Star Trek: Discovery S3 goes back to the future in first trailer

reader comments

105 with 78 posters participating

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[embedded content]
Star Trek: Discovery returns to CBS All Access for a third season on October 15, 2020.
It's Star Trek Day today, marking the 54th anniversary of the TV debut of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. CBS All Access celebrated by streaming an entire day of programming related to the franchise, including several panels for its ongoing and forthcoming series. Among other tidbits, CBS dropped the first trailer for *Star Trek: Discovery*'s third season.

(Spoilers for first two seasons below.)

Discovery is a prequel to the original *Star Trek*, set roughly 10 years before Captain Kirk and his crew took over the USS *Enterprise* and boldly went where no man had gone before. It stars Sonequa Martin-Green as Michael Burnham, an orphaned human raised on the planet Vulcan by none other than Sarek (James Frain) and his human wife, Amanda Grayson (Mia Kirshner)—aka, Spock's parents, which makes her Spock's adoptive sister.

As I've written previously, in S1, Michael had a promising career as first officer of the USS *Shenzhou* under Captain

Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh)—until a desperate act to prevent a war with the Klingons drove her to defy orders and essentially commit mutiny. Casualties aplenty ensued. The season's broad narrative arc was partly her redemption story, as she joined the crew of the USS *Discovery* at the behest of Captain Gabriel Lorca (Jason Isaacs). The rest of the season involved fighting the Klingons and traveling to a mirror universe, with some major consequences. The final shot showed *Discovery* meeting up with the USS *Enterprise*.

In the second season, Christopher Pike (Anson Mount) temporarily replaced Lorca as captain of the *Discovery* while the *Enterprise* was undergoing repairs, with Rebecca Romijn making her debut as Number One. There was more of a return to the classic standalone episode structure, with a season-long arc involving the mysterious appearances of a "Red Angel" and a rogue Starfleet AI called Control who sought to wipe out all sentient life in the universe. That's where Spock came in: he'd had recurrent visions of the Red Angel since childhood and teamed up with his estranged sister, Michael, and the rest of the *Discovery* crew to foil Control's nefarious plan.

The big reveal was that the Red Angel was actually a time-travel suit worn by Michael's mother. She had accidentally jumped 950 years into a bleak future in which all sentient life has been destroyed by Control and had been traveling through time leaving signals (the Red Angel visions) in hopes of altering that future. In the S2 two-part finale, Michael donned a copy of her mother's suit to lead *Discovery* over 930 years into the future. The crew of the *Enterprise* told Starfleet that *Discovery* was destroyed in the battle and were ordered to never speak of it or the crew again. Spock was unable to join Michael and the rest of the crew on that journey, if for no other reason than to preserve the canonical timeline. The good news is that a spinoff series featuring Pike, Number One, and Spock, together on board the USS *Enterprise*, is already in development—likely also a prequel to

TOS, given what we know of Pike's ultimate fate.

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

The third season will explore the crew's adventures in that unknown future. Per the official synopsis: "After making the

jump in the second season finale, season three of *Star Trek: Discovery* finds the USS *Discovery* crew dropping out of the wormhole and into an unknown future far from the home they once knew. Now living in a time filled with uncertainty, the USS *Discovery* crew, along with the help of some new friends, must together fight to regain a hopeful future."

When CBS announced it had renewed *ST: Disco* for a third season, we also learned that writer and producer Michelle Paradise would be promoted to co-executive producer, running the show alongside Alex Kurtzman, who took over the show during S2 after the previous showrunners departed amidst workplace controversy. During today's panel, Kurtzman revealed that the United Federation of Planets still exists in this far-flung iteration but in a substantially smaller and weakened form. The mission of S3 is to restore the Federation to its former glory.

Oh, and apparently this season will also feature a space cat:

> *Meet the newest member of the #StarTrekFamily, @Grudge_Cat from #StarTrekDiscovery. #StarTrekDay pic.twitter.com/7K0eVq1BxC*
>
> *— Star Trek on CBS All Access (@startrekcbs) September 8, 2020*

The trailer finds Michael landing on a mysterious planet in the future and discovering that life forms still exist there. The *Discovery* has crash landed, but its crew is intact. Michael also gets a hunky love interest this season in the form of Book (David Ajala), who tells her about a mysterious event called "the Burn"—"the day that the galaxy took a hard left." Fan favorite Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh) appears to be in fine fighting form. And Michael seems to be growing into a formidable leader, undaunted by the challenges they face. "A federation isn't just about ships," she declares. "A federation is its people."

The third season of *Star Trek: Discovery* is slated to debut on October 15, 2020, on CBS All Access.

Listing image by YouTube/CBS All Access

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1704577

Apple says Epic's Fortnite payment scheme "is theft, period."

Enlarge / Apple says the example here, showing *Fortnite*'s alternative payment scheme on iOS, amounts to "theft" by Epic Games.

reader comments

524 with 172 posters participating

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Apple is going on the offensive in its continuing legal battles with Epic Games over the iOS version of *Fortnite*. In a wide-ranging motion filed Tuesday afternoon, Apple defended itself against Epic's legal charges while also accusing the *Fortnite* maker of breach of contract and outright theft in a countersuit.

"Although Epic portrays itself as a modern corporate Robin Hood, in reality it is a multi-billion dollar enterprise that simply wants to pay nothing for the tremendous value it

derives from the App Store," Apple writes.

Who pays for what?

In its own legal filings, Epic in part seeks the right to provide what it calls "competitive payment processing on iOS" by going around the in-app purchase system built into the iOS App Store. Epic attempted to do this unilaterally last month by adding a discounted Epic Direct Payments option to the iOS version of *Fortnite*, a move that led Apple to bar Epic from the App Store entirely.

Epic vs. Apple/Google

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Besides being a breach of contract, Apple says in its motion that Epic's addition of Direct Payments was a "Trojan Horse" that amounts to "little more than theft." By using a "hotfix" update method that was deliberately concealed from the usual App Store review process, Apple says Epic "sought to enjoy all of the benefits of Apple's iOS platform and related services while [lining] Epic's pockets at Apple's expense."

Later in the motion, Apple says Epic's introduction of Direct Payments in the game "is theft, period."

Epic has happily agreed to Apple's contractual terms to access iOS development since 2008, Apple writes, earning over $600 million from App Store sales in that period. The fact that Epic no longer accepts that deal "does not provide cover for Epic to breach binding contracts, dupe a long-time business partner, pocket commissions that rightfully belong to Apple, and then ask this Court to take a judicial sledgehammer to one of the 21st Century's most innovative business platforms simply because it does not maximize Epic's revenues," Apple writes.

The 30-percent iOS sales commission that Epic tried to get around is much more than a simple fee for processing payments, Apple adds. Instead, that fee “reflects the immense value of the App Store, which is more than the sum of its parts and includes Apple’s technology, tools, software for app development and testing, marketing efforts, platinum-level customer service, and distribution of developers’ apps and digital content.” That includes over 150,000 APIs that Apple has created to ease iOS development, the company writes, as well as the Metal graphics API that Epic itself has praised in the past.

“The App Store is not a public utility,” Apple wrote in a letter to Epic in July in response to Epic’s request. Epic has no right to reap “all the benefits Apple and the App Store provide without having to pay a penny,” the company said.

No, you can’t have your own App Store

In its own recent filings, Epic says it “does not seek to force Apple to provide distribution and processing services for free, nor does Epic seek to enjoy Apple’s services without paying for them.”

Instead, Epic says it would like “the freedom not to use Apple’s App Store or IAP, and instead to use and offer competing services” on Apple’s hardware, just as it can on Windows PCs. That’s not possible, though, because of what Epic says is Apple’s monopolistic control over the market for all iOS software.

Apple says directly in its motion that it “is not a monopolist of any relevant market” and that “competition both inside and outside the App Store is fierce at every level: for devices, platforms, and individual apps.” More than that, though, Apple says the requirement that all iOS purchases go through the App

Store infrastructure is necessary to “ensure that iOS apps meet Apple’s high standards for privacy, security, content, and quality.”

Apple cites Epic’s own example on other platforms as proof of this necessity. When Epic started distributing the Android version of *Fortnite* independently in 2018, Apple writes that “immediately sites appeared that not only advertised Android *Fortnite* but also distributed malware in the game.” Apple also cites security vulnerabilities in that independently distributed Android version as evidence that its iOS protections are necessary.

“Although Apple does not leave it to any developer to keep the iOS platform safe and secure, Epic in particular had demonstrated that it could not be entrusted with this type of responsibility,” Apple writes.

In addition to compensatory and punitive damages related to the breach of contract and other related violations, Apple is seeking an injunction preventing Epic from continuing to use its own external payment processing mechanism in extant copies of the iOS version of *Fortnite* or future apps.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1704560

Colin Kaepernick hits the field in Madden NFL 21 without actual NFL deal

reader comments

124 with 55 posters participating

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- Put me in, coach. I’m ready to play… today.
- We dumped Kaepernick into the Seahawks for these photos, but you can put him on whatever team you want!
- He’s just like us… constantly looking at his phone!
- He’s probably reading EA’s tweets about his reinstatement in the game.
- “Be the one.”
- Fun fact: Colin Kaepernick’s Madden avatar is 80% hair.

Colin Kaepernick may not be a part of today’s NFL, but today the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback makes his return to the *Madden NFL* series. Publisher Electronic Arts has announced that Kaepernick will be available to play later today in *Madden NFL 21*‘s Franchise and Play Now modes, where he can be put in charge of any team in the league.

Kaepernick last appeared in *Madden NFL 17*, which came out shortly after he famously kneeled in protest during the playing of the national anthem before a 2016 preseason game. When Kaepernick became a free agent the next season, he was no longer part of the collective licensing agreement EA arranged with the NFL Players Association and thus did not appear in subsequent *Madden NFL* titles.

This year, though, The Undefeated reports that EA reached out directly to Kaepernick to negotiate individual rights to his likeness in *Madden NFL 21*. Kaepernick was reportedly “hands-on” in the negotiations, insisting on his in-game avatar sporting an Afro and raising a “Black Power” fist as his in-game celebration.

Kaepernick reportedly has an overall rating of 81/100 in the

game, a number “determined by data-driven simulations that took his ongoing free agency into account,” as The Undefeated puts it. That puts Kaepernick in the top 15 out of 111 quarterbacks included in the game. Players will be able to edit Kaepernick’s stats in Franchise mode.

“Colin Kaepernick is one of the top free agents in football and a starting-caliber quarterback,” EA writes. “The Team at EA Sports, along with millions of *Madden NFL* fans, want to see him back in our game.”

“Knowing that our EA Sports experiences are platforms for players to create, we want to make *Madden NFL* a place that reflects Colin’s position and talent, rates him as a starting QB, and empowers our fans to express their hopes for the future of football,” the statement continues. “We’ve worked with Colin to make this possible, and we’re excited to bring it to all of you today.”

A unique one-off

Kaepernick’s individual deal for inclusion in *Madden NFL* is relatively unprecedented in the history of sports video games for an unsigned free agent. When inactive players are included in a sports simulation’s lineup, it’s most often as part of a limited lineup of retired veterans available as part of an “all-time greats” package (or a player-created roster containing similar).

Active players are occasionally able to negotiate individual licensing deals for their video game likenesses separate from their players’ associations—16-bit “classics” like *Michael Jordan: Chaos in the Windy City* and *Shaq Fu* are the result of such deals. But an individual licensing deal for a free agent is generally unheard of in the world of sports games.

Kaepernick has maintained a high profile during his free agency, bringing a lawsuit against NFL team owners for

allegedly colluding to keep him from earning a living with the league (that lawsuit ended in a settlement last year). In June, though, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell publicly encouraged any NFL team to hire Kaepernick if it desires, seemingly ensuring that Kaepernick's inclusion in *Madden NFL* wouldn't endanger EA's now non-exclusive license with the league.

Back in 2018, EA was forced to apologize after Kaepernick's name was censored from the in-game versions of two rap songs in the *Madden NFL 19* soundtrack. "We messed up, and the edit should never have happened," EA said at the time before restoring the lyrics in an update. "We have had a long relationship with Colin through *Madden NFL* and worked through our past soundtrack mistakes," the company said in a statement today.

Listing image by EA

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1704503

From Pong to Civilization: How I made "one more turn" work on consoles

Enlarge / Be still our hearts with this 8-bit cover art.

reader comments

2 with 2 posters participating

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Today, legendary game developer Sid Meier's first memoir arrives at bookstores and digital platforms, complete with the appropriately goofy name, ***Sid Meier's Memoir!: A Life in Computer Games***. It's everything you might expect from the brain responsible for PC gaming series like *Civilization*, *Pirates!*, *Railroad Tycoon*, and *Alpha Centauri*: comprehensive, thoughtful, detailed, and with just enough humor and heart to pace out the dry, technical bits.

In good news, instead of us telling you what we think of the book (TL;DR: thumbs-up), we thought we'd let Meier himself regale you with an exclusive Ars Technica reprint of a chapter. Most of the book's chapters combine Meier's personal stories with a focus on a specific game, and this one, about 2008's *Civilization Revolution*, is as much an explanation of its PC-to-console transition as it is a lesson on game-industry history and on game design.

My own first exposure to video games was, like most people my age, the venerable black-and-white tennis match known as *Pong*. There was a small restaurant down the street from General Instrument where some of us would hang out and have dinner after work, and at some point they installed this weird little table in the lounge with a television screen facing upward underneath the plexiglass surface. The idea was you could set your drinks and bar snacks on it while you played, but it seemed irreverent to eat on the surface of a TV, so most evenings we would just wander over to play a few rounds before returning to our normal, wooden tables. The most memorable thing about it was that one side of the cabinet had somehow ended up wired backwards, sending the little white line to the left side of the screen when the player turned the knob to the right. So we had always agreed that whoever was more skilled had to sit on the broken side to compensate—perhaps my earliest experience in balancing gameplay.

Rotating dial controls were sometimes called "spinners" in arcade hardware terminology, and truly inveterate nerds

recognized them as either potentiometers or rheostats, depending on their function. But to the general public, they were incongruously known as “paddles,” due to their original table tennis associations. A year after *Pong*’s release, the first four-way gaming joystick—a word which, oddly enough, had its roots in early airplane controls—made its debut in the arcade game *Astro Race*. It caught on quickly, and by 1977, the Atari 2600 home console offered a standardized plug that could support a potentially limitless number of third-party controllers, in addition to the five different styles produced by Atari themselves.

The market responded. A 1983 issue of Creative Computing Magazine included a 15,000-word hardware review comparing 16 different joystick brands and eight unique paddle sets, plus eight converters for the less-common plugs those accessories might be required to fit. Some of the products were surprisingly forward-thinking, like Datasoft’s “Le Stick,” which detected motion through a set of liquid-mercury switches that triggered whenever the freestanding cylinder was tilted more than 20 degrees in any direction. It’s easy to see why it didn’t last, but toxic metals aside, Datasoft deserves credit for predating the motion sensor craze by a quarter of a century.

Soon, however, the third-party manufacturers fell away, and an evolutionary split emerged. On one side, the traditional knobs, buttons, and joysticks of arcade cabinets consolidated into a single proprietary controller for each console system. On the other, the personal computer industry began to drift toward more established business peripherals, namely the mouse and alphanumeric keyboard. Major gaming companies tried to straddle the gap for as long as they could, but in late 1983, the North American console market crashed, with previous annual revenues of $3.2 billion plunging to just $100 million by 1985. The drop was so devastating to Atari in particular that the whole event was simply known as “Atari shock” in

Japan. For various reasons, the Japanese market remained stable, and with every console company in America either bankrupt or pivoting sharply to the PC, Japan emerged as the home console champion for the next 20 years.

MicroProse dips its toes into consoles

Of course there were still regular computers in Japan, too. MicroProse [Meier's original games publisher] had released translations of nearly every game since *F-15 Strike Eagle* onto Japanese machines like the MSX, FM Towns, and PC-98. Likewise, there were console owners in America who played English translations of games like *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*. But the culture of each format was firmly rooted in its respective country, and very few games successfully crossed over. It was like baseball versus cricket: you'd find fans of each worldwide, but rarely individual fans of both, and never professionals who played both, despite the relative similarity of their athleticism.

Mechanical differences did play a partial role in the divide, at least from our perspective. It was hard to replicate the subtle movement of a computer mouse with a console's directional pad and floating cursor or to fit as much text on the screen when console players typically sat several feet away. Personally, I don't feel like the problem was mutual—we had more keys than they had buttons—but that's probably not surprising given which half of the industry I work in. Plenty of people have argued that certain console games could never feel intuitive on a PC, and given our processing and graphical differences at the time, maybe they were right. Both have their strengths and weaknesses, and I've already acknowledged that I own at least as many consoles as computers.

Silent Service makes some noise

But the embargo between the two formats couldn't all be chalked up to controllers, as even games with simple interfaces often failed in their opposing market. It wasn't until 1989 that MicroProse first attempted to convert *Silent Service*—which was by that point thriving in 13 different computer formats—to the Nintendo Entertainment System. Western console owners were considered such a long shot that we didn't even bother with a Japanese version, despite having translations readily available from the PC-98. If any Japanese fans were broad-minded enough to accept our game on the console, we would just have to hope they spoke English as well.

I don't remember whether the NES version made any money, but my guess is that it didn't, because we went back to ignoring the platform for the next several games. Even *Gunship*, which was successfully ported to five different computers in Japan alone, didn't get a console release in any language. We eventually dipped our toe in the water a few more times—*Pirates!* saw a pretty successful conversion to the NES, and *F-15 Strike Eagle II* made a respectable appearance on the Sega Genesis. But meanwhile, the Super NES version of *Railroad Tycoon* was cancelled mid-development, and *Covert Action* went in the opposite direction and became our first port to Linux on the PC instead.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1703724

Xbox Series S confirmed by Microsoft after next-gen Xbox price leak [Updated]

reader comments

104 with 66 posters participating, including story author

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- The official Microsoft reveal of Xbox Series S, posted in the wee hours of Tuesday morning after a Monday evening leak.
- Xbox Series S, as placed next to an Xbox Series X.
- To emphasize the size difference, Microsoft puts the smaller Series S into a transparent model of its Series X.
- A better look at the venting array on two of the console's sides. No other angles of Xbox Series S have appeared as of press time.

On Monday evening, a floodgate opened about Microsoft's next-gen console launch plans. Multiple reports, along with a telling video snippet, put an exclamation point on the company's leaked aspirations to launch the "Xbox Series X" console (announced in late 2019) next to a cheaper, smaller "Xbox Series S" model by year's end.

Hours after the reports went live, Microsoft confirmed that Xbox Series S indeed exists. Described by Microsoft as "the smallest Xbox ever," this new console will launch at a $299 price point.

Longtime Microsoft-tracking reporter Brad Sams kicked off the flurry of Monday news with a screenshot showing an apparent Xbox Series S design, colored white and roughly half the size of an Xbox Series X, next to a price: $299. At the time, Sams did not offer an explanation for where he sourced his image, but he has repeatedly reported on the Series S' existence while it was in development under the code name Lockhart, alongside the Series X (codenamed Scarlett).

S marks the spot

If previous reports pan out, Series S will debut with many of the same technical leaps found in Series X—and these could include features like "Velocity Architecture" for faster game loading or fancy graphical effects like ray tracing. But Series S would offer those "next-gen" perks at lower maximum power, meant for either lower pixel resolutions (like 1080p) or lower frame rates, to reduce the console's price. Sams and other reporters have estimated a peak rendering level of roughly 4 teraflops for Series S, compared to the 12 TF power and 4K resolution aspirations of Series X. Microsoft has yet to offer details about Xbox Series S' capabilities beyond a vague description of "next-gen performance."

In August, Ars Technica was able to confirm the cheaper console's name, thanks to sources familiar with Microsoft's plans and an early launch of its controller (whose "compatibility" list mentioned "Xbox Series X / S").

Shortly after Sams' report went live, Windows Central reported the same price point for the Series S, along with a claim that Xbox Series X will launch at $499. WC's report, citing "sources," claimed both consoles will launch on November 10, but the report didn't clarify which regions that launch will encompass. (Microsoft had previously confirmed a "November" console launch for Series X.)

Series S images in the Monday reports were followed by a

leaked snippet of the Series S' reveal video, as shared by Twitter user "_h0x0d_." This four-second video includes a slick animation of both new consoles placed side by side, followed by the Series S sliding into a transparent version of the Series X chassis to emphasize the size comparison. At that point, a narrator describes "how small it is."

What the narrator doesn't say in that brief clip is that the Series S appears to be missing a disc drive on its front face or the other visible sides. Whether a disc drive might exist on any other sides remains unclear, even after Microsoft's Series S confirmation, but that'd be a huge design departure for Xbox, which has placed disc-drive slots on the same side as its console power buttons for years. Hence, skipping the disc drive as a way to get the price down to $299—and further emphasizing digital-download subscription packages like Xbox Game Pass—seems likely.

Instead, the video shows off a top array of holes that resemble the dot pattern found on the edges of Xbox One X, along with a dotted, all-black circular panel on one of its sides—likely meant to enable more venting. Other than the big circle-vent thing, the console's design similarity to Xbox One X isn't exactly surprising, considering Microsoft delisted all Xbox One X consoles earlier this year—which prompted us to guess that Xbox Series S might be taking its place in the Xbox hierarchy.

Windows Central's report includes a suggestion that Series S will launch with a $25/month "Xbox All Access" financing option while Series X will be available for $35/month. Exact terms of such a contract, and whether it might include perks like Xbox Live Gold and Xbox Game Pass, have not yet been confirmed.

As of press time, Microsoft has not responded to Windows Central's report about a potential November 10 launch date or a $499 price for Xbox Series X. Its early Tuesday Twitter post

concluded with a promise of more information to come: “Looking forward to sharing more! Soon. Promise.”

This article has been updated since its original publication. It now includes Microsoft’s acknowledgement of Xbox Series S in a Twitter post.

Listing image by h0x0d

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1704312

I’m Thinking of Ending Things: The most un-Netflix “Netflix film” to date

reader comments

44 with 41 posters participating, including story author

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[embedded content]
The trailer for *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*
Lost in all the hype around the release of two surefire blockbusters with very different approaches to the current state of cinema, this weekend Netflix quietly debuted the first Charlie Kaufman film in five years: *I’m Thinking of Ending Things.* Kaufman’s enigmatic and absurd worlds—from *Adaptation* to *Being John Malkovich* to *Eternal Sunshine of the*

Spotless Mind—often hinge on big concepts and even bigger ideas. So while the director's work may not have the same audience potential as *Tenet* or *Mulan,* it can really stick with you (*Eternal Sunshine* made Ars' list of the best sci-fi *ever*, for instance). To a subset of film fans, *this* is definitely the most anticipated film of Labor Day weekend 2020.

The fact that Kaufman finally opted to partner with a major streaming service means *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* theoretically has the potential to help the filmmaker find his biggest audience, too. But, well… while *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* was always going to be somewhat bizarre, the most perplexing thing about it may be calling it a "Netflix film." Prepare to hit play on the platform's oddest release to date.

Home on the range

Quantum physics student Lucy (Jessie Buckley) and her boyfriend Jake (Jesse Plemons) set out for rural Oklahoma farmland so she can meet his parents for the first time. The two haven't been dating very long, but Lucy's inner thoughts already suggest they won't be dating much longer. "I should be excited, looking towards the first of many—but I'm not," Lucy narrates early in their claustrophobic car ride. When they finally arrive? "Everything has to die, that's the truth… it's a uniquely human fantasy that things will get better, born, perhaps, out of a uniquely human understanding that they will not."

But still, Lucy sees Jake as *fine*. He treats her nicely. He has interests and a drive to improve. And evidently family matters to him, because he'll navigate what looks like a developing blizzard for this dinner. Lucy needs to get home tonight to make it to work in the morning, and Jake initially commits to that tight timeline, too.

The blizzard quickly becomes the least of Lucy's concerns,

though. Jake's parents (Toni Collette and David Thewlis) almost immediately come across as strange. Harmless, based on first impressions, but totally strange. And by the time dessert has been brought out, Lucy senses something's up. She keeps getting missed calls from "Lucy." The family dog won't stop shaking off non-existent water. And pictures of baby Jake on the wall intermittently look a whole awful lot like baby Lucy. Jake warned her the old farmhouse didn't have much to it, particularly its nondescript bedrooms upstairs and the unfinished basement beneath. But as the blizzard keeps worsening and Jake slowly loses his enthusiasm for heading back promptly, Lucy starts exploring what she believed to be a farmhouse but what increasingly seems to be some fixed place with very fluid definitions of time and reality.

- Jake (Jesse Plemons) and Lucy (Jessie Buckley) started dating 6 or 7 weeks ago, memory is a bit fuzzy in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*.
  Mary Cybulski/NETFLIX © 2020
- You'll get intimately familiar with the front seat of Jake's nondescript four door economy car in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*.
  Mary Cybulski/NETFLIX © 2020
- David Thewlis as "Father" and Toni Collette as "Mother," two roles that let them turn the absurdity up to 11.
  Mary Cybulski/NETFLIX © 2020
- You thought your dinner with the significant other's parents was bad? You haven't seen anything yet.
  Mary Cybulski/NETFLIX © 2020
- It's not always clear what's real and what isn't, but the world of *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* isn't limited to Jake, Lucy, and his parents.
  Mary Cybulski/NETFLIX © 2020
- Director Charlie Kaufman (right) always has a vision even if the worlds he builds tend to be a bit surreal.
  Mary Cybulski/NETFLIX © 2020

Lucy, I don’t know what I’m seeing either

I’m Thinking of Ending Things leans so hard into the abstract that you can’t help but wonder what the full picture is even while your viewing is in progress. Normally, that’s part of the charm with a Kaufman film, but it’s a dangerous proposition with something exclusive to Netflix. In the pre-quarantimes, once you purchased a ticket for the theater, you were pot committed and focused only on the screen. But a streaming movie today has to compete for your attention again and again as you’re stuck at home with others and your phone is within arm’s reach. *I’m Thinking of Ending Things* will test many viewers’ commitment more than a few times over its two-hours-plus.

This project was envisioned for Netflix from the start, so it’s surprising how un-Netflix the final version feels. Yes, the streaming service has other examples of truly indulgent filmmaking (*Roma*) and meandering, methodically paced stories (*The Irishman*), but those films are the exceptions. Netflix more regularly excels at lean, fast-moving films across genres, from *Extraction* to *To All the Boys I Loved Before* to *Dolemite Is My Name.* By contrast, the first half hour of *I’m Thinking of Ending Things* takes place entirely in a dimly lit car with Lucy and Jake in close up. Things truly ratchet up when Lucy and Jake reach the farmhouse, but even that is fleeting. Soon Jake and Lucy escape back to their car, where lengthy discussions of filmmaker John Cassavetes’s 1974 thriller *A Woman Under the Influence,* David Foster Wallace’s legacy, and the nature of personality soon follow. “You’re being willfully obtuse,” Lucy says to Jake (and not to Kaufman, I think).

Overall, *I’m Thinking of Ending Things* comes off very stage play-y: minimal sets (the car, the farmhouse, a Dairy Queen knock-off, and a school), long scenes made of very little

action and very in-depth dialogue, and lots of quotes, ideas, or moments that feel allegorical as they're happening. (This surface-level analogy gets amplified by a few spoiler-y things, too.) The performances can also have their volume turned all the way up quite often. Thewlis and Collette in particular clearly had green lights to lean into their characters' weirdness as much as they pleased, and Plemons' Jake fluctuates between feeling like an illusion and a newish-but-uninspiring boyfriend. I had more than a few flashbacks to parsing *Waiting for Godot* in high school English class: in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things,* eventually you realize what's being grappled with in script was always meant to be more important than what's happening in front of your eyes.

Kaufman has made his career on surrealist cinema, and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* has just as many ideas and just as much disregard for the laws of nature as his previous works—it just doesn't land everything as cleanly. At times, I found myself wondering if we were in the mind of someone battling with dementia: Jake, for instance, calls Lucy "Louisa" and "Lucia" in conversation and no one skips a beat; we also see people who appear at different ages within the same "night." Or, maybe this farm is a manifestation of the idea that your entire life flashes before you right before death, as through Lucy we seem to see Jake's existence stuck in fast forward. Supporting characters from Jake's mom to the young woman making milkshakes at a Dairy Queen knock-off all seem to break the fourth wall to warn Lucy of some trouble ahead, the title could be interpreted in a more fatal light, and Lucy's inner monologue homes in on the nature of existence *a lot*: "We're stationary, time passes through us… leaving us, I don't know, dead," she says at one point. "It's tragic how few people possess their souls before they die," she ponders at another.

And if *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* ultimately wants to say something about relationships, that something definitely isn't hopeful. *Eternal Sunshine,* Kaufman's masterpiece, centers on

the same topic and argues the journey of falling in love is worth traversing through even if the ultimate destination is a tragic ending more often that not. But more than a decade later, Kaufman has a much different tune to play. Lucy trudges forward with Jake in this increasingly down spiraling moment without Jake showcasing any redeeming qualities. He acts like a walking citation correcting Lucy with regularity, he fails to recognize her increasingly urgent pleas to get home, and he can't be bothered to keep details of their relationship origins straight. If relationships are destined to be like this, Lucy's struggle suggests don't get in the car at all.

I'm Thinking of Ending Things will probably become a film that's more fun to think through, read about, or discuss than it is to watch—which, again, feels a little counterintuitive to everything else Netflix has up to this point. *Mr. Robot* creator Sam Esmail called it his favorite film of the year while simultaneously noting its, um, lack of plot on Twitter. Personally, I quickly went scrambling for a summary of the book that inspired this, Ian Reid's 2016 debut novel of the same name. That maybe made what I saw "fit" into an idea a bit better; certainly some of Lucy's quotes ring differently: "Most people are other people: their thoughts are someone else's opinion, their lives are mimicry, their passions a quotation."

All that assumes Kaufman wanted to remain loyal to the original story, which is not guaranteed. Even before we knew theaters wouldn't be an option, this auteur intended to eschew a lot of the characteristics now associated with the streaming format. *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* would likely play better in an art house cinema with a cafe waiting for audiences right outside, but much like Lucy's ultimate fate, we will never know.

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https://arstechnica.com/?p=1703945

Can’t watch Tenet? Now is the perfect time to revisit Inception

reader comments

8 with 7 posters participating

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- An old man waiting for someone “from a half-remembered dream.”
  Warner Bros.
- Sharing a dream: Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), Mr. Saito (Ken Watanbe), and Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio).
  Warner Bros.
- Marion Cotillard plays Mal, Cobb’s dead wife, now a subconscious manifestation of his guilt.
  Warner Bros.
- Her manifestation isn’t particularly friendly.
  Warner Bros.
- A cold bath provides the perfect “kick” to wake the dreamer.
  Warner Bros.
- Cobb uses a spinning top as a totem to check whether he’s still dreaming or back in reality.
  Warner Bros.
- Saito hires Cobb and his team for a seemingly impossible

psychological “heist.”
Warner Bros.

- The target: Robert Michael Fischer (Cillian Murphy), heir to a business empire.
  Warner Bros.
- Cobb’s former mentor, Professor Stephen Miles (Michael Caine), is also his father-in-law.
  Warner Bros.
- Miles recommends his graduate student, Ariadne (Ellen Page), to be the “architect” and design the necessary dreamscapes for Cobb’s team.
  Warner Bros.
- The famous French cafe scene within a dreamscape.
  Warner Bros.
- Ariadne manipulates the physics of Cobb’s dreamscape.
  Warner Bros.
- Ariadne stumbles upon Cobb’s dark secret.
  Warner Bros.
- Yusuf (Dileep Rao) is an avant-garde pharmacologist who cooks up a special drug cocktail for the mission.
  Warner Bros.
- Arthur and Ariadne share a dream.
  Warner Bros.
- “You mustn’t be afraid to dream a little bigger, darling.” Eames (Tom Hardy) specializes in identity theft.
  Warner Bros.
- A runaway train intrudes onto the first level dreamscape.
  Warner Bros.

Director Christopher Nolan’s hotly anticipated new film *Tenet* is finally playing in select theaters. But not everybody is able to watch it—New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco are all major markets where theaters remain closed. If you’re not among those lucky enough to live near a reopened theater where the film is showing—and you’re not keen on driving for four

hours to find an open theater—now is the perfect time to revisit what is arguably Nolan's masterpiece: the mind-bending thriller, *Inception*, which marks its tenth anniversary this year. The film grossed over $829 million globally and was nominated for eight Oscars, winning four. (It lost the Best Picture Oscar to *The King's Speech*.)

(Spoilers below, because it's been ten years.)

Nolan first submitted his treatment for a horror film involving "dream stealers" to Warner Bros. back in 2002, but decided he didn't yet have sufficient experience as a director to do justice to what he envisioned, which he knew would require a large budget. "As soon as you're talking about dreams, the potential of the human mind is infinite," he told the New York Times in 2010. "And so the scale of the film has to feel infinite. It has to feel like you could go anywhere by the end of the film. And it has to work on a massive scale."

So he made *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Prestige* (2006), and *The Dark Knight* (2008), until he felt confident enough to revisit his old treatment. While writing the script, Nolan found inspiration in *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), and the works of Jorge Luis Borges, particularly the short stories "The Secret Miracle" and "The Circular Ruins." The former features time slowing down to forestall a death; the latter is about someone constructing a person in his dreams and beginning to question his own reality. Both elements play crucial roles in Nolan's fictional world.

Inception is a master class in elaborate world-building. Nolan originally wrote the script as a heist film, before deciding against it, telling the Los Angeles Times that the story relied too heavily "on the idea of an interior state, the idea of dream and memory" for a straightforward heist framework to really work. But those heist elements do provide a useful scaffolding for the intricate plot.

Leonardo DiCaprio (*Titanic, The Revenant*) stars as Dom Cobb, an "extractor" who conducts corporate espionage for his clients by infiltrating a target's subconscious via a shared dream world. Cobb is an American in exile, wanted in the United States for allegedly murdering his wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard, *The Dark Knight Rises*); their two children live with his father-in-law and former mentor, Professor Stephen Miles (Michael Caine, *Batman Begins, The Dark Knight*).

An impossible dream?

A Japanese businessman named Mr. Saito (Ken Watanabe, *The Last Samurai, Godzilla*) hires Cobb for a uniquely difficult and dangerous mission: not just stealing information from the target's subconscious, but actually implanting an original idea and making the target think it was his own—the "inception" of the title. In exchange, he will make Cobb's banishment from the US disappear so he can go home again.

So Cobb puts a team together, starting with his longtime associate, Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Leavitt, *Looper*), who is skeptical that inception is even possible. Eames (Tom Hardy, *The Dark Knight Rises, Mad Max: Fury Road*) specializes in forgery and identity theft—he has the ability to impersonate other people within a dreamscape—and thinks it's possible, just extremely difficult. Yusuf (Dileep Rao) is a rogue pharmacologist, recruited to engineer just the right combination of drugs for the mission. Cobb recruits one of Miles' gifted graduate students, Ariadne (Ellen Page, *The Umbrella Academy*) as the "architect" of the dreamscapes. He himself is no longer able to safely do so, thanks to unwelcome dream intrusions by a psychological projection of Mal—the product of his own grief and guilt over her death.

The target is Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy, *Batman Begins, Peaky Blinders*), heir to a business empire that is close to achieving global dominance, to the detriment of Saito's own

business interests. His father, Maurice Fischer (Peter Postlethwaite, *Clash of the Titans*), is on his deathbed. The goal is to implant the idea for Robert to voluntarily break up his father's empire, in favor of creating something of his own rather than merely inheriting what his father built.

Cobb and his team decide they must construct three separate dreamscape levels—a dream within a dream within a dream—each reaching deeper into Fischer's subconscious, for the scheme to work. (Each level has its own distinctive look, thanks to director of photography Wally Pfister.) One person will be the "dreamer" for each level, remaining behind as the others proceed downward to set up a coordinated "kick" to awaken the other team members. (Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien" serves as an auditory cue.) Things do not go quite as smoothly as they'd hoped when they put their plans into motion.

(Warning: Major spoilers below the gallery.)

- The truth about Mal is revealed.
  Warner Bros.
- Cobb and Arthur cautiously navigate a hotel corridor within the second-level dreamscape.
  Warner Bros.
- Eames shows his skill as an identity thief.
  Warner Bros.
- Because it's his dream, Arthur must watch over the dreamers on the second level—and eventually wake them up.
  Warner Bros.
- Cobb and his team arrive at the third level of the dreamscape.
  Warner Bros.
- The infamous fight in the revolving hotel hallway.
  Warner Bros.
- Cobb tries to take out as many projections as he can.
  Warner Bros.

- Developments in the action ripple through the various dream levels, putting the level-two dreamers into free fall.
  Warner Bros.
- “How do I drop you without gravity?”
  Warner Bros.
- Albert Einstein and general relativity hold the key to generating a strong enough kick on the second level.
  Warner Bros.
- Cobb and Ariadne descend into limbo to rescue their fallen compatriots.
  Warner Bros.
- Robert confronts his psychological trauma.
  Warner Bros.
- Peter Postlethwaite plays Maurice Fisher, Robert’s late father.
  Warner Bros.
- The pinwheel holds emotional significance for Robert.
  Warner Bros.
- Kaboom! The “kick” starts on the third level.
  Warner Bros.
- Meanwhile, back on the first level….
  Warner Bros.
- For this scene, the actors had to stay underwater for several minutes, relying on scuba tanks to breathe.
  Warner Bros.
- Nolan’s deliberately ambiguous ending: is this reality, or just another dream?
  Warner Bros.

One of the best aspects of the film is the skillful way Nolan keeps upping the stakes. For instance, the subconscious is not without its defenses. In the dreamscape, these defenses are personified by “projections”: human figures that inhabit the dreamscape (generated by the dreamer) and attack any detected intruder, much like the body’s immune system attacks a virus. Ariadne learns this the hard way when she starts messing with

physical reality in Cobb's test-run dreamscape. Also, the "kicks" on all three levels must be precisely coordinated to occur at the same time—despite the fact that time runs more slowly with each subsequent level. So ten hours in the real world translates into one week in the level-one dreamscape, six months in level two, and ten years in level three.

Nolan raises the stakes further on the first-level dreamscape, when Saito is mortally shot by a projection. One way to wake yourself up from a dream if things go south is to "die" in the dream. (The pain, however, is real, since "pain is in the mind.") But the chemical cocktail Yusuf cooks up for their heist contains an added sedative, necessary to keep the three dream levels stable. The tradeoff: if you die in the dream, you *don't* wake up, descending into "limbo" instead, where dreamers can become trapped in an infinite subconscious world, forgetting that they are in a dream.

"Inception is easy"

Inception boasts some positively jaw-dropping visuals—like Arthur demonstrating a life-sized model of Penrose stairs to Ariadne—and set pieces, including a conceptual fight scene for the ages. On the second level, Arthur finds himself facing off against another of Fischer's aggressive projections in a hotel corridor just as the white van on the first-level dreamscape barrel-rolls down an embankment. The physical effects ripple down to the second level, causing the entire corridor to rotate as the men are fighting. To film it, Nolan's crew built a hotel corridor set powered by two powerful electric motors so it could rotate 360 degrees. That way it would look like the direction of gravity was changing constantly as Arthur and his assailant were fighting. Gordon-Levitt likened the experience to being spun in a "giant hamster wheel," telling Details he came home "battered" every night while filming that scene.

Later in the film, Yusuf sets off the “kick” in level one by literally backing the van off a bridge and letting it fall into the river below. This puts the dreamers into freefall, which also ripples down to the levels below, causing an avalanche on level three, and an inconvenient “suspension” of gravity on level two. Poor Arthur has to figure out how to “drop” his dreamers in zero gravity to initiate the kick, and fortunately remembers Albert Einstein’s famous elevator thought experiment, one of the physicist’s seminal breakthroughs as he was devising his general theory of relativity.

That scene provides a solid example of the equivalence principle. Acceleration is motion in which either an object’s speed or direction (its velocity) changes. Mathematically, acceleration and gravity are equivalent, just like energy and mass. If you’re riding in the elevator and someone cuts the cable, you’ll go into free fall and start to float—precisely what happens to Arthur’s level-two dreamers. Since both you and the elevator are falling at the same rate, you won’t be able to feel gravity’s pull. Arthur’s solution is to tie all his dreamers together and herd them into an elevator, and then set off charges at the agreed-upon time so that the elevator drops rapidly, instigating the requisite “kick.”

> *Psychologists might not find Inception quite as conceptually appealing as physicists.*

Psychologists might not find *Inception* quite as conceptually appealing as physicists and the average filmgoer, although Harvard dream researcher Deirdre Barrett gave Nolan’s film props for accurately illustrating how real stimuli can be incorporated into dreams. Specifically, in one scene, a dreaming Cobb is dropped into a bathtub filled with water as a “kick”; in the dreamscape, water crashes into the room where he is standing.

Others might be more harsh in their assessment of the film’s

scientific accuracy. When *Inception* first came out, my spouse and I had dinner with noted psychologist and author Carol Tavris. We raved about the film, but Tavris found its very premise—that it would be supremely difficult to implant an original idea in other people's minds, and have them believe it is their own—to be ludicrous. "Inception is easy," she declared, citing the work of University of California, Irvine, cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, who studies memory—particularly the controversial topic of the creation of false memories.

As Arthur says in the film, planting an idea in someone's head is simple enough: tell people not to think of pink elephants, and images of pink elephants will dance in their heads. But they'll know that the pink elephants came from your suggestion. Tavris argued that it is just as easy to manipulate people into thinking the pink elephants were their idea all along. Loftus' research showed that it's possible to implant a false memory just with the power of suggestion, and that implanted memory will seem as real as something that actually happened.

Does it ultimately matter? Not one whit, because *Inception* is first and foremost top-notch entertainment. That's why it holds ten years later, and is still provoking debate—mostly about Nolan's ambiguous ending. Cobb has a small spinning top that he uses as a totem: something to reassure him that he is indeed awake in reality and not still dreaming. If he spins the top, and it eventually wobbles and stops spinning, the world is real. If it keeps on spinning indefinitely, he's still dreaming.

But in the final scene of the film, Nolan deliberately cuts away after Cobb spins the top, never letting us see if it ever wobbled. So did Cobb find his way back into the real world to be reunited with his children? Or is he forever trapped in limbo? Nolan still refuses to answer that question. "The real point of the scene… is that Cobb isn't looking at the top," he

told Entertainment Weekly. “He’s looking at his kids. He’s left it behind. That’s the emotional significance of the thing.” Whether you choose to accept Nolan’s interpretation is up to you.

Listing image by Warner Bros.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1703217

Masterpiece: Super Mario World 2: Yoshi’s Island

reader comments

35 with 34 posters participating

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Update, Sept. 6, 2020: It’s Labor Day Weekend in the US, and even though most of us now also call home “the office,” Ars staff is taking a long weekend to rest and relax. For many, that includes gaming on titles new and old. We planned on resurfacing a few pieces from the archives to keep the lights on over a holiday, so it seemed only right to select one honoring an all-time classic that turns 25 this year. (And can now be played through Nintendo’s Switch Online service.) Our Masterpiece essay on *Yoshi’s Island* originally ran in September 2012 and it appears unchanged below.

Back in 1995, I thought I knew what a Mario game was. Running left to right (or maybe down to up). Jumping on things. Eating mushrooms to get big. Flying, sometimes. You know the drill.

Then *Yoshi's Island* came along and showed that Mario games could be about a lot more than that.

Yeah, you were still running through levels and jumping on things, but the myriad ways *Yoshi's Island* expanded on the Mario formula made it feel like an entirely new game. Yoshi went from an occasional helper in *Super Mario World* to a permanently controllable character in *Yoshi's Island*, tasked with protecting a near-helpless Baby Mario riding on his back. Yoshi's oversized tongue let players slurp up enemies and transform them into projectile eggs that could be fired in any direction. What used to be a run-and-jump series was now run-and-jump-and-slurp-and-shoot game, and the *Yoshi's Island* designers built levels that catered to these new abilities wonderfully.

But the true key to *Yoshi's Island*'s appeal, to me, is the flutter jump. If you continue to hold the jump button after the peak of Yoshi's arc, he'll kick his feet in the air to first slow his descent and then start floating upward again, achieving a new, slightly higher peak. If you have enough elevation, you can flutter multiple times before eventually floating to the ground. This new feature added a crucial, extra bit of post-jump precision to the standard Mario jump, and allowed for a lot of platforming challenges that required mid-air direction changes or extra-long flutter leaps. It's hard to explain to someone who's never played *Yoshi's Island* just how *right* it feels to trace a series of gentle, perfect curves through the air with a well-timed executed series of flutter jumps.

[embedded content]
Gameplay footage from this stone cold classic.
Then there's the way the game looks. Mario games have always been bright and colorful, but *Yoshi's Island* brought a hand-drawn aesthetic that really captured the game's sense of childlike wonder. From the gentle pastel backgrounds to the stark black outlines of the primary-colored characters and

enemies, there's the slightest bit of imperfect sloppiness to the visual design that evokes a grade schooler's dream world more than a pixelated game system.

A lot of people don't realize that the 2D sprites in *Yoshi's Island* were backed up by a version of the polygon-pushing Super FX chip—the same one that powered early 3D SNES games like *Star Fox* and *Stunt Race FX*. This allowed for massive bosses that could stretch, rotate and move with a smoothness that was unknown in games at the time, but also provide subtler effects like the way Yoshi's head compresses a little bit when he bonks it against the ceiling. The Super FX powered character animation carries a level of detail that makes the characters seem much more lively than the keyframe animation of previous Mario games.

Avoiding enemies is still important in *Yoshi's Island*, but getting hit one or two times usually isn't an instant death, as in previous Mario games. Instead, you can just quickly recapture the floating Baby Mario and continue on with the level. It's an important change for a game that marks a transition point of sorts from the simpler "get to the end without dying" Mario games that came before to titles that focused more on exploration and secondary goals.

Yoshi's Island doesn't have a time limit, allowing players to search out the five giant flowers and 20 hidden red coins in each level to their heart's content. Finding these bonuses isn't necessary to beat the game, but searching out a perfect score on each level provides a great excuse to go back and really absorb all the nooks and crannies of the excellent, puzzle- and secret-filled level design. Plus, finding all the secrets on each level unlocked a series of six extra-hard bonus stages. You know a game is good when you're excited that the reward for playing well is that you get more levels to play.

That's because every new level in *Yoshi's Island* showed more

originality and imagination than the entirety of many other platform games of the day. There are enemy monkeys that spit watermelon seeds at Yoshi and try to run off with Baby Mario. There are giant, screen-filling Chain Chomps that try to chase Yoshi down (before inevitably falling and chipping a tooth on a cement block). There are items to transform Yoshi into vehicles ranging from a helicopter to a submarine. There's a spike-proof dog that serves as a barely controllable transport. There's the infamous level where Yoshi gets high (sorry, "dizzy") by inhaling floating spores. You never know what to expect when you unlock a new level in *Yoshi's Island*, and that expectation of new content keeps you going at least as much as anything else.

The magic of *Yoshi's Island* has proven hard to recapture. I'll never forget the feeling of disappointment I felt when I bought *Yoshi's Story* on the N64 only to realize it was a pale, simplified shadow of the game that inspired it. Years later, *Yoshi's Island DS* did its best to expand on the SNES classic, but everything from the controls to the level design just felt the tiniest bit off. The Game Boy Advance rerelease of the original *Yoshi's Island* might just be the quintessential version of the game, featuring six new unlockable stages that feel perfectly integrated into the larger whole.

The radical experimentation of *Yoshi's Island* holds up amazingly well even nearly two decades after its first release, and stands as a testament to how even the most well-known and beloved series can be tweaked and expanded successfully.

Previous Masterpiece articles

https://arstechnica.com/?p=150499

How Ars Technica’s tech-savvy staffers conduct happy hours in locked-down 2020

Enlarge / Artist’s approximation of Security Editor Dan Goodin’s Zoom calls with other infosec pros.
Getty Images / Aurich Lawson

reader comments

43 with 35 posters participating, including story author

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As the United States settles into Labor Day weekend, we hope you’re finding ways to celebrate—or, more crucially, to carve out something that resembles a “vacation” when travel and holiday options have become more limited. With that in mind, I polled my Ars colleagues with a vacation-minded question: How *do* you put the “happy” into “happy hour” in a socially distanced universe?

Unsurprisingly, many of the answers hinge on technology, though not all of them. If you’ve been struggling to socialize or break out of a 2020 rut, we hope our suggestions inspire you, though we’d also love to see your own suggestions in the comments section below.

Life updates between bets

In the before time, I was part of a semi-weekly poker night with friends from graduate school. Once the pandemic hit, we moved poker night online. We used Zoom for video chat, but we

actually had a tough time finding good online poker software.

We wanted a service that would let us create private rooms and play fake-money games with a decent user interface. After trying and discarding several options, we discovered Pokernow.club. It's free, Web-based, and has a nice user interface.

I've found online poker is a good choice for catching up with friends. People of all skill levels can play. Poker doesn't involve constant action, so there's plenty of time for people to update one another on their lives between bets.

While Zoom poker isn't as much fun as real-life poker, it has had one upside: we've been able to invite mutual grad school friends who moved to other cities.

—Timothy Lee, Senior Tech Policy Reporter

Don't toot your horn here

I have two big social outlets. The first, a local wind ensemble I play in, is unfortunately remaining on hiatus until a room full of people tooting their own horns no longer presents a pandemic risk. The other, however, is my tabletop RPG group, and that's still going like gangbusters.

We're doing so well because playing online is our first nature: we've always been in five states and three time zones ever since we started our game in 2015. We get together every two or three weeks on Roll20 to tell stories and roll virtual dice into the wee small hours of the night. (At least, for me. Our California contingent plays at reasonable hours, hehe.) It's a great way to hang out with friends without the stilted strange awkwardness that can come from running a Zoom or Hangout happy hour just for the sake of screens.

Another thing I've discovered lately: even for someone like me, a tried-and-true introvert who's used to working from home

and mostly socializing online, you sometimes need to go outside. Grabbing a blanket and a cup of coffee and sitting outdoors just to chat with a friend (several feet away) a couple of times a month is a great mood-booster.

—Kate Cox, Tech Policy Reporter

Sliders versus switches

I have a family with three children, so in a lot of ways "happy hour" was already either kind of a myth, or properly socially distanced, depending on how you want to look at it. I spend more time with friends on the Internet and less in person than I used to—but it's a change more like shifting a slider than turning off a switch.

The biggest impact has likely been on my mom, who moved to a nearby town to be closer to me and the kids a year ago—we still visit pretty regularly, but visits are outdoors-only. Thankfully, she's got a place with acres of yard, so as long as the weather's good, that's not so bad.

—Jim Salter, Technology Reporter

The Kusogrande rabbit hole

I've always played games online, but games have become my main connection with the outside world during the pandemic, so they're more important than ever. My wife and I started a Discord group with some fellow friends and family members who play games—her brother, some game developer friends of mine, an old friend of mine who I've worked with several times over the years, and a friend of my wife's from the swing dancing scene.

We've all played *Minecraft* for hours every Friday night since April 29. Our survival world now has a jungle city, a skyscraper made of cascading water, a military fortress, a

series of Pacific Modern homes in terracotta, a nightclub on a balcony, an interdimensional transit system, an underwater luxury penthouse, and a working Mario Kart race track with a scale recreation of Peach's castle from *Super Mario 64*. We've been busy!

Also, I've gotten heavily into the Kusogrande community, a Twitch-based scene where people speedrun, showcase, and race in bad or strange video games—a sort of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* for video games.

Last but definitely not least, I've been doing game jams on itch.io and Discord. Dozens or even hundreds of people form teams and spend a weekend or a week developing small-scope games that riff on the same theme, then share their work and vote for the best games. Weirdly, thanks to these things, I feel like I've actually been more socially active and connected during the pandemic than I was before it!

—Samuel Axon, Senior Reviews Editor

Yes, our infosec pro uses Zoom (sometimes)

I've done one video-based happy hour since the lockdown began. The meetup was with a bunch of security people from my neighborhood. It was good to see everyone's faces and catch up. One of the fun things is that several kids, including my own, joined the conversation and got to hear about and discuss hacking and security. That's something that never happened when our group held happy hour in a bar. Now that I'm thinking about this, I'm ready to rally the group for another video get-together.

If you're wondering: we didn't spend any time thinking about which platform was the most secure. Zoom provides encryption in transit, the same protection offered by Gmail and most

other online services. Had we been discussing sensitive topics, we might have chosen FaceTime or another service that uses end-to-end encryption.

—Dan Goodin, Security Editor

Feeling wrecked? Try *Rec Room*

My social groups in Seattle are pretty analog, and my local board gaming crew never agreed upon a digital facsimile for any of our favorite games. We bought a few standalone game clients on Steam, but we had bad luck with everything we chose. *Tabletop Simulator*, despite its potential for aimless fun and easy add-on DLC packages, remains a difficult proposition for basic actions like picking up pieces and cards in a given game. *Blood Rage*'s Steam version launched with a nightmare list of launch-week woes, while *Charterstone*'s server-side management of ongoing games crashed enough times to kill its "legacy" appeal.

For locked-down socializing, I have found that the most exhilarating option has been to dip into virtual reality, particularly in *Rec Room*, a free-to-play social-space app that includes a series of structured and free-form multiplayer games and activities. Since the game's launch in 2017, its suite of fun has become quite diverse, and it works on pretty much every VR headset imaginable, from PlayStation VR to Valve Index. (If you don't have VR access, you can join any session in "2D" format, as well.) Start simple with accessible fare like bowling and table tennis. Team up and fight strangers in paintball gun battles. Join forces in co-op adventures, where you either fake like a sword-and-shield medieval warrior or wield laser guns in an '80s-styled robo-battle.

Arguably, the app's best quality is how it lets a "leader" guide a group of friends from one activity to the next seamlessly, so that friends aren't constantly worrying about whether they've been disconnected or split up. The games are

fun, sure, but they're mere window dressing for the natural socializing afforded by VR. Everyone can hear and see each other as if hanging out in real life, and positional audio sells the sense that you're all really wandering around at a bowling alley. It feels good to not fret about how many feet of space is maintained between friends, and to see hands and heads move around as if people are really right there.

—Sam Machkovech, Tech Culture Editor

"OMG CROTCH KNIFE"

A lot of my socializing with family and friends has involved cocktails in the back yard, socially distanced. We make an amazing simple syrup with pomegranate juice or cherry juice and then add some fresh-squeezed lime and whatever alcohol sounds good, add some ice and shake it up.

While away camping alone this summer, I did manage to simulwatch *John Wick 2* with my husband, who was holding down the fort back home. Sometimes we got off-sync and spoiled an upcoming event, but our texting stream during the movie pretty much sums it up. (Colby is my dog.)

> ***Me**: Now they're sHOOTING AGAIN*
> *ugh*
> *Dude brains*
> *Not right*
> *OMG CROTCH KNIFE*
> *No way*
> *So wrong*
> ***Husband**: Right!*
> ***Me**: He needs therapy*
> *And of course the guy is a head taller than everyone else on the stupid train*
> ***Husband**: Hm*
> ***Me**: Why are they dragging this guy's death out so long*
> *Lol and everyone leaves the train at a run*

I need to let Colby go potty
Almost to the half hour mark
Morpheus!!
hahaha
Ok
Gonna pause now
***Husband**: K, I'll wait*
***Me**: ok*
***Husband**: ok*
***Me**: Started*
***Husband**: You don't want me owing you*
***Me**: Hm*
Not sure I remember them saying tha
That
That was a lot of headshots
Whoa
Broke the rule
***Husband**: Now what?!*
***Me**: Why did he get him?*
That's crazy.
***Husband**: There you have it*

—K.S., Associate Copyeditor

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Review: Sumptuously reimagined Mulan turns Disney

princess into a true warrior

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Liu Yifei stars as Hua Mulan in Disney's live action remake of *Mulan*.
I'm on record as not being a huge fan of Disney's live-action remakes, but *Mulan*, the studio's live-action remake of the 1998 animated film, is a welcome exception to that personal sentiment. This isn't just a lazy frame-by-frame copycat of the original (looking at you, live action *The Lion King*). Part historical drama and part superhero origin story, it's an inventive re-imagining that owes as much to the Chinese source material as to its animated predecessor, transforming the character from a feisty tomboyish Disney princess into a fierce, true warrior.

(Some spoilers below the gallery.)

As I've noted previously, both films are based on the Chinese legend "The Ballad of Hua Mulan," which tells the story of a young woman in the Northern Wei era (spanning 386-536 CE) who takes her father's place when each family is required to provide one male to serve in the emperor's army. In this version, Hua Mulan is already a well-trained fighter, and she serves for 12 years, although the ballad skips over the details of her military exploits. When she finally returns home, she removes her uniform and meets her war comrades as a woman, who express astonishment that they had never suspected.

Mulan explains that if you just see a rabbit in a field, you can't tell whether it's male or female.

Disney's animated film broadly followed the traditional storyline, except Mulan is not well-trained when she first runs away. The film also added a love interest, a lucky cricket, a goofy dragon representative of the family ancestors named Mushu (hilariously voiced by Eddie Murphy), and a catchy original soundtrack. *Mulan* was released to critical acclaim, grossing $304 million worldwide and earning Golden Globe and Oscar nominations. (It should be noted, however, that Chinese audiences didn't much care for Disney's vision, dismissing it as too Westernized. It only grossed $1.3 million in that region.)

This new live-action version, directed by Niki Caro (*Whale Rider*), also preserves the traditional storyline, although it eschews the goofy, family-friendly humor and musical numbers in favor of a more serious tone. While some fans might miss those elements—there's been a lot of hand-wringing over the exclusion of Mushu, for instance, because Chinese audiences really didn't like the character—Caro has skillfully woven in nods to the animated film in her own interpretation of the legend. That includes the songs: their musical phrasing wafts throughout the elegant soundtrack composed by Harry Gregson Williams. Per the official premise:

> *When the Emperor of China issues a decree that one man per family must serve in the Imperial Army to defend the country from Northern invaders, Hua Mulan (Liu Yifei, The Forbidden Kingdom), the eldest daughter of an honored warrior, steps in to take the place of her ailing father. Masquerading as a man, Hua Jun, she is tested every step of the way and must harness her inner-strength and embrace her true potential. It is an epic journey that will transform her into an honored warrior and earn her the respect of a grateful nation…and a proud father.*

- Hua Mulan (Liu Yifei) tries to be the perfect woman.
- The picture of Chinese womanhood, at least on the surface.
  YouTube/Disney
- She just doesn’t have a knack for traditional skills.
  YouTube/Disney
- There are other ways to espouse the virtue of graceful elegance.
  YouTube/Disney
- Böri Khan (Jason Scott Lee) seeks to avenge his father’s death.
  YouTube/Disney
- Böri Khan with his witchy sidekick Xian Lang (Gong Li).
  YouTube/Disney
- Jet Li plays the emperor.
  YouTube/Disney
- Hua Zhou (Tzi Ma), Mulan’s father, has no sons and offers himself to serve once more in the emperor’s army.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan, her mother Hua Li (Rosalind Chao), and sister Hua Xiu (Xana Tang) are dismayed.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan rides off to take her father’s place.
  YouTube/Disney
- Training up new recruits to defend the emperor and China.
  YouTube/Disney
- A show of manliness.
  YouTube/Disney
- Hua Zhou prays to the family ancestors to keep his daughter safe.
  YouTube/Disney
- The Northern army attacks.
  YouTube/Disney
- Xian Lang is a fierce fighter in her own right.
  YouTube/Disney
- Game face: on.

YouTube/Disney

- Mulan takes aim.
  YouTube/Disney
- The two armies prepare to do battle.
  YouTube/Disney
- Xian Lang parries Mulan’s sword.
  YouTube/Disney
- Mulan has come into her own, as a warrior and a woman.

The film starts off slowly, lingering over every exquisitely realized detail. Frankly, the script lays on the shaming of Mulan for not being womanly enough pretty thick in the earliest scenes. (We get it, ancient China was a big-time patriarchy.) But this awkwardness fades, and quite quickly. The cinematography, stunt work, and costume design are breathtaking, and Caro teases out powerful performances from her actors, which include some well-known names in Asian cinema.

Caro has incorporated several classic scenes from the 1998 film: Mulan chasing a rogue chicken into the family temple, creating havoc; the disastrous meeting with a matchmaker; an army training montage; the interruption of Mulan’s midnight bathing while hiding her identity; and Mulan setting off an avalanche to defeat Böri Khan (Jason Scott Lee, *The Jungle Book*) and his invading Roaran warriors. These are not slavish recreations; Caro has added her own touch to the scenes, slightly tweaking some, while others are more significantly altered.

“Qi is for boys”

Perhaps the biggest difference from the 1998 version is that this Mulan isn’t just your average tomboy from a rural village. She has a super power: especially strong qi (or ch’i), a vital life force energy in Chinese philosophy that permeates everything. Those with strong qi, who can learn to

channel it, make for fierce, skilled warriors. But as Mulan's father, Hua Zhou (Tzi Ma, *Rush Hour, Man in the High Castle*) reluctantly tells her, "Qi is for boys. It is time to hide your gift away." Girls who exhibit those gifts are shunned as witches.

Mulan also has a sister, Hua Xiu (Xana Tang), and Caro introduces a shapeshifting witch named Xian Lang (Gong Li, *Memoirs of a Geisha, Curse of the Golden Flower*), who was once just like Mulan: a young girl with very strong qi who was exiled for not conforming to traditional womanly ideals. These two characters may derive from the *Sui Tang Romance*, a 17th-century tragic novel based on the Mulan legend, in which Mulan has a younger sister and bonds with a fellow female warrior named Xianniang.

Mulan's love interest in the 1998 film, Li Shang, has been split into two characters: Commander Tung (Donnie Yen, who played Chirrut Imwe in *Rogue One*), head of the Imperial Army, and a fellow recruit, Chen Honghui (Yoson An, *Mortal Engines, Mega Time Squad*). According to co-producer Jason T. Reed, there was consensus that having Mulan's commanding officer also be her love interest just didn't play well in 2020, and I think it was a good decision. Yen is terrific as Tung, who spots Mulan's strong qi right away and chides her for not cultivating it (granted, he still thinks she's a man).

[embedded content]
Disney's *Mulan*: "A Tale of Many" Featurette.
The animated film's lucky cricket is now a human character named Cricket (Jun Yu, *Fresh Off the Boat*): another fellow recruit who was born under an auspicious moon, per his mother, and is thus deemed to be lucky. And instead of Mushu, Mulan is aided by the spirit of a glorious phoenix—the Hua family emissary for their ancestors. The phoenix symbolizes harmony and is the yin to the dragon's yang in Chinese philosophy, which makes it a fitting symbolic ally for Mulan.

Xian Lang is an inspired addition to the story, particularly since Khan is such a one-dimensional villain (he was in the 1998 film, too, but it was less noticeable in that cartoonish setting). She seeks a place where her powers will be celebrated rather than vilified; hence her uneasy alignment with Khan. He has promised her that place in exchange for helping him take down the Emperor (Jet Li, *The One, Lethal Weapon 4*), but he does not accept or respect her, at one point deriding her as a "curbed dog."

She is Mulan's dark reflection, akin to Harry Potter and Voldemort, or Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader—except Xian Lang has a far more compelling sales pitch when she urges Mulan to join forces with her, arguing that she will never be accepted into Chinese culture. "I was a girl just like you when they turned on me," Xian Lang tells Mulan. "The more power I showed, the more I was crushed. We are the same." Gong Li's portrayal matches Liu Yifei's luminous performance as Mulan; they play off one another beautifully, making their interactions among the film's most memorable moments.

"One warrior knows another"

That shift in focus does come at a cost: there is less emphasis on Mulan bonding with and ultimately earning the respect of her comrades in arms: Chen, Cricket, Ling (Jimmy Wong, *John Dies at the End*), Chien-Po (Doua Moua, *Gran Torino*), and Yao (Chen Tang, *Warrior, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). It was a particularly fun element of the 1998 film, but Caro is going for something different here. Mulan is not trying to "be a man"; she's learning how to be the best version of herself.

The 1998 animated *Mulan* is hands-down my favorite animated Disney film (excluding films by Pixar). But it always bugged me that, for all her accomplishments, when Mulan returns home at last, her mother and grandmother are much more thrilled

when Li Shang shows up—presumably to propose (at the emperor's urging). Marriage is always the true ultimate goal for any Disney princess, after all. But Caro's Mulan is a bona fide warrior; her ending is far more ambiguous, and the better for being so.

Thematically, *Mulan* is not about defying unfair gender stereotypes or overthrowing the patriarchy. It's about having the freedom to be true to ourselves and to cultivate our unique gifts. But it's also about having others recognize those gifts and accept us for who we really are—hence its broad popular appeal. "One warrior knows another," Hua Zhou tells his daughter when she returns home to seek his forgiveness for running away. "You were always there, yet I see you for the first time."

Sniff. Yeah. Something in my eye.

Like many other films this year, *Mulan* shifted its release date multiple times because of the coronavirus pandemic, before finally opting for a streaming release. The film is currently available for a $30 premium purchase to Disney+ subscribers. It will get a theatrical run in territories where the streaming platform is not available. *Mulan* will become available free of charge to all Disney+ subscribers on December 4, 2020. And I wouldn't be surprised if Disney greenlit a broader theatrical run sometime in the future, when the current global crisis has passed. This is a film I would love to see on the big screen.

Listing image by YouTube/Disney

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