audio Engine makes this headset announcement pretty unsurprising.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment
- Instead of concluding with a new VR headset, Sony showed fans… a new media remote. I mean, it looks nice enough.
  Sony Interactive Entertainment

The first (and only) previous time Sony launched gaming hardware that couldn’t play games from physical media was 2009’s PSP Go. Low initial demand for that device, though, led to a massive price drop and eventual discontinuation in less than two years.

The market for digital game downloads has changed a lot since then; Sony said a full 74 percent of its full game sales were digital downloads for the most recently reported fiscal quarter (up from 53 percent a year ago). Still, after living through the PSP Go experience, Sony may still be a bit shy about going too hard on the idea of a purely digital system out of the gate.

Do retailers want to sell them?

The other major possibility is that GameStop as a whole (and perhaps other retailers) simply ordered fewer units of the Digital Edition than the Standard Edition. Again, that could simply reflect the retailers' expectations regarding the relative demand for both options.

In GameStop's case, though, there may be extra incentive not to sell a console that can't play discs. GameStop still makes most of its money on physical game sales, after all, including the high-margin business of buying and reselling used discs. When a GameStop customer buys the PS5 Digital Edition, that could very well be the last time that customer ever buys a game from GameStop.

When GameStop confirmed in a recent earnings call that it would be selling the Digital Edition of the PS5, CEO George Sherman expressed skepticism that the era of games on discs would soon be coming to a close. "Consumers like the physical aspects of games," he said. "They collect them and they add value as a trade-in. So as software continues to evolve with dramatically better graphics, it does not take up valuable storage space and discs are available to those without broadband Internet."

That may well be true. But if more people start buying the Digital Edition of the PlayStation 5 (or the similarly disc-drive-free Xbox Series S), then it will be a good sign that consumers by and large are not following Sherman's expectations.

With initial PS5 allotments exceedingly likely to sell out quickly through the holiday season, it may be awhile before we see if Digital Edition PS5 supplies closely match the demand for the lower-priced option. If they do, we'd expect Sony will adjust its production ratios up or down to match what the market is saying relatively quickly. For the time being, it

seems clear that the lion’s share of PS5 sales will be equipped with a disc drive.

Listing image by Sony Interactive Entertainment

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1707826

Report: Trump admin looking into Tencent’s US gaming investments



Enlarge / SHENZHEN, CHINA – AUGUST 19: A woman walks outside the headquarters of Tencent on August 19, 2020 in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province of China. (Photo by VCG/VCG via Getty Images)

reader comments

126 with 71 posters participating

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The US government is reportedly scrutinizing Chinese tech giant Tencent and the US gaming companies in which it has an investment interest. Bloomberg reports that the Treasury Department's Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS) has asked companies including Epic Games and Riot Games to answer questions about their data-security standards, according to "people familiar with the matter."

CFIUS has the authority to examine foreign investment in US companies when those investments could have an impact on national security. Historically, that has often meant examining foreign access to US natural resources or military secrets. More recently, though, CFIUS has taken an expanded interest in potential foreign access to US customer data.

"When you're talking about massive amounts of data, there's probably something for the committee to look at," former Treasury Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Investment Security Aimen Mir told Bloomberg yesterday. "The question then becomes is the risk high enough that it actually warrants forcing deals apart?"

CFIUS' investigation comes amid the Trump administration's moves against Chinese social media apps TikTok and WeChat, the latter of which is owned by Tencent. After signing an executive order banning both apps in August, Trump has demanded they be removed from US App Stores this weekend. TikTok owner ByteDance is currently seeking an investment with Oracle to possibly avoid these sanctions.

Representatives for Epic and Riot were not immediately available to respond to a request for comment from Ars Technica.

Many fingers in many gaming pies

Originally focused on licensing Western games for the Chinese market, Tencent has slowly increased its investment in non-Chinese companies over the years. The company has owned 93 percent of *League of Legends* developer Riot Games since 2011 (and 100 percent since 2015) and 40 percent of Epic Games since 2012. The conglomerate also owns majority shares in *Clash of Clans* developer Supercell and *Path of Exile* developer Grinding Gear Games, as well as smaller shares in companies including Ubisoft, Activision Blizzard, Funcom, Discord, and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* maker Bluehole.

These ownership stakes have occasionally aroused suspicions among some conspiracy-minded gamers, who worry that the Chinese government is collecting their gaming information or spying on their computers via Tencent's influence on these companies.

"Epic does not share user data with Tencent or any other company," Epic CEO and co-founder Tim Sweeney said in response to such concerns in a December 2018 Reddit thread. "We don't share it, sell it, or broker access to it for advertising like so many other companies do. I'm the founder and controlling shareholder of Epic and would never allow this to happen."

"Tencent is a significant, but minority shareholder in Epic," Sweeney added in another Reddit thread months later. "I'm the controlling shareholder of Epic… The decisions Epic makes are ultimately my decisions, made here in North Carolina based on my beliefs as a game developer about what the game industry needs!"

Last year, Riot Games urged its *League of Legends* esports broadcasters to not include "personal views on sensitive topics (political, religious or otherwise)" in their broadcasts. A spokesperson for the company told the LA Times at the time that the longstanding policy was worth repeating

“in light of the ongoing situation in Hong Kong and the current global political environment.”

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